[Whitaker on Ouellette and Thompson, 'The Post-9/11 Video Game: A Critical Examination'](#)

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Marc A. Ouellette, Jason C. Thompson. *[The Post-9/11 Video Game: A Critical Examination.](#)* Jefferson: McFarland, 2017. 200 pp. $35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-9902-1.

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Marc Ouellette and Jason Thompson's *The Post-9/11 Video Game* studies the influence of 9/11 as a historical event on the development of video games in the twenty-first century. In a surprising but welcome move, the authors' analysis is not limited to military action-adventure games, like *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell*, or military shooters, like *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*. Instead, their work often attempts to trace the influence of 9/11 on decidedly unmilitary titles such as *Dead Rising*, *Grand Theft Auto III*, and *Portal*. This premise gives Ouellette and Thompson the freedom to consider 9/11-inspired themes and concepts across several different game genres. Unfortunately, as the authors stray from military adventure and shooter games, the connection between their analysis and 9/11—both as a concept and historical event—breaks down. *The Post-9/11 Video Game* begins with tremendous promise, but it follows tangents that are disconnected from the ostensible topic of the book and as a result ends with conclusions that are unsubstantiated.

This book begins with a well-expressed argument: "video games now dominate the global market of digital storytelling and digital play" (p. 1); video games "should not be dismissed as harmless entertainment" (p. 2); and "9/11 as a historical event altered the way that war games were made" (p. 3). According to Ouellette and Thompson, video games, as an emerging form of cultural production, are just as susceptible to influence from major historical events as film, music, and television. Thus, video games of the past two decades include "images, symbols, archetypes, themes, characterizations and topics whose conception and cultural declensions arise from the events of September 11, 2001" (p. 3). For the authors, a post-9/11 video game is not simply a game published after 9/11, but instead a game that reflects the "pyschagogic force" that 9/11 exerted on video games and culture in general (p. 3). In a few short pages, Ouellette and Thompson lay out a compelling argument regarding 9/11 and video games. Moreover, they do so without an exhausting apologia for games, a ubiquitous feature of game study titles.

With this premise in hand, the authors continue with an intellectually satisfying chapter that considers the influence of 9/11 on *Syphon Filter 3* and *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun*, two games published shortly after September 11, 2001. The authors' analysis is particularly strong with *Rising Sun*, a first-person, Second World War game that famously begins with a mission set during the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Ouellette and Thompson argue that this Pearl Harbor sequence represents a clear allegory for 9/11. The player character defends Pearl Harbor from waves of kamikaze planes, which did not appear in the war until much later but make a clear connection for

the player with the events of September 11. In addition, the conclusion of the opening mission presents Pearl Harbor as a near American victory, with Japanese forces thrown back by the player character's vengeful resourcefulness, not so dissimilar from passenger resistance to terrorist hijackers on 9/11. The authors do a good job of connecting *Rising Sun*'s portrayal of Pearl Harbor to the wider political and cultural context of the early 2000s, during which comparisons between Pearl Harbor and 9/11 were very common. Strangely, this consideration of early 2000s context does not make much of the probable reliance of *Rising Sun*'s visuals on cinema of the era, specifically Michael Bay's *Pearl Harbor* (2001).

Ouellette and Thompson continue their work with a study of how the depiction of cities in video games changed following 9/11. This study includes a worthwhile analysis of the tower defense genre (an allegory for defending the World Trade Center) as well as useful remarks on how often New York City serves as a site for digital disaster and mayhem in the twenty-first century. It is here, however, that the analytical thrust of the book begins to fall apart. The authors begin to consider these ideas and themes with relation to nonmilitary, nonrealistic titles, including *BioShock*, *Dead Rising*, and *Portal*. While the inclusion of these types of games in the analysis is a potential strength of the book, the authors do not convincingly connect 9/11 as a concept and event to the design of these titles. For instance, in fantastical settings such as *BioShock Infinite*'s floating city Columbia, is 9/11 a more relevant inspiration for the city's images and symbols than general game design trends (such as open world games and vertical movement in first-person titles) or other historical events (including the Boxer Rebellion and Wounded Knee, both of which are important plot points in the game)? Do the archetypes, themes, characterizations, and topics of zombie games like *Dead Rising* rely on 9/11, or do they instead rest on inspiration from horror cinema as well as common millenarian fears around the turn of the century?

By including nonmilitary titles in their analysis, Ouellette and Thompson often find themselves analyzing trends and themes that existed well before 9/11, including consumerism, masculinity, and attachment to advanced technology. This seems like an opportunity to track how the depiction of these topics in games changed because of 9/11, but throughout most of the book the authors only discuss how these depictions changed in the last twenty years, without drawing any connection to 9/11 itself. And the while the authors are on firmer and more convincing ground when they discuss military adventures and shooters, their analysis could have greatly benefited from considering other "war games," namely real-time and turn-based digital strategy titles. Indeed, nearly two whole chapters of the book are spent studying one first-person shooter, *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun*. While these chapters are well researched and often convincing, their resulting conclusions, applied to "the post-9/11 video game," ring hollow because of the limited scope of analysis. Ouellette and Thompson are right to draw a connection between 9/11 and video games, but too often their book leaves one questioning that solid assumption.

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