

Fighting the Good (Preemptive) Fight

American Exceptionalism in Tom Clancy's Military Shooters

Defending our Nation against its enemies is the first and fundamental commitment of the Federal Government. Today, that task has changed dramatically. Enemies in the past needed great armies and great industrial capabilities to endanger America. Now, shadowy networks of individuals can bring great chaos and suffering to our shores for less than it costs to purchase a single tank. Terrorists are organized to penetrate open societies and to turn the power of modern technologies against us.

To defeat this threat we must make use of every tool in our arsenal—military power, better homeland defenses, law enforcement, intelligence, and vigorous efforts to cut off terrorist financing. The war against terrorists of global reach is a global enterprise of uncertain duration. America will help nations that need our assistance in combating terror. And America will hold to account nations that are compromised by terror, including those who harbor terrorists—because the allies of terror are the enemies of civilization. The United States and countries cooperating with us must not allow the terrorists to develop new home bases. Together, we will seek to deny them sanctuary at every turn.

The gravest danger our Nation faces lies at the crossroads of radicalism and technology. Our enemies have openly declared that they are seeking weapons of mass destruction, and evidence indicates that they are doing so with determination. The United States will not allow these efforts to succeed. We will build defenses against ballistic missiles and other means of delivery. We will cooperate with other nations to deny, contain, and curtail our enemies' efforts to acquire dangerous technologies. And, as a matter of common sense and self-defense, America will act against such emerg-

ing threats before they are fully formed. We cannot defend America and our friends by hoping for the best. So we must be prepared to defeat our enemies' plans, using the best intelligence and proceeding with deliberation. History will judge harshly those who saw this coming danger but failed to act. In the new world we have entered, the only path to peace and security is the path of action.

—President George W. Bush's remarks on the 2002 National Security Strategy¹

Always historicize!

—Fredric Jameson's opening directive in *The Political Unconscious*²

Introduction

On September 20, 2002, the Bush administration unveiled a revamped national security strategy that described the government's newfound defense policy of unilateral, preemptive military action to face down would-be terrorist threats. This aggressive brand of foreign policy represented a dramatic change from the multilateral deterrence strategies that had dominated the Cold War and early post-Cold War years. Critics questioned the dramatic change of tone and posturing, arguing instead for caution and diplomacy. Meanwhile, supporters believed that the 9/11 attacks (then only a year old) provided all the necessary justification for a more interventionist defense strategy. And yet, as philosopher Samuel Weber observes in *Targets of Opportunity*,³ as radical a shift as preemptive war policy would seem to represent, it is a continuation of one of the nation's most enduring political and cultural doctrines: American exceptionalism.⁴ According to this belief, the United States's unique political origins and economic and productivity successes during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries provide policymakers with all necessary justification for pursuing perpetual military supremacy. Weber argues: "Global political *supremacy*, understood in large measure to derive from economic and technological superiority, is at the same

time declared to be *supremely vulnerable*, given the relative availability of destructive technologies to ‘rogue states’ and, perhaps even worse, to non-state ‘terrorist’ groups.”⁵

The 9/11 attacks also provided neoconservatives with the political cover for pushing through an aggressive post–Cold War defense policy that had actually been crafted nearly a decade before in the wake of the 1990–1991 Persian Gulf War. At that time, then Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney with fellow neocons Paul Wolfowitz and I. Lewis “Scooter” Libby, drafted a 1992 classified document called “Defense Planning Guidance.” This controversial document advocated three primary objectives for American foreign policy: (1) preventing the ascendance of any competing superpower; (2) gaining and maintaining access to Middle Eastern oil reserves; and (3) the efficacy of unilateral military action in meeting said objectives.⁶ The document was later withdrawn after it was leaked to the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*. However, its central tenets remained popular in conservative policy circles, and it finally found its official public articulation in September of 2002—an articulation that represented a generational shift in the public’s understanding of exceptionalism “from the liberal consensus to the conservative ascendency” that had been taking place during the last half of the twentieth century.⁷ Less officially, this revitalized and aggressive post–Cold War interventionist policy was expressed in an array of military entertainments. And there is arguably no name more synonymous with militainment and with American exceptionalism—before and after 9/11—than Tom Clancy.

In the previous two chapters, I argued for the utility of gameplay modality as an analytical concept and applied it to understanding how *Modern Warfare’s* narrative subjectivity attempts to ameliorate post-modern war’s representational problems by reinterpreting modern-day counterinsurgency for the military first-person shooter. This chapter continues in a similar vein by examining how the character and level design of the best-selling series *Tom Clancy’s Rainbow Six: Vegas* and *Tom Clancy’s Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter* represent American’s high-tech military capabilities alongside convenient policy beliefs about the use of preemptive force. The Clancy shooters transform the player into a virtual military insider who knows how and why to fight during imagined crises. The justifications for preemptive war emerge out

of the games' mutually reinforcing avatar and spatial design constructs, producing a paranoid ludic imaginary that reinforces the righteousness of neoconservative foreign policy ideas popularized during the early 2000s.

The four Clancy titles examined herein have been selected for several reasons. First, as of 2015, all four shooters—*Advanced Warfighter* (2006), *Advanced Warfighter 2* (2007), *Vegas* (2006), and *Vegas 2* (2008)—have sold well over a million copies each, making them best-selling titles by conventional game industry standards. Second, because Clancy was thought to be the “novelist laureate of the military industrial complex”⁸ until his death in 2013, his oeuvre offers unique points of entry for understanding how a multimedia brand renowned for its technological detail and suspenseful narratives could be adapted for interactive play. Finally, the *Rainbow Six* and *Ghost Recon* series are prototypical squad-based tactical shooters that immerse the player in the role of a counter-terrorist squad-team leader who must execute tactically sound actions to complete a mission—in effect, making the player the military solution in these fictionalized Wars on Terror. These games clearly profit from their status as Clancy properties. But they also model the efficacy of martial power when it is executed “correctly.” By remaining attentive to what these games ask and allow us to do and how they represent American soldiers and terrorized domestic spaces, we can appreciate the hegemonic pleasures of becoming a technowarrior, and how these choices reflect and perpetuate a conservative view of American exceptionalism after 9/11.

Tom Clancy's Branded (War)Fare

Notwithstanding his prominent billing, Tom Clancy has had relatively little input on the production of the games that bear his name.⁹ It is instead more accurate to think of Clancy's influence as functioning on the level of brand. In 2008, the French video game publishing powerhouse Ubisoft bought the rights to Tom Clancy's name. This acquisition included *all* transmedia intellectual property rights associated with the games, books, and movies bearing the Clancy brand and saved the publisher millions in annual royalties.¹⁰ (Nothing quite says “American exceptionalism” like selling one's name to a multinational corporation

headquartered in Paris.) The Clancy name remains a cornerstone of Ubisoft's product line and a vital component of its military shooter offerings, with *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Siege* and *Tom Clancy's The Division* scheduled for release in 2015 and 2016, respectively.

The Clancy brand games do not, however, represent a singular authorial voice or gameplay genre as much as they imagine a set of overlapping technology and policy beliefs common to postmodern warfare.¹¹ The *Ghost Recon* and *Rainbow Six* series celebrate a technology-rich form of militarized American exceptionalism, a technowar discourse in which defense officials manage war as though it were a corporate business or a science.¹² This discourse emphasizes the increased reliance on (if not fetishization of) techno-centric solutions as represented by the Revolution in Military Affairs¹³ and the growing centrality of net-centric weapon technologies that transform soldiers into cyber nodes in real-time information grids.¹⁴ These cutting-edge and near-future information and weapon technologies promise to make the military's Special Forces units more agile, lethal, and invisible. Or, in the language of our just-in-time production culture, they are destruction-on-demand.¹⁵ According to the *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter* instruction manual, Clancy games transform the player into "the soldier of the future." The manual continues: "In full command of the cutting edge of military technology, *you* are the most lethal, high-tech soldier on the battlefield."¹⁶ The pleasures of playing as a cyborg soldier draw heavily on the politics established in Clancy's technothriller fiction.

Clancy's decidedly pro-U.S. technothriller genre¹⁷—wherein suspenseful narrative elements are structured around military-grade technologies, their surreptitious uses, and its related discourse of technowar, or treating modern warfare as a capitalistic endeavor that privileges technology and economics in its production¹⁸—contains all the necessary ingredients for remediating pro-military fiction into ludic form. For example, Clancy's literary pulp canon contains readily identifiable protagonists (soldiers and government agents) who are primed for technologically aided action (tactical warfare) against international threats (terrorist groups, rogue states) that will reinforce the political righteousness of American exceptionalism. Technothriller fiction generally, and Clancy's branded offerings in particular, endorse a highly militarized version of American exceptionalism by representing the Defense De-

partment's public and clandestine programs in a favorable light. Accordingly, the majority of the critical ink spilled on Clancy's novels has targeted the author's Manichaeian moral universe and his preoccupation with warfighting technologies and strategies.¹⁹

Clancy's early publishing successes established the technothriller's generic parameters, while the brand's subsequent wide-ranging wares solidified in consumers' minds what to expect from the Clancy name. As Fredric Jameson reminds us, "Commodification turns genre into a brand-name . . . and the social contract into a product guarantee."²⁰ The Clancy games' eventual commercial harvest was first sown during the waning years of the Cold War after President Ronald Reagan enthusiastically endorsed the author's breakout 1984 political pulp fiction novel, *The Hunt for Red October*. According to *Life Magazine* journalist Loudon Wainwright, Reagan called the novel "the perfect yarn," and most likely enjoyed it because the story offered "relief from the drab reality of life—although it might be disconcertingly close to some of the reality in Reagan's daily intelligence briefings."²¹ In his treatment of the president's escapist reading, Wainwright is also one of the first to critically assess the attractions of Clancy's fiction. The reporter astutely notes:

But surely one of the book's biggest selling points has to be that it all comes out right in the end. More than that, it reaffirms the comfortable convictions we have about ourselves and our superiority over the usually villainous Russians. In its broad strokes the book is as much an act of propaganda and caricature as those scores of Happy Yank films Hollywood turned out during World War II. There's nothing wrong with the novel; it's simply a not very skillful wrapping of action in the flag. It must be reassuring to many, including the President, to read novels that feature the good intentions, the ingenuity and the bravery of Americans, to fantasize for a few hours that the best Soviet commanders will wnat [sic] to defect, that in an orderly and well-plotted world we must win out over a people weakened by their slavish adherence to a cruel and rotten ideology.²²

Clancy's dozen-plus novels published after *The Hunt for Red October* assume a similar literary construction and ideological disposition. In *The New American Militarism*, Andrew Bacevich describes the author's oeuvre in these broad strokes:

In any Clancy novel, the international order is a dangerous and threatening place, awash with heavily armed and implacably determined enemies who threaten the United States. That Americans have managed to avoid Armageddon is attributable to a single fact: the men and women of America's uniformed military and of its intelligence services have thus far managed to avert those threats. The typical Clancy novel is an unabashed tribute to the skill, honor, extraordinary technological aptitude, and sheer decency of the nation's defenders. . . . For Clancy and other contributors to the [technothriller] genre, refuting the canards casually tossed at soldiers in the aftermath of Vietnam forms part of their self-assigned charter.²³

Not surprisingly, American military personnel and conservative opinion leaders were among Clancy's biggest fans. The respect is largely mutual, as the author counted President Reagan, former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, retired General Colin Powell, and Colonel Oliver North among his favorite and most inspiring public servants.²⁴

Clancy's deepest contempt was reserved for terrorists and Congress, a fact that is reflected in many of his works. The author is famously quoted as having said: "There are a lot of people in Congress who . . . would rather trash the military than hug their own kids."²⁵ America's preeminent representative and deliberative political body, an elected quorum whose governing actions are by design balanced by other governmental actors and measured by debate, is an inconvenience and an obstruction to the decisive action preferred by the author's patriotic technocrats and soldiers. Clancy, like his fictional heroes, eschewed deliberation for action.

The commercial success of his pulp fiction migrated swiftly to Clancy's movies and video games because, like the novels, these texts narrate the political stakes of postmodern war and represent visually state-sponsored violence (not unlike TV shows like *24*).²⁶ Yet the Clancy games locate players in an experiential space different from that of TV/film viewers or pulp fiction readers. The Clancy games remediate the genre one step further—beyond narration and visualization either alone or in tandem—by modeling the field tactics needed to best non-state terrorists. The Clancy-brand video games are thus the most complete textual realization of the author's technothriller

universe because the user has the fullest opportunity to experience these American war mythologies, enacting and becoming the righteous technowarrior. That is, while the games support the discourse of technowar and American exceptionalism found in technothriller fiction generally, these shooters also enable gamers to play with the martial force by which global political hegemony is secured. This textual affordance helps explain the games' popularity and the brand's overall value to its game publisher Ubisoft. Taken together, the Clancy games are the tenth best-selling franchise of all time, having sold over 55 million units worldwide as of May 2008, surpassing other memorable franchises in sales such as *The Legend of Zelda*, *Sonic the Hedgehog*, and the *Resident Evil* series.²⁷

The *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter* and *Rainbow Six: Vegas* series depict the political necessity and strategic efficacy of postmodern military interventions using similar stories and gameplay designs. The *Advanced Warfighter* and *Vegas* narratives unfold in (what was at the time of their release) near-future Americas (*Warfighter* in 2013 and *Vegas* in 2010), with their conflicts originating in Mexican city streets and ending on U.S. soil. Both franchises locate gamers in firefights using first- (*Vegas*) and third-person (*Warfighter*) perspectives in outdoor expanses (*Warfighter*) and in tight, indoor spaces (*Vegas*) where their counterterrorism specialists are armed with a cache of weapons and communication devices to foil the terrorist plots. Despite these similarities, the two series nevertheless possess unique elements that make them worth examining individually. For the *Advanced Warfighter* games, the proper and judicious use of high-tech weaponry and communication technologies represent the Defense Department's early-to-mid-2000s approach to net-centric warfare as being the best means of combating twenty-first century threats. The *Vegas* games, meanwhile, unfold amid civilian population centers in the Americas and in the United States and stress the need for maintaining a preemptive policy of "fighting them there, so we don't have to fight them here." Taken together, the gameplay modality of these Clancy-brand tactical shooters—again, understood as textual vehicles for narratives *and* as beliefs about how the world works—illustrate the efficacy and moral righteousness of preemptive, technologically aided martial strikes to prevent horrific attacks on U.S. citizens, helping to ensure a state of post-9/11 Pax Americana.

How We Fight: Visualizing Technological Exceptionalism in *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter*

In *Advanced Warfighter I* and *II*, players must use their technological advantages and training to overcome the superior enemy numbers and foil the terrorists' attacks on civilian populations and domestic infrastructure. *Warfighter's* instruction manual summarizes its action:

The Ghost Recon squad, led by Scott Mitchell [the gamer], is expert at using its sharp military tactics to survive seemingly impossible military situations. In this realistic conflict, "run and shoot" behaviors are not a viable option and will only result in quick death. To prevail Scott Mitchell must use his tactical assets to their fullest.²⁸

In the first *Warfighter* game, the player's elite band of "ghosts" are deployed to Mexico City in 2013 after Nicaraguan rebel forces steal U.S. military hardware and try to unload their ill-gotten wares to Mexican paramilitary forces. Before the ghosts recover the equipment, however, they are redirected to the Mexican capital to save the Mexican and U.S. presidents and the Canadian prime minister, who are meeting to announce the North American Joint Security Agreement treaty, from a coup d'état (there are terrorist threats in both games to defense infrastructure and negotiations). The Canadian prime minister is killed in the attack, the Mexican president is nearly fatally wounded by an embassy bomb blast, and the U.S. president disappears—and thus begins the player's forty-eight-hour mission to save U.S. President James Ballantine, prevent military technology from falling into the wrong hands, and tamp down the Mexican insurgency. In a similarly hyperbolic vein, *Advanced Warfighter 2* unfolds a year later as Mitchell's ghost team is sent to Ciudad Juarez to neutralize a nuclear device that has fallen into the hands of the same rebel force that is now threatening to take out an American nuclear defense shield.

True to Clancy's technothriller poetics, the *Advanced Warfighter* titles contain numerous plot twists that make recounting their serpentine storylines tedious work. More importantly, such a detailed summary fails to illuminate what it is these games do best: represent technowarriors and battlefield tactics. This is not to suggest that the stories are irrelevant;

indeed, they are necessary components for engendering the narrative subjectivity discussed in the last chapter. Still, it is more illuminating in this case to examine *how* the player's available actions create an engaging military cyborg identity.

The player engages the enemy in *Advanced Warfighter's* proleptic post-Cold War battlefields as a high-tech, decision-making node in an interconnected, cybernetic weapons system. The game's visual centerpiece is its "Integrated Warfighter System" interface, which grants the player with information gathered by other Global Information Grid assets (figure 3.1).²⁹ The game's Integrated Warfighter System is a fictionalized version of the U.S. Army's "Future Force Warrior"—itself a major weapons subsystem of the now defunct Future Combat Systems project (2003–2009).³⁰ Key features of the game's Integrated Warfighter System include advanced communications and networked optics that keep the ghosts connected with one another and with their commanders and a sophisticated heads-up display (HUD) that maps virtual information over worldly objects and terrain in real-time. The player also remotely controls a bevy of support vehicles (spy drones, armored personnel carriers, and the like) that offer additional firepower and reconnaissance capabilities. The Clancy games celebrate unapologetically the power of remote controlled robotics and networked forces, refusing to problematize their usage as do the games examined in the next chapter.

Information and communication technologies are of particular importance in realizing Clancy's brand of military fantasy because they mediate the player's identification with the games' counterterrorism agents (Scott Mitchell in the *Advanced Warfighter*, games Logan Keller in *Vegas* and Bishop in *Vegas 2*). Central to this identification is the avatar's HUD. This visual display is awash with digital markers and screens, enabling the gamer to internalize the hostile environments as a cybernetic weapons system (figure 3.2). During any one mission, the player may need to triangulate data gathered by an unmanned aerial vehicle, camera-equipped teammates, and weapons that can see through surfaces. Once the player has successfully gathered the necessary battlefield intelligence and has positioned the ghosts, he or she engages the enemy force.³¹

The *Advanced Warfighter* games' technothriller narratives and their underlying technowar discourse, in concert with their computational

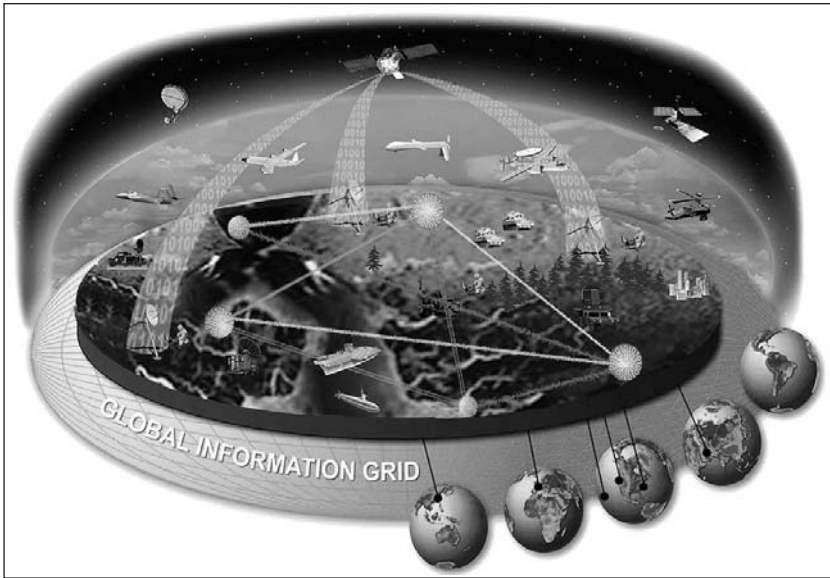


Figure 3.1. The Department of Defense’s “Global Information Grid” seeks to maintain informational superiority through its interconnected warfighting systems.



Figure 3.2. Real-time information is mapped over worldly elements for the cyborg soldier in *Advanced Warfighter 2*.

rules and operations, exercise rhetorical conviction concerning the efficacy of future warfighters and their weapons. The Clancy properties are ideologically comforting fantasies because they posit that challenging “overmatch” victories in which a small, technologically aided team can overcome considerable obstacles, are attainable with the proper application of advanced weaponry and political will.³² The firefights in the novels, films, and games gain credibility because they resonate with what gamers already know of the application of advanced technologies in current military engagements. As George Bush’s secretary of state, Donald Rumsfeld, argued in 2003, “In the twenty-first century, ‘over-matching power’—the ability to field a small but technologically superior force—is more important than ‘overwhelming force.’”³³ Clancy’s war games are compelling precisely because their gameplay modality *seems* to represent faithfully weapons systems and Special Forces field tactics. These games are pleurably affecting, however, because the player makes the key choices—via the action mediated by the HUD display and through the available actions in game—that bring the overmatch military victory to fruition, transforming the player into the classically trained Tom Clancy hero.³⁴

Identifying as a cyborg weapons system is central to the ludic war pleasures of the Clancy titles and other post-9/11 shooters. Yet there is nothing particularly new about the fantasy of playing with potent weapons. Cultural historian H. Bruce Franklin documents how the American imagination has long been shaped by an obsession with superweapons from at least the late nineteenth century and the formative role that science fiction has played in the development of foreign policy and defense projects. Regarding the occasional fine line between the George W. Bush administration’s neoconservative consultants and sci-fi authors, Franklin states:

The New American Century authors become truly ecstatic as they project their images of war in space, from space, and in cyberspace (which their report calls cyber-war). Here it becomes truly difficult to distinguish between this strategic document and the Robert Heinlein–Ben Bova–Jerry Pournelle–Newt Gingrich branch of ultra-militaristic and technophilic science fiction. But that science fiction had already become a part of the Pentagon’s strategic vision of the twenty first century.³⁵

And herein lies the cultural currency of the Clancy name. The author's brand is not just a recognizable marketing construct that taps into a proven generic formula or consumer demographic (though it is that too); the name also prescribes the rules for *how* its games are to be designed and the virtual worlds that might be imagined and constructed. Clancy's poetics constitute such a "house style" at this point that his influence is evident in the visual design and political imaginary of wholly unrelated projects—from TV recruitment ads for the armed forces to foreign policy penned by the Project for the New American Century, a neoconservative think tank that advocated for regime change in Iraq and included such high-ranking Bush administration officials as Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz.³⁶

If the fantasy of playing with weapons of mass destruction is nothing new for American culture, then what is perhaps innovative about these games is that they transform the player into a fantastically "smart" weapon. The player is not some weapon of *mass* destruction; instead, the player is a weapon of *exact* destruction. The games celebrate U.S. technological exceptionalism by modeling for the player the precise and specific martial power of the cyborg warrior who is able to overcome considerable obstacles through the application of extreme competence. The strike forces represented in the Clancy games are the inevitable outgrowth of a defense production logic where the massive military presence has been replaced "with a customized force configuration, managed informatically."³⁷ *Advanced Warfighter* gives ludic expression to a long-standing fantasy that sees next-gen technologies as liberating Americans from excessive losses of "blood and treasure." Randy Martin describes how the military's technologies produce a more precise and lethal defense actor:

Now computer modeling has been decentralized from the decision makers pushing the button for nuclear attack to the soldiers in the field. The network is meant to integrate people and things, machines and marines, labor and capital by converting the activities of all into the measurable output of information flows. Transformation, according to a statement by George W. Bush at the start of the Iraqi occupation, figures a military future "defined less by size and more by mobility and swiftness, one that

is easier to deploy and sustain, one that relies more heavily on stealth, precision weaponry and information technologies.”³⁸

This massive military transformation is justified on the grounds that surgical interventions that leverage computing technologies can be used to preemptively protect a range of global interests, while sidestepping political blowback like the “Vietnam Syndrome.” Technological exceptionalism is generally justified as working in the service of the United States’s political exceptionalism. Or, “how we fight” in the twenty-first century makes sense in light of “why we fight.”

Why We Fight: Navigating Political Exceptionalism in *Rainbow Six: Vegas*

If there’s a one percent chance that Pakistani scientists are helping al Qaeda build or develop a nuclear weapon, we have to treat it as a certainty in terms of our response. . . . It’s not about our analysis. . . . It’s about our response.

—Vice President Dick Cheney³⁹

Whereas the *Advanced Warfighter* games project the gamer into the imagined experience of future counterterrorism warriors and their technologically enhanced operations, the gameplay modality of the *Tom Clancy’s Rainbow Six: Vegas* games articulate in forceful narrative and spatial terms how these types of soldiers and their preemptive actions are a post-9/11 necessity. The *Vegas* titles differ from the *Warfighter* series in that they present their 3-D levels through the first-person perspective (the game switches to a third-person point of view when the player finds protective cover), and the firefights occur largely in interior spaces rather than in open-air venues. More importantly, and as the titles suggest, these games focus on engaging terrorists on U.S. soil. The box art on the first *Vegas* game promotes its action thus:

Las Vegas. The entertainment capital of the world. Thousands of unsuspecting tourists visit each day. Thousands more call it home. But on this

day, something has gone terribly wrong. The Strip has become a battleground. Fremont Street is no longer safe. And casinos are being blown up one by one. On this day, Rainbow Six is the city's last hope.⁴⁰

This franchise holds out the chance of saving the homeland from terrorists who have targeted civilians and domestic infrastructure. And, in a manner similar to the positive framing of the future weapon systems in *Advanced Warfighter*, proceeding through the domestic spaces in the *Vegas* games produces a terrorized “story map.”

Building on the idea of the cognitive map, games scholar Michael Nitsche proposes the concept of the “story map” to explain how players experience virtual spaces.⁴¹ Whereas a cognitive map is a mental interpretation of a fictional or real space's characteristics or dimensions, Nitsche's story map explains how players make sense of virtual realms when they are experienced in concert with immersive and narrative elements. According to Nitsche, “In contrast to the cognitive map generated primarily for orientation, a story map aims not at an accurate understanding of Euclidian space but of spatialized drama and its setting; it combines navigation of drama, film, and interactive space.”⁴² The story map is therefore neither an “objective” rendering of a game space, nor is it even principally about space. Instead, the story map is the experiential whole of navigating a game's architectural design while making sense of the story and other dramatic elements that contextualize and make meaningful that spatial exploration.

The *Vegas* franchise engenders a decidedly anxious story map by having players navigate the horrors that could be visited upon a major U.S. city ravaged by a well-organized and well-funded terrorist group. In the games' near-future narratives, transnational terrorists are planning to destroy domestic infrastructure like the Nevada (read: Hoover) Dam (*Vegas*) and have smuggled chemical weapons into the country (*Vegas 2*). The games' terrorized spaces present a series of object lessons, or object simulations, of the failure to guard absolutely against such potentialities—potentialities articulated most clearly by former Vice President Dick Cheney's famous “one percent doctrine.” Journalist Ron Suskind describes the former VP's distinctly Clancy-esque view of post-9/11 national security as follows:

A rogue state might slip a nightmare weapon, or a few pounds of enriched uranium, to a nonstate actor—a *transnat*—if it could be assured that the weapon’s country of origin was undiscoverable. And why not? Let the terrorist do the dirty work that some secret sponsor would never do on its own, but maybe had dreamed of: *Bring America to its knees*. Cheney’s response: If there was even a one percent chance of such an act occurring, we must act as if it’s a certainty.⁴³

The civilian spaces that are explored over the course of *Vegas*’s missions include downtown city streets, flashy casinos, high-end hotels, and recreation and convention centers. The tactical exploration of these spaces, which contain horrific fragments of their former humanity—ringing telephones, blood-splattered cubicle walls, and fleeing civilians and frightened hostages—engenders a terrorized story map that at once reflects the procedural dictates of the tactical shooter and the narrative elements of technothriller fiction, while indicting any policy that might second-guess the necessity of swift or preemptive responses to perceived threats.

Thinking about how game spaces and story maps inform interpretations of gameplay modality can be difficult for at least two reasons. First, as Nitsche notes, the descriptive metaphors that we use to explain game spaces are not without their linguistic baggage.⁴⁴ “Sandbox,” “playground,” or “garden” are not meaningless labels for games, but they more accurately describe the experiential quality of a space, not its structure for in-game movement. The critical and commercial hit *Grand Theft Auto 4* (2008), for example, is a “sandbox” action adventure game where the player is free to engage in different actions: completing narrative-based quests, driving around the city causing havoc, or peacefully sightseeing as a tourist might. The game’s synthetic city is called a “virtual sandbox” because it accommodates a variety of play choices and allows one relative freedom to pursue (or not) the narrative campaign. A second difficulty in describing the layout of a game space is that the virtual world is navigated alongside a host of representational elements. Like continuity editing in film and television, the narrative spaces in the Clancy games hide the computational artifice. (Of course, it is precisely because of this complex layering that the games can be experienced as impressionistic story maps.)

The spatial structures dominating Clancy's *Ghost Recon* and *Rainbow Six* shooters closely resemble arena spaces. Both franchises place the counterterrorism squad at some insertion point—in *Ghost Recon* it is usually in an open-air location, and for *Rainbow Six* a multilevel building complex—where the player is tasked with completing the objectives en route to the extraction point. According to Nitsche, “The arena’s spatial arrangement often supports events such as battles, dances, or speeches that demand skillful operation of the avatar, often in collaboration or competition with others.”⁴⁵ The tactical exploration of Las Vegas’s residential and business buildings transforms the municipality into a series of mini-arenas where the gamer tests and retests his or her equipment and skills against enemy forces.

The repetitive firefights performed in *Advanced Warfighter’s* and *Vegas’s* arenas differentiate these games from other military shooters that possess more linear or track-like structures. For example, the *Call of Duty* titles offer considerably more restricted environments where gamers are led down relatively narrow paths. These guiding structures emphasize the need for accurate firing and frenetic movement, and thus color the player’s experience of these ludic wars differently. A closer examination of dramatic moments from *Vegas 2* will make clear how a Clancy-brand story map comes to fruition by uniting narrative action with virtual spaces.

In *Vegas 2*, the gamer plays as Bishop,⁴⁶ a *Rainbow Six* veteran who has been reinstated to combat the terrorist menace seizing Las Vegas. The player leads a three-person squad through a series of engagements in and around the city killing terrorists, disarming bombs, and rescuing hostages. At the game’s midpoint, Bishop’s team traces a chemical bomb to the Hawkins Recreational Facility, a large exercise complex. The player then fights his way through the facility’s offices, gymnasium, and courtyards. As Bishop’s squad nears the Hawkins stadium, the terrorists trigger their chemical weapon, killing the unseen civilians sealed inside. The player is too late and must watch as the deadly gas leaks from the building’s locked doors and listen to the off-screen screams. Like *Modern Warfare’s* moments of sacrificial citizenship and gameplay paralysis described in the last chapter, this nightmare scenario is one of the game’s most powerful events precisely because the space is off limits to exploration and because the outcome cannot be altered.⁴⁷ True to the

politics of the technothriller, the player bears witness to the horrors of late intervention.

Another remarkable sequence immediately follows the stadium massacre, as Bishop's team pursues Miguel Cabrero, one of the terrorist leaders, through a residential section of the city. The player's team moves swiftly from one backyard to the next, killing the terrorists aiding Cabrero's escape. These middle-class backyards have been transformed into de facto arenas for tactical combat. Bishop warns the team: "Check your fire. Do not hit the houses." (Yet there is no penalty for shooting houses as there is for killing civilians. In fact, there is a distinct tactical advantage in shooting the outdoor grills' propane tanks to wound nearby enemies.) The level design here is peppered with an array of household items including grills, bicycles, flower planters, while the audio track contains off-screen sounds of barking dogs and crying babies. The *Vegas* story maps maintain that if we are to be victorious, we must allow Special Forces units to finish the War on Terror wherever it takes them, including our backyard patios and gazebos.

There is also a level in *Vegas 2* that presents the War on Terror as a professional game and addresses its players as would-be recruits. As Bishop's team tracks down the terrorists through the Las Vegas International Convention Center, they move through what is unquestionably the game's most self-referential level—an exhibition hall hosting a Major League Gaming (MLG) event. The MLG is a professional video gaming league in which players compete for cash prizes and professional sponsorship. To the untrained eye, the exhibition hall may appear to be just a room full of tables and computers. However, dedicated gamers and fans of competitive electronic sports will recognize that these networked computers are for high-speed gaming competitions and that the exhibition room, adorned with MLG ads, looks like an official competition venue. *Vegas 2*'s publisher, Ubisoft, crafted the game's multiplayer map after consulting with the MLG, and the league then adopted *Vegas 2* for its competitions.⁴⁸ In sum, in this "hall-of-mirrors" play space, competitive gamers in the physical world are playing as soldiers in Clancy's universe, and these avatars are virtually fighting in a room that represents competitive gaming competitions.

Like *Modern Warfare 2*'s Museum bonus level, the convention center's self-referential MLG room illustrates the persistently blurry lines char-

acterizing the gameplay modality of post-9/11 shooters (figure 3.3). Yet there is something else afoot here. The MLG stage is more than product placement for the league; it interpellates its gamer subjects as potential warfighters. By locating a firefight in a room that supports these competitions, the title recognizes these gamers as those who might sympathize with Clancy's technothriller ideology since they have demonstrated the know-how for actualizing its martial tactics in an array of spaces, including an e-sports game room.

Vegas's story maps posit that preemptive military interventions are a post-9/11 necessity and legitimize interventionist policy ideals like Cheney's "one-percent doctrine." Gymnasiums, game rooms, and even our own backyards—the *Vegas* games teach us that no domestic space is safe from terrorists and their WMDs. Conversely, the games maintain that with the right application of tactics and technological support, there is no space that cannot be secured by American forces. Additionally, the gameplay modality of the *Vegas* games communicate to avid gamers that they are uniquely qualified to participate in future Wars on Terror because they can attest to the virtues of American exceptionalism, having experienced virtually the utility of preemptive war.

Society Must Be Defended Preemptively: Clancy Games as Games of Exception

Knowing these realities, America must not ignore the threat gathering against us. Facing clear evidence of peril, we cannot wait for the final proof—the smoking gun—that could come in the form of a mushroom cloud.

—President George W. Bush, October 7, 2002⁴⁹

If we have actionable intelligence about high-valued terrorist targets and if President Musharraf [of Pakistan] will not act, we will.

—President Barack Obama, August 1, 2007⁵⁰

The games examined in this chapter and the last do more than visually narrate America's rationale for taking up its so-called "preemptive wars." These games demonstrate how postmodern conflicts are to be



Figure 3.3. An exhibition hall hosting an MLG event.

conducted and how such actions are a logical extension of post-9/11 foreign policy beliefs. The *Advanced Warfighter* and *Vegas* games showcase advanced technologies as the means to transform disciplined soldiers into elite technowarriors who can win on tomorrow's battlefields and secure the political promises of American exceptionalism. And while the characters, settings, and mechanics are key constitutive elements in maintaining the series' commercial appeal, what truly sets these games apart is that they remediate Clancy's technothriller genre, enabling the player to perpetuate the American exceptionalism popularized in his books and films. The gamer becomes the technowarrior who enacts a militarized "state of exception."⁵¹

The hegemonic pleasures of Clancy-brand games are intimately bound up in operating as "exceptional" ludic soldiers. Clancy's warfighters are exceptional with respect to their weapons systems, communication technologies, and skill sets, and they are likewise exceptional with respect to the law. Clancy shooters are pleasurable because players can brandish lethal force in "black ops" missions that cannot be officially recognized by the government, which nevertheless grants such instrumental actions and agents their liminal legitimacy. For instance, the assassination of Osama bin Laden in 2011 by the Navy's SEAL Team Six unfolded under the cover of night, and under the cover of legal exception. Yet rather than acting as

a ludic aporia that draws attention to the state of exception's legal, political, and ethical contradictions, the Clancy games and similarly designed militainment revel in the paradoxical pleasures to be found in protecting the state's democratic rule of law by acting autocratically beyond the law.

Exception is not a limitless privilege, however, and even fairly mainstream shooters contain textual fissures that reveal oblique and explicit critiques of the military-entertainment complex's cultural politics. Among the more recent targets of criticism are the robotic systems that have come to epitomize warfighting in the new century: unmanned ground and aerial drones. As valuable as these remote controlled spies and assassins are to the military brass, they are weapons of exception that engender no shortage of legal and ethical concerns—apprehensions that find their way into a variety of post-9/11 ludic wars.