

The Good, the Bad and the Evil

The Representation of International Relations in the Game *StarCraft*

Submitted on 12th of February 2010

To:

Stockholm University
Department of Journalism, Media
and Communication
Politics and Popular Culture
Alexa Robertson

By:

Jan Michael Gerwin
Körsbärsvägen 4C/0545
11423 Stockholm
jage1354@student.su.se

Introduction

Where do we acquire our knowledge of world politics? Political speeches, media coverage, political events might be good answers to that question. Elite politics and political elites, which Iver B. Neumann and Daniel H. Nexon describe as first-order representations of politics (2006, 6), are in the main focus of international-relation scholars. Yet, within the last ten years, there has been an increasing interest in second-order representations as they can be found in popular cultural texts. While the first-order representations claim to represent facts and the world 'as it is', the latter "represents elements of social and political life through a layer of fictional representation" (Neumann & Nexon, 2006, 7). But what relevance do popular cultural texts in academic research on international politics really have?

In order to answer this question, it is important to think about the way we construct our social reality. All popular cultural texts add to the context of political representation from which we draw meaning and make sense of the world. This is particularly of importance, when we acknowledge that second-order representations are for many people the main source of knowledge about politics and society (Neumann & Nexon, 2006, 8). We construct our understanding of the world according to the range of topics discussed in these texts such as morality, community, resistance or political participation.

"Scholars influenced by constructivism and post-structuralism now recognize that any attempt to understand the influence of cultural forces – such as ideas, identities, language, discourses, and symbols – requires moving beyond cultural resources that shape political processes." (Neumann & Nexon, 2006, 6)

If we want to find out something about power, we may not neglect its cultural production through representation and discourse. We should ask ourselves how political practices and political theory gain acceptance and to what extent they become common sense (cf. Weber, 2010, 4). This is what makes popular cultural texts such as novels, films, music or video games relevant for international-relation scholars. If we accept this fact, the second question to ask is, what we can actually 'get out' of the study of popular culture in the context of international relations.

The interrelation between popular culture and world politics is ambiguous. On the one hand, popular culture sustains power structures and takes thus part in the "production

of consent” (Hall, 1982, cited in Weldes, 2003, 7). To that extent, “we can examine it for insights into the character and functioning of world politics” (Weldes, 2003, 7). On the other hand, popular culture provides alternatives to existing politics offering ideas and possibilities for change jeopardising thus common sense (cf. Weldes, 2003, 8). In both ways, analysing popular cultural texts allows us to access political ideologies and argumentation behind existing structures. This is especially rewarding since popular cultural texts are much more straightforward in their discussion of international politics than first-order representations can be; and this counts for science fiction texts in particular which will be the matter of this paper.

There is no crucial definition of science fiction that could outline the genre entirely, but referring to Daniel Suvin (1979), Jutta Weldes (2003, 9) mentions the “novum” as a striking characteristic of such texts. A novum is something new and different to the known world that could be space-ships, aliens, cyborgs etc. The novum leads on the one hand to a process of estrangement, but relies on the other hand on a “discourse of possibility” (ibid.). In this atmosphere of plausibility and alienation, science fiction often provides an independent view on contemporary political and social developments and the future shape of our world. This is often represented in the extreme distinction of utopia or dystopia – the world and how we wish it would be or how we fear it might become (cf. Weldes, 2003, 10). Science fiction texts are therefore mirrors of contemporary society as well as of technological, cultural and politics trends.

“First they [science fiction writers] look at the world around them in all its parts. Then they take some of those parts out and throw them away and replace them with new parts of their own imagining.” (Pohl, 1997, cited in Bergethon, 2008, 11)

In this paper, I want to turn to the video game *StarCraft* as a matter of examination. The video game features typical science fiction characteristics such as aliens, space wars and human life on outer planetary systems. I want to treat the video game as a popular cultural text and use the narrative analysis as a method knowing well that such attempts do not stand unchallenged (see Chapter 3). My study interest is how international relations are portrayed in this particular clash of three different species in space.

Following the approach of popular culture as a mirror¹ of international relations, my aim is to identify elements and signals in the narrative that can be related to paradigms and themes of international politics, the representation of 'the other' and body politics as authors such as Weber, Molloy or Haraway present them.

But at first, I want to introduce the notion of narratives and the method of narrative analysis particularly in the context of video games. Here, I want to elaborate the question if and to what extent video games can be treated as texts and analysed narratively discussing the dichotomy of ludologists and narrativists. Then, I want to present the narratives that are featured in the video game *StarCraft*, before turning thoroughly to the analysis of these narratives within the scope of international relations.

Narrative Analysis

Narratives are ubiquitous. We meet many different narratives every day. Narratives that are told, that we tell, that we read or that we see for instance in pictures or paintings. In fact, everything we experience adds to our life story and is in that sense set into a narrative form. By situating actions into a narrative, we can draw meaning out of it and putting it into a social context. This can be described as 'plotting' – organising specific events in a meaningful whole.

"In order to understand their own lives people put them into narrative form – and they do the same when they try to understand the lives of others. Thus actions acquire meaning by gaining a place in a narrative of life."
(Czarniawska, 2004, 5)

These individual narratives are of course not independent of each other. Every conversation, discourse or retelling of a narrative positions and shapes the narrative anew. With other words: The same events can be organised in many different plots. Narratives are always the result of negotiating and become thus – as an outcome of many authors – societal representations that we can relate to. The narratives of a society tell us something about the society – its experiences, moralities and so forth. Even though Czarniawska (2004, 6) points out that there are many competing narratives at a

¹ This refers to the rough distinction of four different approaches to study international relations in popular cultural texts by Neumann & Nexon (2006). To learn more about the other approaches see Neumann & Nexon, 2006, 10ff.

time, it is legitimate to speak of prevalent narratives that mark preferred plots and their retelling. One prominent example for that is the “Morphology of the Folktale” by Vladimir Propp. While analysing 100 Russian fairytales in 1928, Propp found out that many of them feature the same structure and recurring events (Czarniawska, 2004, 76ff). It appears thus that every society has its preferred narratives that are constructed by discourse and power relations. The rescue of the princess by the prince for instance is a rather preferred narrative than the rescue of the prince by the princess.

That makes narratives important within the social sciences. People do not only wrap their experiences within narratives, they rely on a catalogue of social, political and cultural narratives from which they constitute their actions (cf. Robertson, 2010, 36). When regarding narratives not solely as a concrete aesthetical product of an author but as a narrative *of* a society, the analysis of a narrative is likely to tell us not solely something about a concrete text, but something about society as a whole.

“Through the agency of storytelling, our situation in the political and cultural landscape, and that of everyone else, is set out, maintained, negotiated and adapted to new circumstances.” (Robertson, in press, 14)

It is in this regard of minor importance if the narrative is true or not, if it contains facts or fiction. The structure of a narrative remains the same in both ways and the “respective attraction is not determined by their claim to be fact or fiction” (Czarniawska, 2004, 8). The importance of popular cultural texts in cultural contexts is therefore just as big as that of first-order representations of politics.

How does the analysis of a narrative then look like? In this paper, I want to apply the strategy of the hermeneutic triad by Paul Hernardi. The triad consists of three different steps of textual analysis that can be best subsumed with three questions to a text: What does the text say? How does the text say it? What can I, the reader, make out of it? (Czarniawska, 2004, 5) The first question can be described as explication of what is narrated in the text. The second question is the explanation of what is said, which is of particular interest regarding the structure of video games and their interactive form of discourse and argumentation. The latter question opens the text for an exploration with theories and paradigms out of the field of international politics. This inter-textual analysis shall be emphasised within the analysis.

In order to make the reading of the analysis easier, some concepts about the structure of narratives shall be briefly introduced here. Referring to Labov, Robertson (in press, 39)

mentions six phases of narratives: abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution and coda (which draws a link back to the present). What this typology adds up to is a plot, a meaningful organisation of events, which is the main characteristic of a narrative. Besides this chronicle structure, narratives feature a theme. Prominent themes are for instance good vs. evil, man vs. nature, journey, identity or sacrifice. Moreover, almost all narratives contain characters such as a hero, a villain, a helper. As mentioned, in science fiction literature these characters are often novel for instance cyborgs or aliens.

Narratives in Video Games

Lucian M. Ashworth (2009) points out that computer games are an excellent outcome of popular culture to discuss world politics and here especially geo-politics. This is due to their simulation of space, which no other popular cultural text can offer. But identification, he argues, is in these scenarios often blinded out.

“Political and military computer games (...) are excellent at simulating spatial relations, although the personal stories that are the emotive strength of film is frequently lost in the God’s-eye view of the game” (Ashworth, 2009, 2).

I argue that it is rewarding to discuss international politics as well in the narrative of computer games and that *StarCraft* is a striking example for that. But before turning to the representation of international politics in the game, it is necessary to discuss how narratives take place in computer games and of what condition the relation between narratives and computer games are. In fact, there is a passionate debate if computer games can be considered as narratives at all.

At the beginning of the young academic field of game studies, scholars applied many of the traditional models of media and cultural studies to the new field of video games, treating games as media texts and analysing them with methods from the literature, film or other mass media studies – for instance the narrative analysis (cf. Dovey & Kennedy, 2006, 3; Frasca, 2003, 221). This led to annoyed reactions of a new generation of game scholars, who claimed that the understanding of games as narratives would blind out the most important characteristics of games and the gaming experience (e.g. Aarseth, 2001; Eskelinen, 2001; Frasca, 2003; Juul, 2001).

“If I throw a ball at you I don't expect you to drop it and wait until it starts telling stories. On the other hand, if and when games and especially computer games are studied and theorized they are almost without exception colonised from the fields of literary, theatre, drama and film studies.” (Eskelinen, 2001)

Their point was to get away from an understanding of games based on representation to a rather structural perspective of games as simulation. In that context, Gonzalo Frasca introduced the term “ludology” in the studies of video games (Frasca, 2003, 222). As a formalist discipline, Frasca argues, “it should focus on the understanding of its structure and elements – particularly its rules – as well as creating typologies and models for explaining the mechanics of games” (ibid.). Since video games do not consist of a sequence of events, the gaming environment should rather be regarded in terms of rules and possibilities, instead of “Proppian folklore” (Eskelinen, 2001).

In fact, time plays a crucial role when comparing traditional narrative media texts such as novels and films with video games. In traditional media texts, there is always a distinction between the story time (the time of the signified), the narrative time (the time of the signifier) and the reading/viewing time. In video games, this distinction must implode. While constructing the story through interaction with the game, the player experiences story time, narrative time and playing time simultaneously. “There is no such thing as a continuously interactive story” (Juul, 2001). Considering that the player creates the story while playing, there is obviously no fixed sequence of events. The player is thus able to modify the story over and over again, which is the main motivation to play a video game more than once (Frasca, 2003, 227). The video game is then a simulated space that is not determined by a story, but by behavioural rules of how to manipulate and configure the equipment (for instance units, Tetris blocks etc.).

As Jon Dovey and Helen W. Kennedy point out, this formalist perspective on video games has been proved as a promising method to analyse typologies and characteristics of video games, but “remains incomplete as an analytical resource” (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006, 85). The representation in video games cannot be discounted as “just uninteresting ornaments or gift-wrapping of games” (Eskelinen, 2001). Many contemporary games provide highly representational elements that cannot be dismissed

by “the Tetris defence”² (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006, 86). Discussing the example of *StarCraft*, we will see that the narrative context of video games can be just as much as important as the formal game-play³ depending on the study interest. Dovey and Kennedy (2006) promote therefore a hybrid approach of game studies that combines structural analysis with narrative analysis.

When we accept that games feature narratives without being narratives, there are still some points to make about how narratives are implemented and how they differ from traditional media texts. An event as it would take place in a traditional media text can in a video game either be an event or a cinematic⁴ or a simulation with multiple outcomes (cf. Juul, 2001). Characters in video games can be either characters or the player her/himself. Often, a protagonist in video games is both: represented through a character (in cinematics for instance) as well as through the player (in the simulation part). This has of course implications on the identification with characters in video games. Referring to Carr (2002), Dovey & Kennedy state that the control of a character prevents a full identification (ibid., 2006, 91) and that an avatar can thus be regarded as a machine that has to be mastered.

As for this paper, I want to focus on the narrative analysis of *StarCraft* giving only minor insights into the formal rules and the game-play. This is due to my particular study question. A ludologist approach would probably be the best to follow by examining what kind of game *StarCraft* is or how ‘it works’. But by asking, how international relations are represented in *StarCraft*, there is no other way than having a thorough look on the narratives in *StarCraft* – the narrative context, the narratives expressed by goals and mission objectives and the narratives that are constructed by interactive gaming. However, at the end of the analysis, I want to give a brief overview of what a ludologist approach could add to my study goal.

² Which argues that Tetris is the best example to show how a game can be compelling with minimal representational qualities (Newman, 2004, cited in Dovey & Kennedy, 2006, 86).

³ I use the term ‘game-play’ as a denotation of the simulational part of the game that is defined by rules and the „gaming experience“ (Juul, 2001) that result from them.

⁴ A film-like scene within a video game where the player is not able to interrupt.

StarCraft and its Narratives

StarCraft is a Real Time Strategy (RTS) game by *Blizzard Entertainment*, which was first released in March 1998 featuring a 30-level single player as well as a multiplayer mode. By selling 1,5 million copies in the release year, *StarCraft* became the best-selling PC game in the year 1998 (Blizzard Entertainment, 2008). Until 2008, 9,5 million copies have been sold worldwide, which makes the game one of the most successful strategy games ever (ibid.). In that regard, *StarCraft* is a striking example of popular culture.

One of the crucial points for the great success worldwide was the multiplayer mode and the possibility to play the game in a particular internet-based multiplayer environment called *battle.net*. These competitive matches between players led to the emergence of professional gaming leagues and the increasing popularity of *eSports* in general (Werdenich, 2009, 46). Today, there is a great amount of professional players, not only in South Korea, where matches are broadcasted on the national television networks and successful *StarCraft* players are celebrated like pop stars (Werdenich, 2009, 60).

But besides the game-play, also the storyline in *StarCraft* developed by Christ Metzen and James Phinney gained a broad fan community constantly contributing to and expanding the *StarCraft* universe (Rambusch et. al., 2009). The story features parallels to classic science-fiction works such as the novel *Starship Troopers* by Robert A. Heinlein⁵.

StarCraft is about the warfare between three different species in space – the earth-originated Terrans, the humanoid Protoss and the insectoid alien species of the Zerg. This is, what becomes obvious when starting the game for the first time. The narrative of the game, however, starts already in the user manual, which contains a quite detailed description of what has happened until the player enters the storyline. This narrative is supplemented by descriptions of the units and buildings that the three species are able to produce. Narrative and game-play are thus already in the manual intertwined, which adds an interesting perspective to the debate on narratives and ludologists earlier.

The *StarCraft* universe is set in the 26th century far away from the earth in a distant galaxy, where a fleet of human exiles gets off course and crash-lands on three different planets in the so-called Koprulu sector (Blizzard Entertainment, 2009). The exiles are

⁵ Robert A. Heinlein is thanked in the *StarCraft* credits (Blizzard Entertainment, 1998, 95).

deviants, criminals and people with genetic or cybernetic mutations that are undesired on earth. During their development and expansion on other planets, the Terrans (as they call themselves) involve soon in conflicts with each other struggling for the domination of the human inhabited planets. Finally, the “Terran Confederacy” evolves as supremacy power, only challenged by the “Sons of Korhal” – a military separatist group around their leader Arcturus Mensgk and the with psychic powers gifted second-in-command Sarah Kerrigan. Just when the conflict between these two groups escalates, a Protoss fleet arrives and destroys one Terran colony entirely. And not enough, the Terrans must learn that an unknown alien organism different from the Protoss infested another of their planets. Suddenly, the Terrans have to face two alien enemies.

Even though the Zerg and the Protoss share the same origin (both have been originally created by the mysterious race of the Xel’Naga), they differentiate completely. Whereas the Protoss have been developed over thousands of years practicing their psionic abilities, the Zerg are a rather new species that is characterised by their ability to mutate by collecting genetic material of defeated species. The Zerg society is organised by a so-called Overmind, an organism that combines the collective intelligence, controls all individual will and provides strategic commands. One of the commands is to destroy the Terrans to acquire their genetic material (cf. Blizzard Entertainment, 1998, 53ff).

The Protoss, however, relay their behaviour to their experience and moral conduct. They have learnt from their history and established a link of instinctive telepathy that every Protoss can access and that serves them to behave in a commune. Their notions are wise and result from an institutionalised spirit of moral behaviour – the code of Khala (ibid. p. 75). This code contains for instance the demand to protect all creatures that live in the Protoss galaxy – among those the Terrans that the Protoss have been observed right from their appearance. Besides the communal link, the Protoss organise themselves in a Caste system: The Juridicators, the Templars and the Khalais. The Juridicators – or the Conclave as the political institution of the Juridicators is called - are responsible for the governing of the Protoss and the execution of the Khala law, the Templars are responsible for the study of psionic power and the Khalai comprise all other Protoss – “industrialists, scientists and workers” (ibid. p. 72). The three castes thus represent politics, military and citizens.

Despite this rather harmonious and balanced society, also the Protoss have a skeleton in the closet. As a punishment for the resistance to submit themselves under the code of

Khala, the Conclave chased a small group of Templars out of their part of the galaxy. Not being seen for many centuries, they are only referred to as the Dark Templars.

Once the Protoss notice the Zerg invasion into the Koprulu sector, they have no choice than to reveal themselves to the Terrans. In the hope to prevent the Zerg to spread further on other Terran colonies, they decide to destroy the infested Terran planet taking into account the destruction of all Terrans that live on the planet. This is the situation where the narrative in the game begins.

Before turning to the narrative in the game and the different conflicts that it covers – that means the questions ‘what is narrated?’ and ‘what can we draw from it?’, I want to focus briefly on the general constitution of the single player mode and the question, ‘how the narrative is told’. That means in this case: Where does narration take place?

There are three different conditions in *StarCraft* that the player experiences: In beforehand of every mission, the player takes part in a briefing, which informs about the mission objectives as well as about events that happen outside of the game-play. The briefing is presented as a video conference with changing participants. The briefings are the main narrations, where the player gains information about the characters, their relations to each other and their individual aims. Who briefs the player however, is determined by the narrative and cannot be influenced by the player.



Abb. 2: A Terran Briefing. Sarah Kerrigan, Jim Raynor and Arcturus Mengsk (v.l.n.r.) discuss the further military steps. Blizzard Entertainment, 1998a.

The main part of the game is obviously the fulfilling of the missions (the quest) in which the player has to achieve military aims depending on the briefing. Even though the player is sometimes in the position to control a hero, s/he never plays the role of a hero. Instead, s/he remains in a superior strategic position acting as a General and fulfilling commands. This metaphorical and literal bird's eye view is the striking attribute of Real Time Strategy games. From time to time, it happens that the narrative develops further within a mission. This is for instance the case, when heroes meet in the mission or objectives change due to (not influenceable) events.



Abb. 3: A Protoss and a Terran space-ship destroy a Zerg base together. Blizzard Entertainment, 1998a.

Short video sequences (cinematics) are the third condition in the game, where narrative takes place. The cinematics are screened after the completion of key missions and feature developments in the narratives as well as background information to the characters.



Abb. 4: Zerglings invade the Confederate space-ship Norad II. Blizzard Entertainment, 1998a.

The game and thus the narrative are separated in three episodes. Every episode has its own plot. It is therefore useful to speak of four narratives within the game. The main narrative features the conflict among the three species. The minor narratives treat political and military conflicts within the species. In each episode, the player controls another species and changes thus her/his role within the main narrative. In the first episode, the player is a magistrate of the Terran colony Mar Sara within the Terran Confederation and eventually switches sides to the Sons of Korhal. In the second episode, the player is a Zerg cerebrate conducting commands of the Overmind and controlling the Zerg units. And in the third episode, the player is a Templar within the Protoss army.

Even though the perspective of the narrative changes and therefore the question, who narrates, the narrative itself is consistent and of temporal linearity. Anyway, this style of narration surely differs a lot from novel narration. As Chris Metzgen puts it:

„Even if we take control away from you for a couple of minutes to show a pre-rendered cinematic, or a cinematic sequence that shows the next story note unfolding, we want to get people back into the action as soon as possible. And that determines the way your story unfolds. You have to tell it in bite-sized chunks because you know that control must resume for the player pretty soon.“ (Metzen, 2007)

Considering this rather complicated, but highly involving style of narration, there are some points to make about the interaction of the player with the narratives: First, the player has no choice on which side s/he wants to fight. Personal identification is irrelevant within the game-play. Secondly, the player does not play any relevant character of the narratives. If so, s/he plays three different rather irrelevant (anonymous) characters that could be easily substituted from a narrator's perspective. Thirdly and most important, the player is not able to influence the narratives in any way. A mission can be either accomplished or not. This backs Juul's thesis that there is always a distinction between the narrative and the interaction in a game (Juul, 2001). Despite the great interaction of the player with the game, s/he is thus rather an observer of the narrative than an author.

The Representation of International Politics in *StarCraft*

It is a rough world that the Terrans, Protoss and Zerg inhabit in the Koprulu sector. All species rush from one war into another and conflicts on both narrative layers can hardly be solved. This is not surprising since the engagement in war and the defeat of the enemy is obviously the core goal of the game. The main conflict lies certainly between the three species, since the aggression of the Zerg and their simple agenda to destroy the Terrans entirely make every fight to a struggle of survival and every negotiation pointless. In this constellation, war cannot be avoided, since the Zerg are fundamentally evil and eager to commit genocide. This puts the game in a classic realistic perspective, where international politics are anarchical and international relations conflictual due to an essential badness of humanity (cf. Weber, 2010, 14f). Before further elaborating this thesis, two questions have to be asked: Where is the 'nation' in this 'international' conflict and what can be said about the 'human nature' of the three species?

Realism as well as idealism assume that international relations are composed by sovereign nation-states that shape international politics in an anarchical vacuum of a

missing world government. Realism portrays these politics as a conflict-laden struggle for power and security explaining this behaviour with a fundamental badness of mankind (realist) or with a fundamental deficiency of social relations among nation-states (neo-realist) (cf. *ibid.*). Idealism on the other hand portrays international politics as fundamentally cooperative claiming that human are essentially good and altruistic. In this paradigm, wars occur due to badly organised nation-states that neglect the will of the essentially good people and restrict their freedom to communicate (cf. Weber, 2010, 38ff).

It is unchallenged that all three species in *StarCraft* hold sovereignty – as they “have absolute authority over their territory and people” (Weber, 2010, 14). Even though the Protoss have observed the Terrans for a long time, they have resisted intervening into any political process. A more complicated question is if the species hold any characteristics of nation-states and if they can be depicted as human after all.

The Terran Realism

Only barely mentioned in the narrative, the Terrans appear to be the most likely of the three to have a democratic system. Even though described as highly corruptive, the *StarCraft* manual mentions senators that act within the Terran Confederation – the union of most Terran colonies. Even if the colonies do not conduct themselves as sovereign nation-states, the narrative tells us that the behaviour of the Confederation has been perceived as highly imperialistic which indicates that the colonies have been sovereign before there was the Confederation as a superior government. However, the narrative indicates as well that the Terrans – while scrambled over many different planets – yet perceive themselves as one civilisation. In fact, there is no hint on any kind of differentiation concerning language, religion or other cultural habits. This sameness makes a Terran union as political category self-evident. However, due to the imperialistic behaviour of the Confederation, their legibility is challenged by the “Sons of Korhal” – a non-democratic military separatist group.



Abb. 5: A fleet of the Sons of Korhal on their way to destroy a space platform of the Terran Confederation. Blizzard Entertainment, 1998.

The representation of the Terran Confederation and the Sons of Korhal and the used symbols are of particular interest. In the cinematic intro of the game, we see a Terran soldier who controls a space-ship while listening to American country music and talking to his comrades in broad Southern American dialect. The same music and dialect is featured in the other cinematics that show Confederate units. The third cinematic shows space-ships of the Sons of Korhal attacking a Confederate satellite. Just before the satellite explodes, we see a Confederate flag at the outside of the satellite referring to the Confederate States of America during the American Civil War. The statement is unmistakable that the Terran Confederation is a union consisting of 'rednecks' and cigarette-smoking 'space cowboys'. We get the whole picture, when we learn from the manual that one of the crash-landed carrier ships that brought the Terrans to the Koprulu sector was called 'Reagan'.

Even though the Sons of Korhal share the American accent, their flag – a red arm with clenched fist on black ground – and their rhetoric feature rather communist elements. After the defeat of the Terran Confederation, which the player conducts, Arcturus

Mengsk addresses in the final cinematic of the first episode all Terrans with the message: “Out of the many, we shall form an indivisible whole, capitulating only to a single throne. And from this throne, I shall watch over you!”

The narrative in the first episode of the game reads thus as a struggle between (imperialistic) liberalism and (authoritarian) communism. In the game, none of these alternatives turns out to be morally acceptable. The Confederation refuses to help the Mar Sara colony against the Zerg invasion and arrests the Marshall of Mar Sara Jim Raynor for ridiculous reasons, which causes the player and Jim Raynor to join the Sons of Korhal. There, the player learns that the Confederation has had knowledge of the Zerg invasion for a long time, but has apparently only thought of how they could take advantage of the invasion for their own power increase. The Confederation turns out to be not only imperialistic, but even a threat for the Terran civilization. However, Arcturus Mengsk and the Sons of Korhal act in the same way, when they lure the Zerg to the headquarter of the Confederation in the colony of Tarsonis. There, Mengsk abandons Sarah Kerrigan surrendering her to the Zerg, who capture her and use her for genetic experiments. In the end, the player find her/himself alone, only accompanied by Jim Raynor, who turns out to be the only reliable and morally consistent character in the Terran episode.

What does this episode tell us now about the Terran nation-state and the essential human condition? Stemming originally from earth, the Terran conflict appears to represent quite earthly themes. The struggle between liberalism and communism is one that is often depicted in video games of this genre (for instance the *Command & Conquer* series). Considering that the Terran people are one civilisation, it is hard to define either the Confederation or the Sons of Korhal as a nation-state and thus the conflict between them as an international conflict. A civil war would be a rather fitting term. The political seems to subordinate under the military anyway. Yet mentioned in the manual, the senate plays apparently no role in the Terran world and consequently come all commands in the Terran briefings from military and not from political elites. Maybe this is Heinleins influence, who illustrated the Terran world in *Starship Troopers* as highly militaristic (Suvin, 2008, 124). What the video game teaches us further about the Terran world is that politics are in any case conflictual due to deviant state behaviour as exemplified by the Confederation – which would back a rather neo-realist perspective – or due to deviant human behaviour as that of Arcturus Mengsk – which conforms with

the classic realist perspective (cf. Weber, 2010, 14f). In both cases, humans are represented as unreliable and egoistic caring solely about their personal power increase. Idealistic terms such as “altruism” or “international society” are far away from the Terran identity. The Terran world gives therefore a good example of realism in terms of international politics.

The Protoss Idealism

Compared to the unstable and conflictual political situation of the Terrans, the Protoss society seems to be firmly constituted. As mentioned, the society consists of a caste system with each a political, military and civil caste. In contradiction to the Terran world where military goes along with political power, the two systems are strictly separated in the Protoss world. The political institution – the so-called Conclave – commissions the military – known as the Templars. Even though undemocratic, it is thus natural to think of the Protoss society as a nation-state that even has its own constitution – the code of Khala. The nation is described as highly conservative, spiritual and responsibly caring for their part of the galaxy. Yet, this does not mean that the Protoss are pacifist. Quite the reverse, they maintain a military tradition, where death on the battlefield is the most honourable achievement. But how come these two dicta together?

War in the Protoss world is certainly a result of bad behaving inhabitants of the galaxy. The Protoss fight to protect themselves against evil invaders like the Zerg. If every species in the galaxy would be like the Protoss, there would be no wars. In that regard, the Protoss represent a rather idealistic paradigm, which can be especially retraced in the inner-episode narrative. As mentioned, the Protoss too have an inner-political conflict to solve. After centuries of oblivion, the Dark Templars return to their homeland and engage in fighting with the Zerg. The Conclave mistrusts the returning renegades and fears that they could have a bad influence on the Protoss society. As a result, the Conclave arrests their own commander Tassadar, a Protoss Templar who has been in contact with the Dark Templars trying to mediate between the two factions. But just in time before the final assault against the Overmind, the Conclave understands that the Dark Templars returned to protect their former home world Adun from the Zerg being the only Protoss able to terminate the Overmind.

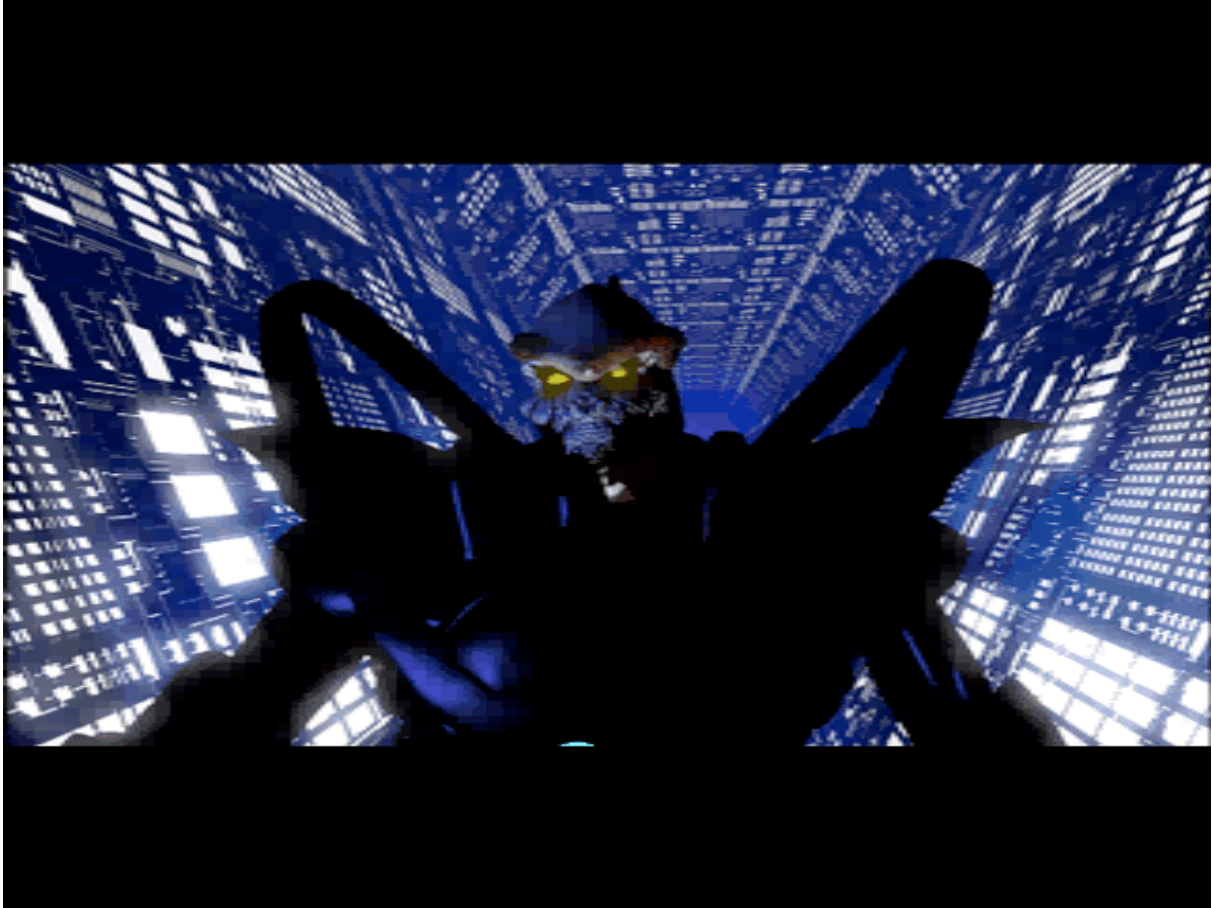


Abb. 6: The Protoss Templar Tassadar sacrifices himself to defeat the Overmind. Blizzard Entertainment, 1997.

It turns out that the Protoss Khala society and the Dark Templars both have good intentions (which is to prevent the Zerg invasion). This is the crucial element of idealism in international relations theory. According to Weber (2010, 44), conflicts occur due to bad behaving nation-states that do not act according to the wish of the people. The conflict in the Protoss episode does exactly mirror this kind of state behaviour. While not listening to Tassadar, who tries to convince the Conclave that the Protoss are in need of the Dark Templars in order to destroy the Overmind, the Conclave orders to fight the Dark Templars. The conflict results thus out of miscommunication and not out of individual deviance. In fact, the narrative emphasises that the ignorant behaviour of the Conclave is not an outcome of individual inconsistency, but of political consideration. After a failed attempt to kill one of the Zerg cerebrates, the Conclave – in person of the Juridicator Aldaris – addresses the player: “Attacking defenceless Cerebrates is not the way of true Protoss warriors.” That means that even the Zerg may not be killed causeless. The altruism of the Protoss people is once more represented, when Tassadar eventually sacrifices himself to destroy the Overmind in the last level of the game. These

elements of sacrifice, conciliation and caring for all other creatures indicate that the Protoss are essentially good. In a Protoss world, where people behave responsible and altruistic, international politics would be cooperative. The Protoss can therefore be perceived as the better humans, far better than the Terrans stemming from earth and involving in all sorts of individual conflicts can ever be.

This distinction between Terran and Protoss behaviour can be retraced when comparing the resolution of the two narratives. In the case of the Protoss, the two enemy fractions settle their differences after having figured out their miscommunication – both maintaining their sovereignty. In the Terran narrative, one of the fractions has to succeed over the other in order to restore peace. This narrative layer can therefore be read as a comparison of realism and idealism. In doing so, the Terrans are more likely to represent the ‘us’, the future of our human species. The Protoss contrast this future. Being still adequately human-like, the Protoss represent a human society where everybody acts responsible and human values are essential. Essentially good.

The Evil Other

Just as the Protoss are portrayed as the good ‘other’ in the game, the Zerg are the evil ‘other’. Having the appearance of all kinds of insects, the Zerg cover all planets that they inhabit with a purple creep on which they can mutate to huge organs in order to create an infrastructure. Their evolutionary supremacy juxtaposes the technological progress of the Terrans as well as the spirit of the Protoss. Even though organised in different broods, all Zerg are under the control of the Overmind, who is quite unspectacularly visualised as a loose-hanging eye, but who expands a surprising creativity in reaching its goal: to make the Zerg the best developed species in the universe.

This agenda makes – as mentioned – a political negotiation pointless. Yet, it is not only the visionary plan of the Overmind that makes the Zerg to an unavoidable enemy. Even when not under the control of the Overmind, which happens occasionally, the Zerg exhibit still an astonishing hostility against every living creature – including Zerg who do not belong to a particular brood. The Zerg are so to say essentially bad and especially dangerous when acting as a collective under the control of the Overmind. Not only the Zerg appearance but also their missing culture and missing individuality make it hard to recognize them as human and thus their swarm society as a nation-state. Even though highly intelligent and creative, the Zerg represent rather the bestial other. The Zerg gain their sovereignty rather from what Patricia Molloy refers to the sovereign rule of “the

terrible and inhuman, the demon dimension” instead of the “human mortal dimension” that the Terrans and Protoss belong to (Molloy, 2008, 103). The Zerg display a common fear of the high-developed evil alien whose single goal it is to destroy humanity.

It is surprising though that the Terran Confederation and the Sons of Korhal do not unite in the face of this evil threat. Instead, both fractions use the Zerg for their own interests. With a so-called PSI-emitter – a technological device that is able to control the will of the Zerg – they even set the Zerg against their own civilisation. Instead of fighting the monster, the Terrans “are only steps away from being monsters” themselves (Molloy, 2008, 107). While using the Zerg as military weapons, the distinction between good and evil is not so clear anymore. Molloy speaks also of “a fluidity of the boundary that seemingly separates the human from the monster” (2008, 107).

It is only when the Terran Confederation is defeated that Arcturus Mengsk finally tries to unite the Terrans:

“The Confederacy is no more. Whatever semblance of unity and protection it once provided is a phantom, a memory. With our enemies left unchecked, who will you turn to for protection? The devastation brought by the alien invaders is self-evident.”

In his inauguration, Mengsk uses the alien threat as an argument to support him. There, in the face of the other, he tries to create a collective identity – the Terran nation-state. “With sovereignty founded upon the principles of inclusion and exclusion – annihilation of difference – a few monsters are needed every now and then to remind us that we are human” (Molloy, 2008, 106). In the Terran case, the Alien threat is used to reach inside the state and to achieve political unity. However, it is almost too late.

It takes until the very last level of the game until the Terrans and the Protoss finally unite against the Zerg. The player is thus in the position to conduct the Terran as well as the Protoss units, which makes her/his role in the narrative even more schizophrenic. Yet, it is only a small group of Terrans around Jim Raynor that resist the newly founded “Terran League” of Arcturus Mengsk and follows the Protoss against the Overmind. The defeat of the Overmind can therefore hardly be describes as an international achievement. Jim Raynor turns rather out to be a wanderer between the species. Someone who has been proved morally suitable to gain the trust of the noble Protoss. In

that regard, he shows parallels to the character of Jake in James Cameron's *Avatar*. Both share an instinctive morality that distinguishes them from their human (military) environment. But Jim Raynor is not the only character that wanders between the worlds.

Body and Gender in *StarCraft*

The most interesting character in the game is certainly Sarah Kerrigan. Not only is she the only female character in the game, she is also the only hybrid character. After being captured by the Zerg on Tarsonis, Kerrigan mutates to a border creature – half Zerg, half human combining deadly features of both species. But not only her body, also her identity shows hybrid elements. Being controlled by the Overmind and faithful to the Zerg on the one hand, Kerrigan displays human individuality and freedom of mind on the other hand. This makes her extremely powerful and gives as well the gender roles in the game an interesting spin.

The *StarCraft* universe is generally a universe of white men. All characters in the narrative are white (we don't know about the units though), which is corrected in the first expansion of the game, when the black character Duran joins the narrative. In the Protoss narrative, gender is completely blinded out to the extent that it is questionable if something like gender actually exists in the Protoss species. And as for the Terran species, as mentioned, Kerrigan is the only female character in the narrative and also the game-play features no female units at all⁶. Even though portrayed as excellent military, Kerrigan combines many characteristics that put her in a classic female position in a military man world. During the game, we learn that Arcturus Mengsk freed Kerrigan out of a Confederate program on brain experiments. In return, Kerrigan fights faithful on his side. When Raynor joins the Sons of Korhal, he immediately feels attracted and eventually responsible for Kerrigan. The sexual attraction is indicated in the fifth level of the Terran episode, when they meet for the first time.

Kerrigan: "Captain Raynor, I finished scouting up the area and... you pig!"

Raynor: "What? I haven't even said anything to you yet!"

Kerrigan: "Yeah, but you were thinking it."

Raynor: "Oh... yeah... you're a telepath. Look, let's just get on with this, okay?"

Kerrigan: "Right."

⁶ This changes in the first expansion of the game, when the new space-ship unit of the Terrans features a female voice in the game-play.

In the end of the episode, it is Raynor who insists the most, when Mengsk leaves Kerrigan alone on Tarsonis, and during Kerrigan's mutation, she reaches out for Raynor telepathically wanting him to help her. Even though a great warrior, Kerrigan is yet portrayed as someone who must be taken care of. Kerrigan and Raynor are thus depicted with typical gender attributes: mentally gifted vs. intellectually restricted, sexually attractive vs. sexually wanting, dependent (on men) vs. responsible (for women). This juxtaposition implodes once Kerrigan has finished her mutation.

When Kerrigan and Raynor meet again for the first time after her mutation, we hear the following dialogue:

Raynor: "Sarah, is that really you?"

Kerrigan: "To an extent. I'm far more than I once was, Jim. You shouldn't have come here."

Raynor: "But, the dreams... I dreamed you were still alive, that somehow, you were calling to me."

Kerrigan: "I was. While I was in the chrysalis, I instinctively reached out to you and Arcturus telepathically. Apparently, Arcturus sent Duke here to reclaim me. But that was then, Jim. I am one of the Zerg now, and I like what I am. You can't imagine how this feels."

Raynor: "So what? Are you going to kill me now, darling?"

Kerrigan: "It is certainly within my power, but you're not a threat to me, Jim. Be smart, leave here now and never seek to confront the Zerg again."

The mutation of Kerrigan has turned around the relationship of the two. The care of Raynor is no longer appreciated. The princess is no longer interested in being rescued, to speak in fairytale themes. Referring to Hollinger and Gordon (2002), Bruce L. Rockwood states that the "exploration of the role of gender and body in understanding the self and the other, often linked to the concept of the mutant as a foil for understanding ourselves", has been a common narrative in science fiction literature (2008, 17). The human hybrid either vampire, mutant or cyborg, represents the margin where being human and having a gender can be discussed. A prominent example of this argumentation is Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* (1991), where she sets the cyborg – a hybrid creature of social reality and of fiction – in a post-gendered world. Refusing sexual reproduction, the cyborg has no history, no individual development and thus no

gender (ibid., 151). Though created by a militaristic and patriarchal society, the cyborg is “untied at last from all dependency” (ibid.).

“The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential.” (Haraway, 1991, 151).

Just as Haraway’s cyborg, the mutated Kerrigan breaks with her fathers. After having mutated into the hybrid creature, she forgets her history as a Terran. But that does not mean that she puts all her faith in the Overmind. In fact, she is still too much human to cede her individuality. Instead, she sets her own goals to eventually – after the Overmind has been defeated – raise to take control over the Zerg⁷. In the end, Kerrigan is out of control, alone in space. When she finally finds herself released from the influence of the Overmind, she has overborne all boundaries – either mentally or physically. In Haraway’s manifesto, the cyborg can be read as a metaphor for resistance on the one hand, and as an embracement of “spatial identities and contradictory standpoints” on the other (Haraway, 1991, 154). In *StarCraft*, Kerrigan resists too. Having overcome all categories such as gender, species or the military society, she serves finally only her own interests. These interests are however not really different from those of the Overmind.

The transformation of Kerrigan makes us question how essential human values can be after all. Contradicting the evil Zerg, the good Protoss and the instable Terrans, Kerrigan opens a new intersection. On the one hand, her identity is plain and natural; on the other hand, she combines characteristics from both species, which make her not fitting into either the Zerg or the Terran category. This makes her pursue her own agenda. Kerrigan as well as Haraway’s cyborg is “oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence” (1991, 152).

The Narrative Game-play

Finally, I want to make some brief points about how the game-play affects the narrative to provide a – after all – ludologic framework. First, the game design aspires obviously that the player plays all possible combinations (Terran vs. Zerg, Terran vs. Protoss, Terran vs. Terran and so forth). This makes especially sense, when we understand the single player mode as the training for the multiplayer games. In that regard, the

⁷ This is the narrative in the first *StarCraft* expansion *BroodWar*.

narrative must feature all possible conflicts. Secondly, much of the games' appeal results from the perfect balance of the three completely different species. The game can thus not have a final winner, even if the narrative provides an ending. This underlines once more the distinction between simulation and narrative in video games. Thirdly and most important, conflict is the single aim of the game-play. As Ashworth (2009) – who by the way provides an excellent analysis of the relationship between international politics and video games with ludologist methods – points out:

“It seems that in computer games, however historically well researched, the cognitive shortcut⁸ when designing a geo-strategic universe is one of zero-sum competition and the superiority of military concerns over other issues and questions.” (Ashworth, 2009, 6)

Conclusion

The crucial point of the game-play and the narrative is that it features three different species, which makes the analysis highly interesting in terms of international politics. Identifying the most with the Terrans, we are confronted with two alien others, their alien identities, values and politics. All species display different political dogma that I tried to work out in the analysis of the inner-episode narratives. The Terrans display a future of our human species that is highly militaristic and where the political is always connected to the military. Power increase is the main purpose of international politics that are generally conducted in military conflicts.

The Protoss nation juxtaposes this realism. Even though conflicts happen as well within the Protoss species, it represents a rather idealistic paradigm. Being a human race after all, the Protoss can be perceived as an ideal example of humanity: altruistic, responsible and noble. Yet, rather an ideal that the Terran humanity ('our' humanity) will never be able to reach.

The Zerg represent the other side of the spectrum. Being non-human, the Zerg display everything that is inferior: essential meanness, missing individuality, missing culture. Having the status of evil beasts, they do not take any role in the international politics among the species, but the role of the enemy to fight against. The game can be further

⁸ Ashworth refers here to a concept by Kimberly Hutchings (1926).

explores while looking at how humans might deal with such an inevitable threat. How it is used in military ways to gain power and how it is used politically to gain unity.

Both alien species can definitely be used to discuss the human identity. Having Jim Raynor on the side of the Protoss and Sarah Kerrigan on the side of the Zerg, the game illustrates how contradictory the human condition can be. We can ask ourselves which essential values we as humans actually have and further, in which direction we actually tend towards.

The strong and compelling storyline makes it easy to analyse the game with the 'narrative method'. Though the narration style and the identification with the characters differ completely from novel narratives, it seems natural and necessary to explore the representation of international politics in the game with the narrative analysis. Of course, there is the simulation dimension in the game that defines the game and is certainly of higher importance for the player. However, as an extremely popular game, I argue that it is relevant to take a thorough look on the narrative when examining the relationship of politics and popular culture.

Primary Sources

Blizzard Entertainment (1998): *StarCraft* Manual. Irvine: Blizzard Entertainment.

Blizzard Entertainment (1998a): *StarCraft*. Computer Game.

Blizzard Entertainment (2008): *StarCraft's* 10-Year Anniversary: A Retrospective. Press Release. URL <http://www.diablo3.com.au/press/10-years-starcraft.shtml> [2010-02-03]

Blizzard Entertainment (2009): The Story so far... Part 1: *StarCraft*. URL <http://starcraft2.com/features/storysofar.xml> [2010-02-03]

Metzen, C. (2007): Interview with Chris Metzen. Blizzard's resident lore keeper speaks with GFW. *Games for Windows*. URL <http://www.1up.com/do/feature?pager.offset=0&cId=3160168> [2010-02-05]

Secondary Sources

- Aarseth, E. (2001): Computer Game Studies, Year One. In: *The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, Vol. 1(1). URL <http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html> [2010-02-05]
- Ashwort, L.M. (2009): The Return of Classical Geopolitics: Computer Gaming and the Rediscovery of Space in International Relations. In: *World Politics & Popular Culture Conference*, Newcastle, 19. – 20. November 2009.
- Bergethon, P.R. (2008): Landscapes of Change: Science, Science Fiction and Advances in Biology. In: Hassler, D.M. & Wilcox, C. (eds.): *New Boundaries in Political Science Fiction*. (pp. 3 - 16). Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press.
- Czarniawska, B. (2004): *Narratives in Social Science Research*. London: Sage.
- Dovey, J. & Kennedy, H.W. (2006): *Game Cultures. Computer Games as New Media*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Eskelinen, M. (2001): The Gaming Situation. In: *The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, Vol. 1(1). URL <http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen/> [2010-02-05]
- Frasca, G. (2003): Simulation versus Narrative. An Introduction to Ludology. In: Wolf, M.J.P. & Perron, B. (eds.): *The Video Game Theory Reader*. (pp. 221 – 235). London, New York: Routledge.
- Haraway, D. (1991): A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century. In: *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. (pp.149 - 181). New York: Routledge.
- Juul, J. (2001): Games Telling stories? – A brief note on games and narratives. In: *The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, Vol. 1(1). URL <http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts/> [2010-02-05]
- Molloy, P. (2003): Demon Diasporas: Confronting the Other and the Other-Worldly in 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer' and 'Angel'. In: Weldes, J. (ed.): *To Seek Out New Worlds. Science Fiction and World Politics*. (pp. 99 – 122). Houndsmills: Palgrave.

- Neumann, I.B. & Nexon, D.H. (2006): Introduction: Harry Potter and the Study of World Politics." In: Nexon, D.G. & Neumann, I.B. (eds.): *Harry Potter and International Relations*. (pp. 1 – 25). Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Rambusch, J. et. al. (2009): A Literary Excursion Into the Hidden (Fan) Fictional Worlds of Tetris, Starcraft, and Dreamfall. In: *Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory. DiGRA 2009*. Conference Paper. Digital Games Research Association: London. URL www.digra.org/dl/db/09287.39358.pdf [2010-02-03]
- Robertson, A. (in press): *Mediated Cosmopolitanism. The World of Television News*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Rockwood, B.L. (2008): Looking Within: Science Fiction Explores the Future of 'Being Human'. In: Hassler, D.M. & Wilcox, C. (eds.): *New Boundaries in Political Science Fiction*. (pp. 17 – 34). Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press.
- Suvin, Darko (2008): Of Starship Troopers and Refuseniks. In: Hassler, D.M. & Wilcox, C. (eds.): *New Boundaries in Political Science Fiction*. (pp. 115 – 144). Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press.
- Weber, C. (2010): *International Relations Theory. A critical Introduction*. 3rd edition. London, New York: Routledge.
- Weldes, J. (2003): Popular Culture, Science Fiction and World Politics. Exploring Intertextual Relations. In: Weldes, J. (ed.): *To Seek Out New Worlds. Science Fiction and World Politics*. (pp. 1 – 30). Houndmills: Palgrave.
- Werdenich, G. (2009): *PC bang, eSport und der Zauber von StarCraft. Koreas weltweit einzigartige Rolle in der Welt des elektronischen Sports*. Unpublished Master's thesis. Wien: Universität Wien.