

# MEDIA FIELDS

J O U R N A L

**PS4**

Mark Cooley

2008–present

Public installation with modified PlayStation game play

“Kids in Congo were being sent down mines to die so that kids in Europe and America could kill imaginary aliens in their living rooms.”

—Oona King, former member of the British Parliament

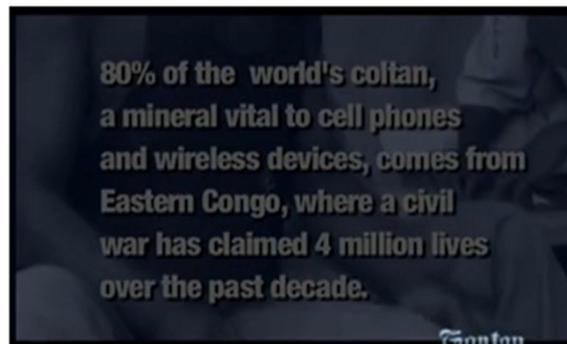
For well over a decade, warfare has ravaged the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Over the years, various armed groups have terrorized the population in a brutal struggle for political dominance and possession of the country’s abundant resources. Estimates claim that more than 5 million casualties occurred between 1998 and 2008, many of them victims of starvation and preventable diseases. And despite the official ending of “Africa’s World War” in 2003, warfare continues to this day, as well as reports of mass rapes, killings, and other atrocities committed by rebels and government troops.

One of the most sought after natural resources in the DRC is coltan or columbite-tantalite, a metallic ore from which the element tantalum is extracted. Tantalum is used to produce capacitors found in many electronic devices, such as cell phones, computers, DVD players, and video game

*Media Fields Journal* no.2 (2011)

consoles. Mining coltan in the DRC is treacherous work often done by children in extraordinarily oppressive and violent conditions. Forced labor, slave labor, and child soldiering in the DRC have been documented by the US Department of Labor, which has included the country in its [“Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor” report](#) every year since its initial publication in 2001.

*PS4* is a project conceptualized in response to widespread reports of the Sony Corporation’s large stake in the DRC’s bloody coltan trade during the production of its PlayStation 2 game console. *PS4* is a public gaming station and video mash-up that superimposes documentary video footage over live video gameplay. Conceptually, the project borrows from various sources, including Sergei Eisenstein’s concept of intellectual montage, the tactic of détournement employed by the Situationist International in works like René Viénet’s 1973 film *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?*, and theory laid out in [Guy Debord’s \*The Society of the Spectacle\*](#). Additionally, [Louis Althusser’s “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”](#) offers a way to look at how individuals become subjects through the process of interpellation. The photomontage work of John Heartfield and Martha Rosler’s series *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful* (1967-73) also served as a conceptual model for this project. *PS4* explores the ideological effects of gaming by interrupting the “seamless” gameplay experience and offering a critical view of so-called “immersive” technologies.





“You see the imagery, you know what’s going on, you see what you’re looking at. It’s very easy when something like that is happening to project yourself there and feel a part of the battle. Like I said, your heart starts racing a little bit.”

[-CNN interview with predator drone aircraft pilot on flying air strikes in Afghanistan and Pakistan from a control room in the Nevada desert](#)

*PS4*’s initial playlist juxtaposed PlayStation games such as the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise and *Black Hawk Down* (2003) with documentary footage of coltan mining provided by the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting. *PS4*’s playlist has since expanded to look at a variety of other sites where the casualties of global capitalism and militarism are appropriated by game designers and twisted into seamless ideological rituals of libertarian heroism. Of particular interest is the so-called first person shooter perspective, a reiteration of renaissance perspective where all objects in the world converge in the eye (or more precisely “I”) of the individual. The first-person shooter quickly learns that the “fight for freedom” paradoxically demands tyranny to kill a tyrant, terror to stop a terrorist, and injustice for the sake of justice. Stripped bare, this is the business of cutthroat capitalism: attaining a supreme vantage point (a given in the first-person shooter game) and doing away with any adversary standing in the way of the stuff and

status one needs to make it to the next level. Though this kind of self-righteousness and self-interest may seem to lie in stark contrast to the popular notion of democracy (in many cases the very thing we're supposedly defending), it somehow seems to exemplify a very specific kind of "freedom" touted by the US. This kind of "freedom" represents an abandonment of commitment and responsibility in favor of self-interest.



All games are serious in that they are practice for something outside of the game. Many video games (perhaps most poignantly the first-person shooter) can be viewed simply as practice for our neoliberal economy. While most popular debate around video games is centered on a literal view of whether or not actions in the game are reenacted in the real world, on a metaphorical level, perhaps the average combat game has more to do with shopping than shooting. The race to get ahead, no matter the cost to others: this is where the libertarian dream, so poignantly stated in the US Army slogan "an Army of one," can momentarily take shape inside a video game experience.

Coltan mining in the DRC is but one site among many that poignantly demonstrates the harsh and violent material beginnings of the machines we use to project our manufactured dreams of the world. In this dream world, the utmost attention is given to constructing experiences that will be regarded as realistic, immersive, interactive, and so on, though careful attention is paid to constructing narratives that seek to deny "users" (even while touting their "control") any constructive imaginary over the real

conditions of existence. High-minded declarations of the postindustrial society, the democratizing power of technology and consumerism, and even the concept of developed and underdeveloped worlds all seem hopelessly myopic in the face of the material tragedies that accompany the production of consumer technologies. Sadly, when electronics fall victim to planned or perceived obsolescence, often only months after purchase, "recycling" often means shipping them once again around the world, to developing countries such as India or China, where their precious and toxic metals can be scavenged before the rest of the machine is incinerated. This work is often done by children, with crude tools and without protective gear, in a scene reminiscent of mining. Mining coltan marks only the first stage in a profoundly linear, destructive and unsustainable trail blazed by neoliberalism that stretches thousands of miles over the globe.

**Mark Cooley** is an interdisciplinary artist interested in exploring the intersections of art, activism, popular culture, and institutional critique in a variety of contexts. Subjects of particular interest are US foreign policy, the fine art culture industry, and the political economy of new technologies. Mark's work has been featured internationally in online and offline venues such as Exit Art, NY, Rhizome.org, Furtherfield.org, the World Social Forum, MediaLabMadrid, and many other sites. Mark is currently a professor in the School of Art at George Mason University in the suburbs of Washington D.C. His work can be viewed at <http://www.flawedart.net>.