TrackingPoint bolt-action rifles are game-changers, not a game

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Abstract
If you were born before 1985 there's a good chance you watched Looney Tunes on a Saturday morning and followed the exploits of Elmer Fudd, Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck. Poor old Daffy, at times disguised as a rabbit, just couldn't outwit Bugs during rabbit season; and Fudd was one of those hunters you felt sorry for - a thousand shots fired, some on target, but never able to finish off his rival. A modern-day remake of a Fudd cartoon might feature a "precision-guided firearm," such as those in the recently released TrackingPoint XactSystem series, making Looney Tunes look like something out of ancient history. The cartoon might also be a little boring, with a short and predictable ending: shoot to kill the rabbit, and that's it - dead. No great chase necessary, no teasing the target animal out. The first time Daffy came into Fudd's field of view he'd be annihilated with pin-point accuracy.

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Hunting game has been turned into a hunting game. TrackingPoint

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The cartoon might also be a little boring, with a short and predictable ending: shoot to kill the rabbit, and that’s it – dead. No great chase necessary, no teasing the target animal out. The first time Daffy came into Fudd’s field of view he’d be annihilated with pin-point accuracy.

The new series of three TrackingPoint bolt-action rifles was developed with sport in mind – rather than combat or law enforcement – and was released last month at the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas.

The rifles contain a computerised and networked tracking scope and some non-volatile storage space to record everything seen with the optics.
Looking through the scope presents the shooter with a computerised “heads-up display” (similar to the sort you might find in a first-person shooter videogame) and the ability to “tag” a target which is then tracked by the rifle’s built-in software.

When the crosshairs in the heads-up display (HUD) are centred on the tagged target, a squeeze of the trigger will deliver a TrackingPoint proprietary round with great precision.

The TrackingPoint rifles have a Wi-Fi server onboard, allowing them to be paired up with an external iOS device. In this way, an iPad app can then mirror the rifle’s HUD, allowing a spotter to assist with shots while looking at a bigger screen.
Game hunting, or hunting game?

With the addition of a computerised heads-up display and the ability to mirror the view from the rifle’s optics on an iPad, hunting game is becoming ever more like a hunting videogame.

As one SIMHQ forum user wrote:

Might as well mount [a TrackingPoint rifle] on a drone and go nail Bambi from hundreds of miles away without the horrible inconvenience of all that going outside!

The similarities with videogames continue with the ability to upload photos and videos of your kill – captured by the rifle – to share with members of your social networks – a feature found in many current videogames.

It’s not hard to imagine a hunting-game craze with repercussions not only in the virtual world but in the physical.

We could also point to the potential for cruelty to animals. Why? Because users might feel compelled to create an interesting clip somehow, and a single clean shot might look somewhat uninteresting.

Using a TrackingPoint rifle is about more than sport. Hunting has been game-ified.

TrackingPoint

Virtual and real-world hunting
The TrackingPoint rifles seem to create a game-like experience reminiscent of real-world, location-based, role-playing games (LBRPG) where one fights virtual “monsters” with real-world personas in their given neighbourhood.

In 2011, YD Online, a Korean mobile gaming company, launched Geo Hunters, an iPhone-based LBRPG that sets gamers to fight monsters in their vicinity. What’s of particular interest is that “hidden monsters” appear according to world news.

The CEO of YD Online, Dr. Hyun Oh Yoo, believes this influenced-by-real-life element of the game makes it “even more relevant and engaging”.

Dr Yoo added:

Location-based technology has revolutionised game mechanics and GEO Hunters takes this type of experience one step further by using Google Maps to create a fun, addictive gaming environment.

We wanted to create a mobile game that combines actual geography with fantasy, while creating a community of engaged competitive players.
My fear is that the line between violence in the real-world and virtual world is starting to blur because of the location-based element that fixes monsters (and yourself, and other gamers) to a physical location on the earth’s surface. Your feet might be touching the ground but your head is in a virtual world as you move around trying to capture, tame, feed and build your own army to protect the world.

I can envisage people feeling “trapped” by virtual monsters surrounding them and not knowing which way to turn in order to maintain their position in the game. The longer you are in the game, the higher the stakes, after all.

So despite knowing too well it is just a game, a gamer might accidentally step into head-on traffic in order to avoid capture in the physical world, risking – at best – serious injury.

They may also become suspicious of people around them, and fear the close-up tap on the shoulder that means “game over”. The separation between that part of the game conducted virtually and that part of the game relevant to a physical location begins to meld.

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**Screen violence**

With modern-day rifles – such as those in the TrackingPoint series – real-world violence (such as shooting at game) is being presented as it might be in a videogame.

It could be easy to dismiss the impact of death of the target animal as something less significant if you’re watching that death through a heads-up display or on an iPad. While there is much research still to be done in this area, it surely warrants concern.
No doubt, we will have to rethink what it means to “pull the trigger” in the future - someone who selects a graphic on an iPad app might well plead they were simply engaged in a game that went too far.

And all this even before augmented reality hits the mainstream gaming scene. Users might recant that it “felt like they were taking a photograph”, or “they were just playing an iPhone app”, and that they weren’t actually holding a gun when the round was fired.

**Think of the children**

I wonder if the TrackingPoint rifles come with a sophisticated security system – no-one seems to have mentioned this just yet. What might happen if one was able to take control of someone else’s weapon wirelessly?

Thankfully, these precision guided firearms don’t come cheap – about US$17,000. The price tag minimises the risk that these guns will be seen as children’s toys for creative play.

That said, there’s now an iOS app that allows kids to fire virtual NERF guns in an augmented-reality game that looks like TrackingPoint.

We may soon be raising a generation of gamers who are good at real-world hunting, but we might also be raising those that won’t know the difference.

Yes, TrackingPoint guns promise exciting technology but, as a Looney Tunes character might put it: “That’s not all, folks!”