# Chapter XXXVI
# Interpreting Game-Play Through Existential Ludology

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## ABSTRACT

*This chapter introduces and operationalizes an innovative interpretive strategy called "existential ludology" to explain how the game-play mechanics of two tactical shooter video games America's Army: Rise of a Soldier (Microsoft's Xbox) and Full Spectrum Warrior (Sony's PlayStation 2) educate gamers on how to play militarily. These titles, both produced in part by the U.S. Department of Defense, engender strict, doctrinal learning opportunities by embedding official combat protocols into their game-play structures. By employing existential ludology as an interpretive tool we can understand these military-backed games from an experiential, player-centric perspective, while also recognizing how their seemingly innocuous game-play is located within, and linked to, larger networks of power. Moreover, existential ludology's flexibility as an interpretive instrument encourages educators to recognize the educational affordances of popular video games so that they might adopt these popular media artifacts for their own pedagogical ends.*

## INTRODUCTION

On November 16, 2005, the United States Army, in association with interactive software publisher Ubisoft Entertainment, commercially released the first "Official U.S. Army Game" for home video game consoles—America's Army: Rise of a Soldier—for Microsoft's Xboxand Sony's Playstation 2 lockstepping on the heels of its wildly successful and freely distributed 2002 PC predecessor, America's Army. Video clips on the game's Web site[1] advertise the game's realist aesthetic, declaring, "Our game developers don't rely on imagination," while inviting players to "Become one of the elite" and to "Experience the Army." The release of Rise of a Soldier is a landmark moment in video game history because it is the first instance of the U.S. military co-developing a for-profit console game that also carries its seal of approval.[2]

The military and the private sector have been utilizing computer-based training technologies for decades precisely because they believe in the efficacy of media technology in educating their personnel to meet a range of work-related challenges. In the past, the armed forces have commissioned private firms' production of training simulations for various in-house uses, and more recently commercial off-the-shelf PC titles—for example, Doom II (Id Software, 1994) and Unreal Tournament 2004 (Epic Games, 2004)—have been modified by the military's modeling and simulation groups for training purposes. It is not entirely surprising then to see a military title like Rise of a Soldier emerge from this production network and enter the non-militarized, domestic realm of the home entertainment center.[3] What is surprising about tactical shooter-style military games like Rise of a Soldier and Full Spectrum Warrior, however, is just how effectively they fuse the doctrinal training properties of simulations with the ludic rules and narrative themes of the well-established combat game genre, thereby producing para-educational leisure toys that are adopted by gamers in informal learning settings.

As this collection demonstrates, there are a number of compelling ways to think about how video games and pedagogy intersect, and what these nexuses mean for educators and critics alike. Phenomenology, a twentieth century philosophical movement that interrogates the common structures of human consciousness, is but one qualitative research approach that offers insights on how learning occurs while one is busy at play. Moreover, since this chapter is interested in examining how the experiential structures of video game-play present gamers with varied learning opportunities, existential phenomenology—a variation of the movement that changes phenomenology's central, organizing question from 'what is knowledge?' (epistemology) to 'what does it mean to be human?' (existentialism)—offers a generative and sound conceptual foundation from which to craft an original research program. If existential phenomenology asks about the possibilities and meaningfulness of human action in the lived world, then existential ludology, as this chapter conceptualizes it, asks similar questions about meaningful play in the virtual world.

## BACKGROUND

This chapter defines video game-play as an experiential relationship produced between a human and an electronic game device. And because all game-play experiences are the product of lived relationships between players and game technologies, the "philosophy of technology" camp of philosophic criticism emerges as a key literature for this discussion. Don Ihde, Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, Andrew Feenberg, and Andrew Pickering are probably the best-known scholars of this interest group. Don Ihde's work is particularly instructive because it fuses a phenomenological sensitivity with a view to how technologies are adopted by different cultures to "present a radically demythologized story of the structures and limits of human-technology relations, as well as a critical reflection on technologies and their uses" (Jorgenssen, 2003, p. 214). In the latter half of this chapter's main section, I will follow Ihde's lead (1977) in using phenomenology to forge my own self-fashioned program, and then apply this interpretive method to two military console games, thereby teasing out the titles' similar educational logics. I begin first, though, by examining Ihde's phenomenologically grounded view of human-technology relations to lay the foundation for existential ludology.

Ihde describes the three variants of human-technology relationality as embodiment relations, hermeneutic relations, and alterity relations. Technologies that become transparent or those that are forgotten through their successful use are embodiment relations. These tools appear to meld with, or become part of, one's own body