

# Homegrown Heroes and New War Warriors: Post-9/11 Depictions of Warfare in Call of Duty

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## **Homegrown Heroes and New War Warriors: Post-9/11 Depictions of Warfare in *Call of Duty***

Almost twenty years after 9/11, America and the West are still coming to terms with its impact. Indeed, it is difficult to articulate the enormity of the political, social and cultural consequences of the attacks on New York's Twin Towers without recourse to platitudes like 'era defining' or 'earth shattering'. The political/military ramifications of the event, and in particular the Bush presidency's arguably calamitous response to it, need no recounting in this essay of cultural sociology. What is in focus here is the impression of 9/11 and the ensuing 'War on Terror' on the American collective consciousness, as expressed through its popular cultural texts. Carroll's (2002: 2) reading of this broader existential dilemma, published only a year after the event, remains strikingly relevant:

The half-century Golden Age that ran from the 1950s to the start of the millennium may be over. It is possible that the American era may have had its end triggered, and with it the supremacy of the West, of what it stands for and what it stands on. Everything depends on the inner response.

Through an examination of the military 'first person shooter' (FPS) video game franchise, *Call of Duty*, this chapter sketches out one popular cultural iteration of this 'inner response'. Released two years after 9/11, and developed by studio Infinity Ward, the first *Call of Duty* turned the clock back to World War II, a seemingly simpler historical conflict which 'has since been moulded into a triumphalist teleology, sanded of its rough edges and imbued with a sense of moral righteousness' (Tanine 2018: 6). Following two more World War-themed and increasingly successful sequels, the franchise then shifted to providing players with interactive depictions of contemporary warfare – and, in doing so, became even more successful. By 2016, Infinity Ward – with supporting developers, Sledgehammer Games and Raven Studios – had completed a narrative arc of sorts, with three science-fiction-themed *Call of Duty* games. With seemingly nowhere new left to explore in terms of locale, the developers returned to World War II, and then the contemporary theatre, with their two most recent entries.

As the most profitable military FPS franchise of all time, *Call of Duty* is a prime example of what numerous researchers (e.g. Lenoir and Lowood 2000; Stahl 2010; Huntemann and Payne 2010; Robinson 2016), working within the ‘militarisation’ (Enloe 2000) of culture framework, refer to as a product of the ‘military-entertainment complex’. Seen as the culmination of ‘broad changes in the 1980s and 1990s that drew mass media into alliance with military interests’ (Stahl 2010: 25), the military-entertainment complex describes films, television shows and, increasingly, video games that further the US military’s ideological agenda and, in some cases, benefit from collaboration and funding from the military itself. Arguably the most famous example of a media artefact that encompasses both dimensions of this matrix is 1986’s *Top Gun*, the jingoistic Cold War naval aviator film produced by Jerry Bruckheimer in direct collaboration with the Pentagon (Sirota 2011). With the ostensible aim of achieving ‘authenticity’ in their recreations of war and conflict, *Call of Duty* developers have similarly worked in concert with military interests (Stuart 2014; Mattone 2019). Indeed, the relationship has even proven reciprocal, with franchise writer and producer, Dave Anthony, leaving game development in 2014 to take on an advisory role at the Pentagon (Parkin 2014). In terms of the focus of this chapter, what is more important is the general consensus among interested researchers (e.g. Anderson and Kurti 2009; Stahl 2010; Gagnon 2010) that, with or without military funding/collaboration, *Call of Duty* games’ unabashed support for ‘military force and recent war policies’ naturally furthers a ‘mutually beneficial arrangement’ (Andersen and Kurti 2009: 56, 61).

The vast temporal span of *Call of Duty*’s past, present and future visions offers an intriguing popular cultural glimpse into how America sees itself amidst post-9/11 perpetual war. In the following three sections we chart each of these visions, with particular attention paid to interpreting the most recent entries in the franchise.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, this chapter provides a multi-layered analysis which, while echoing key aspects of the militarisation thesis, also uncovers a deeper and inadvertent set of tensions. The games are grouped together according to this broad temporal narrative rather than being discussed in the chronological order of their release. While the franchise began with World War II before moving to a contemporary and then future focus, the most recent games have revisited World War II and the present day.

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that publisher, Activision, employed another development studio, Treyarch, to produce *Call of Duty* games in between the two-year release schedule of Infinity Ward’s main-line entries. Treyarch’s games, including the highly successful and more light-hearted *Black Ops* series, are equally worthy of analysis but also different enough in their ‘alternative timeline’ character to justify separate discussion.

Examining *Call of Duty* according to time period/genre rather than release date reveals a broader narrative that, while ostensibly furthering a military-entertainment complex agenda, also betrays a culture desperately valorising its imagined past, struggling with its present, and hoping to one day come full circle.

### *Past*

Set in World War II, the first *Call of Duty* (*COD1*) (2003) established the template for the following two entries in the franchise, *Call of Duty 2* (*COD2*) (2005) and *Call of Duty 3* (*COD3*) (2006). Infinity Ward's decision to focus on World War II is not surprising. Indeed, a survey of FPSs released between 1992 and 2011 found that approximately two thirds were situated in this historical setting (Breuer, Festl and Quandt 2011). There are moral, aesthetic and dramaturgical factors that make this theatre particularly appealing for game developers. In contrast to later wars, World War II remains enshrined in the American cultural imaginary as a 'good war', in which the 'good' allied forces triumphed over the forces of unmitigated 'evil' (Ambrose 1992, 1997; Tanine 2018). It was also the war that consolidated America's economic, political and cultural hegemony, and ushered in the period of uncritical praise that C. Wright Mills referred to as 'the American celebration' (Mills 1956: 26). Setting the games within the venerable cities of Europe, each in the process of being reduced to rubble, also serves as an omnipresent reminder that the player is taking part in an existential struggle for the future of humanity. Finally, unlike the protracted timeframes of later wars, the clear beginning and end of World War II make it particularly well suited for dramatisation within traditional narrative arcs.

The first three games in the *Call of Duty* franchise are steeped in what film historian, Thomas Schatz (2002: 75), refers to as 'Hollywood's military Ur-narrative'. They endorse a set of values – namely, duty, courage, selfless sacrifice, and friendship – that are seen to be forged in the bloody crucible of war. While these values are a hallmark of FPSs more generally, the World War II-themed *Call of Duty* games differ from other seminal examples like *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992) and *Medal of Honour* (2002) in terms of their accent. Technological limitations meant that earlier FPSs were restricted in their ability to include supporting non-player characters. As a result, gameplay focused on the 'lone wolf' or 'super soldier' style of warrior protagonist. In contrast, from *COD1* onwards, players navigate the battlefield in

squadrons, with squad members shouting directions and providing support at critical moments. The result is a more democratic sense of heroism that celebrates the importance of camaraderie over individual achievement, and the everyman over John Rambo.

The politics of these games is Manichean. While the narrative focus remains squarely on the battles at hand, it is connected to the wider world through the interpolation of iconic speeches and quotations from statesman and military leaders. This is epitomised in *COD2*'s framing of the conflict through General-turned-President Dwight Eisenhower's speech 'Order of the Day' (1944). Drawing parallels to the Great Crusades, he praises the troops' courage and self-sacrifice before calling for the 'blessing of Almighty God upon this great and noble undertaking'. The effect is an illustration of a moral consensus that runs in an unbroken chain from divine legitimation, through politics and social institutions, to the values displayed upon the battlefield. In *COD1-3*'s interpretation of World War II, this relationship is so ironclad that it precludes any detailed examination of the actions of allied forces. There are no 'bad' allied soldiers here, only heroes who temporarily lose their moral compass in the heat of battle. By establishing the enemy as the personification of evil, *COD1-3* effectively give the allies, and by extension the player, carte blanche. There is no moral transgression that remains unattonable through noble self-sacrifice and recommitment to the allied cause.

Ostensibly, *COD1-3*'s use of archival materials aims to inject a sense of documentary realism that helps develop players' understanding of the historical importance of the war, while also raising the stakes of gameplay. However, the narrow squad-based contextualisation of the war in these games, coupled with the rudimentary characterisation of their protagonists, means that they never move beyond a surface-level connection to real-world history. Where these games are richest in historical detail is in their almost fetishistic attention to the look and feel of the weapons used in the conflict. The importance of this aspect is further highlighted by the overwhelming praise all three received from critics for their recreation of an authentic combat experience.<sup>2</sup> It is also evident in the weapons' 'mod packs' that are still produced by members of the player community to further enhance the weapons' verisimilitude.<sup>3</sup> This preoccupation with the mechanics of gameplay ultimately suggests that

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<sup>2</sup> While many of the relevant online reviews are no longer accessible, summaries of this wide praise can be found on aggregate review site, metacritic: <https://www.metacritic.com/>.

<sup>3</sup> See for example the modifications for Call of Duty available on the website *MODDb*. Retrieved from <https://www.moddb.com/games/call-of-duty/mods>

the moral and dramaturgical components of these earliest entries are less important than their ability to capture an aesthetic experience of World War II.

Released eleven years after *COD3*, and developed by one-time supporting studio, Sledgehammer Games, *Call of Duty: WWII (COD WWII)* (2017) saw the game return to its original locale. Reflecting both the franchise's evolution and wider trends in the industry, *COD WWII* is marked by both a greater attention to storytelling, and a greater self-awareness as a popular cultural artefact. Emphasising the developers' aim to create an experience 'that touches, in a respectful way, on the true darkness and atrocities of the conflict', then-studio head, Michael Condrey (cited in GameCentral 2017), saw the game as an opportunity to change players' perceptions of the franchise more broadly: '... this canvas of World War II and this conflict and this flexion point in human history, it's the most powerful opportunity for us to really create art.' Despite these intentions, *COD WWII* is ultimately no less anchored in cliché. The narrative follows the wartime experiences of Ronald 'Red' Daniels, a small-town boy who yearns to return home to his sweetheart. He is accompanied by a tightknit squad of surrogate brothers, including: an American Jew struggling with his dual sense of identity; a naïve intellectual; a scrappy New Yorker; a hard-as-nails Sargent; and a kind-hearted and fatherly Lieutenant. The choice of locations is similarly stereotypical, focusing on key battles, including Omaha Beach on D-Day and the Battle of the Bulge. As suggested, what separates *COD WWII* from its more diegetically basic predecessors is its desire to be taken seriously as a remediation of the historic conflict. For example, conversations between squad members namedrop Nietzsche, and Nazi atrocities are briefly counterpoised to German achievements in music, literature and the arts. However, such allusions to moral ambiguity in how the enemy is perceived never inform the narrative, they merely gesture towards a complexity that it does not possess.

While set within the broad theatre of World War II, *COD WWII* wants to tell a more intimate and sentimental story. The game opens with a vision of German forces decimating Europe before quickly narrowing its focus to the wartime experiences of Red and his squadron. Their camaraderie forms the sentimental core of the story and pushes everything else into the background. Indeed, the game has little to say about the war beyond its appeal to well-worn themes of honour, duty, and brotherhood. When their Lieutenant nobly sacrifices himself so that his troops may survive, there is no space within the narrative's narrow frame to ponder how this relates to the wider tragedy of war. Instead, his death is reduced to an opportunity to

reinforce the values that underlie the game's worldview. In using World War II as a backdrop for its intimate story, *COD WWII* tries to have its cake and eat it too: it wants to be acknowledged for the weight of its subject matter, while at the same time avoiding the sort of genuinely deeper engagement that might undermine its simple tale of brotherhood.

Similar limitations are evident in the game's attempt to provide psychological depth to Red's character arc. A series of flashbacks establish that as a boy he failed to shoot a wolf that mauled his older brother to death. Haunted by his failure to act, he carries an abiding sense of guilt and yearns to redeem himself at war. An opportunity presents itself when his best friend is abducted by the Nazis: at great personal risk, Red manages to track him down to a concentration camp, and the hero arrives just in time to stop his friend's execution and wreak revenge on his Nazi jailor. Having saved his surrogate brother, Red's guilt is absolved, and he returns home to his heavily pregnant girlfriend ready to begin his adult life. Red's story follows a stock convention of mid-twentieth century films in which, absent any sense of post-war trauma, 'war is presented as a relatively benign ritual transition from boyhood to adulthood' (Gibson 1994: 22). Released over seventy-five years after the end of World War II, and in the context of an enormous body of related historical research and cultural remediation, this throwback to a coming-of-age narrative seems strikingly oblivious to the war's lasting psychological impacts.

In an extensive study of the aestheticisation of World War II, Tanine (2018) argues that the rising popularity of related video games following 9/11 reflected a nostalgia for the supposed Manichean clarity of conventional warfare. Furthermore, she postulates that framing onscreen violence within the 'good war' circumvents any moral qualms that players may have, thereby freeing them to revel in the thrill of violence and destruction. In this sense, *COD WWII* is a contradictory text, in which the game's core interactive aim to 'promote and facilitate the extension of the process of *militarisation*' (Martino 2012: 264) sits awkwardly with its pretensions to narrative sophistication. On the one hand, the game wishes to be taken more seriously as a rumination on the experience of World War II. On the other hand, there is little beyond the surface to suggest any genuine depth of engagement with its subject matter. While ostensibly presenting as a more sophisticated take on World War II than *CODI-3*, the game endorses the same constellation of values as its predecessors, and similarly fetishises the look and feel of combat. Indeed, the increased emphasis on narrative in *COD WWII*

allows the game to pay superficial respect to the gravity of World War II while simultaneously appropriating it as a visceral aesthetic spectacle.

### *Present*

Over the course of the increasingly successful *CODI-3*, Infinity Ward gradually made a name for itself as the premiere game developer for World War II-themed military FPSs. With 2007's *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare (MW1)*, the developers pivoted into depictions of contemporary warfare and thereby established the franchise's pre-eminence across the FPS genre more broadly. As a post-9/11 contemporary military FPS released well after America's interventions in both Afghanistan and Iraq (and amidst growing anxieties over the latter), *MW1* fictionalises, and then oddly reframes, these conflicts as between American peacekeepers and Russian ultranationalists, with the Middle Eastern antagonists essentially stripped of agency and reduced to pawns in the latter's game of global conquest. Pre-empting by some years the West's current, and arguably exaggerated (e.g. Clapper cited in Koenig 2017), fixation on Russia as 'genetically driven' to nefariousness, this first iteration in what would become known as the 'Modern Warfare' series manages the remarkable dual-feat of both propagandising contemporary Middle Eastern conflicts and returning the player to the comfort of a simpler Cold War-era.

Indeed, while the game begins in a fictionalised Middle Eastern country, with the player pitted against anti-Western Muslim terrorist, Khaled Al-Asad, the focus soon shifts to Russia and the fight against the game's shadowy archvillain, Imran Zakhaev. Notably, *MW1*'s Russia-based sections even include a level in which the player fights waves of ultranationalists across the real-world backdrop of Pripyat, the Ukrainian ghost city rendered uninhabitable by the Chernobyl disaster of 1986. *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 (MW2)* and *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 (MW3)*, released in 2009 and 2011, respectively, tread similarly curious temporal/geopolitical ground. However, like most commercial media sequels, they up the ante considerably: *MW2* brings the conflict onto American soil with the anachronistic fever dream of a full-scale Russian invasion; and *MW3* essentially recapitulates this paranoid scenario across Europe.



It is important to note that Infinity Ward have always been careful to portray their Russian and Middle Eastern villains as rogue non-state actors who pose as much of a threat to their own nations' interests as they do to the West's. Echoing the hawkish neoconservative worldview that drove foreign policy during the Bush-era (Kitfield 2007), this 'either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists' (Bush cited in Khan 2017) distinction serves to pre-empt accusations of blanket ethnocultural demonisation, while complimentarily framing America's military interventions as innately altruistic. However, it should also be noted that in games as frenziedly paced as *MWI-3* – with their difficult-to-follow plotting and revolving door of forgettable non-Western ally characters – any narrative distinctions drawn on paper between good and bad foreigners are easily lost in the actual moment-to-moment gunplay. More broadly, and to follow Gagnon (2010), all three games offer a view of American foreign and military policy which at once: stokes fears of external and existential threats to the nation; glorifies American military power and promotes 'the myth that state violence and wars are inevitable' (Gagnon 2010: 9); and, finally, sanitises the altogether more gruesome real-world conflicts it seeks to make sense of.

*MWI-3* are as heavily gendered as their World War II-themed predecessors. However, in this contemporary setting, the hypermasculine player-protagonist and his band of similarly orthodox brothers also closely align to Gibson's (1994) 'New War warrior' archetype:

Paramilitary culture always stresses the tribal organisation of males as the family type best suited for life in the war zone... Either they are elite units, like the fighter pilots or commandos, within a large military bureaucracy or they are independent mercenary groups. (Gibson 1994: 39)

As Gibson (1994: 40) goes on to suggest, the above archetype echoes certain 'archaic male initiation rites' in which boys are removed from feminine influence, particularly their mothers, in order to be symbolically reborn into manhood. However, for these warriors, the central function of such gendered separation rites is conspicuous in its absence:

But it is at this point that the old and the new diverge. The function of the older ceremonies is to return new adult warriors to society to serve as its protectors. The same process operates in World War II movies. In most New War stories, by contrast, the "adult" male is not reintegrated into society. He may fight on behalf of society, but he is not part of it. His enemies are never fully defeated; the New War never ends. (Gibson 1994: 41)

Importantly, as millennial video game incarnations of Gibson's elite (rather than everyman) warrior archetype, the heroes of *MWI-3* are considerably more Dirty Harry or Jack Reacher than John Rambo or Martin Riggs: if there is any torture or rage here, it has been completely sublimated into a brutally proceduralist focus on 'the mission'. Indeed, even in the brief and punctuating moments of tragedy and triumph, the heroes essentially maintain this cold professionalism – a response which mutes the impact of such moments and invites the player to respond in kind.

Following a foray into science-fiction-themed FPSs (discussed in the next section), developers returned to the contemporary theatre with 2019's confusingly titled reboot, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*. While echoing *MWI-3* in boosting American military hegemony and positioning the nation (and its Western allies) as perennially under threat, *Modern Warfare* is, in certain fundamental respects, a very different beast. First, and according to the game's campaign gameplay director, Jacob Minkoff (cited in Forward 2019), a conscious decision was made at the outset to produce a 'more intimate, more mature, more gritty' take on the series. Aided by a new game engine which enabled hitherto unmatched degrees of photorealism, the developers ostensibly achieved their aim of making 'everything grounded and real' (Minkoff cited in Forward 2019) by shifting from the bombastic representational style of action films towards one clearly aimed at evoking the imagery of real-world news footage. Much like Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) – the similarly 'gritty' and deeply contestable (e.g. Greenwald 2012) filmic account of the capture of Osama Bin Laden – *Modern Warfare*'s simulacra-like (Baudrillard 1994) 'realism' stands in unique tension with the comic book chauvinism the game inherits from its predecessors.

Indeed, in seeking to more faithfully approximate contemporary real-world conflicts, while wholeheartedly maintaining the hyper-ideological agenda of previous entries, *Modern Warfare* clashes with itself in a manner similar to *COD WW2*, and ultimately presents as something akin to an interactive version of *Rambo III* (1988) as if it were filmed by 'embedded' (DiMaggio 2008) war correspondents. In other words, the game draws from, and insidiously unites, two distinct but nonetheless complimentary traditions in modern mythologising: the popular cultural and the state-sanctioned journalistic. For example, one sequence sees the player placed in control of a Middle Eastern girl attempting to escape her fictionalised war torn Middle Eastern city. Borrowing liberally from news footage of the present conflict in Syria, we are again offered an anachronistic version of events in which the

archvillain is Russian – in this case, General Roman Barkov, the Kurtz-like rogue commander who has occupied the city and flooded it with Sarin-like gas.

The Syria-inspired escape sequence is, as suggested, a bizarre anachronism: introduced as a ‘20 Years Ago’ flashback, it alludes to the Cold War period of Soviet occupation while also clearly situating itself in a contemporary context. Indeed, it even features the controversial (e.g. O’Connor 2017; Solon 2017) ‘White Helmets’ volunteer organisation which rescues the girl at the outset. Trapped under the rubble of a collapsed building, and beside her own dead mother, there is a marked obscenity to all this: a grim contemporary reality taken wildly out of context in the name of visceral and propagandist entertainment. Furthermore, the game’s desire to ‘ground’ itself so squarely in real-world imagery ultimately leads it from cynical obscenity to some astonishing acts of projection. Indeed, Barkov’s military occupation provides numerous moments in which *Modern Warfare* essentially transfers real-world American guilt onto the shoulders of the fictional Russian archvillain and his brutal accomplices. During the abovementioned escape sequence, the player witnesses Barkov’s troops murder civilians amidst a harried friend-or-foe confusion that evokes the Haditha massacre, and other proven and alleged American war crimes. A later torture scene goes so far as to include waterboarding, depicted here as a Russian tactic which, much like its real-world analogue (US Senate cited in Usborne 2012), proves both cruel and ineffective. Most flagrant is the ‘Highway of Death’ mission in which, during the introduction, the narrator quite literally scapegoats Russia for this infamous Gulf War episode: ‘The Russians bombed it during the invasion, killing the people trying to escape’.

Another aspect of *Modern Warfare* which distinguishes it from its predecessors is its handling of military bureaucracy. Rendered here as an ineffectual, and at times corrupt, organisation, the military leadership expects the heroes to ‘put their lives on the line while at the same time crippling them with regulations’ (Gibson 1994: 34). Indeed, the game is framed almost from the outset as a conflict against both the enemy and the bureaucracy. At the close of the first main mission in which British SAS soldiers respond to a terrorist attack in London, Sergeant Kyle Garrick surveys the damage and remarks to a sympathetic Captain John Price:

It shouldn't have happened in the first place, sir. They sent us in half-arsed, so everyone can just keep pretending we're not at war... why have we got our hands tied? Let's just take the bloody gloves off and fight.

Echoing conservative-revisionist explanations for America's defeat in Vietnam (Wiest and Doidge 2010), the present and ongoing 'War on Terror' is understood in *Modern Warfare* as persistent only in so far as the bureaucracy inhibits men like Kyle and Price from doing their job. It is a recurring theme throughout that introduces most missions as edging just over the line of official sanction, and culminates in a final betrayal in which the powers that be inexplicably hand over to Russia one of the elite squad's key Middle Eastern allies. Furthermore, as Kyle's assessment suggests, the frustration appears at times directed as much to society-at-large as to the military bureaucracy: towards the end of the game, Price sneers, 'we get dirty and the whole world stays clean.'

In an arguably lackadaisical gesture to progressive political values, *Modern Warfare* also represents a departure from *MW1-3* in terms of gender representations. While it stops short of disrupting the core brotherhood with the inclusion of women in the squad, the game features two female characters who each play a key role in the squadrons adventures. The first is Kate Laswell, Station Chief and principal contact between the New War warriors and the higher ups in the military bureaucracy who remain conspicuously absent from the narrative itself. Sympathetic to the squad's frustrations at being hampered by its leaders, Laswell treads a fine line between maintaining protocols and doing everything she can to aid her charges in their shadowy pursuits. Ostensibly presented as the squad's hard-headed manager, Laswell ultimately occupies a conventional motherhood role, mediating between her unloved sons and their absent fathers.

The second, even more central female character is Farah Kirim, leader of the insurgency against Russian occupation of her fictional homeland. While not strictly a member of the elite squad, Kirim fights shoulder-to-shoulder alongside them on a number of occasions. Furthermore, in order to emphasise her importance in the narrative, developers place control of Kirim in the hands of the player during three sequences: the previously discussed flashback in which she flees her city as a young girl; later, as an adult, during an escape from Barkov's clutches; and then, finally, when she achieves vengeance by assassinating the Russian archvillain. As far as *Modern Warfare's* characters are concerned, Kirim is relatively

well-drawn, and provides a much welcome contrast to the Western heroes' gruff 'check your corners' professionalism. However, given the real-world unlikelihood of encountering either a female special forces captain or a female Muslim insurgency leader, the developers' gender-inclusive decision to feminise the latter, rather than the more central former, is a curious one. Indeed, it essentially enables *Modern Warfare* to maintain the hypermasculinity for which the series is known, while offering gestures of inclusivity that remain safely at an 'orientalised' (Said 2003) distance.

### ***Future***

Responding to a burgeoning trend in the FPS market, Infinity Ward (now aided by Sledgehammer Games and Raven Soft) pivoted once more after 2011's *MW3* into a science-fiction reimagining of the franchise. *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare (AW)* (2014) and *Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare (IW)* (2016) are generally understood as the franchise's two science-fiction-era entries, but the immediately preceding *Call of Duty: Ghosts* (2013) represented its first tentative step into the genre. Set in 2027, *Ghosts* remains the least well received *Call of Duty* by fans and critics alike (e.g. Avina 2020; James and Werner 2017) – a reception which no doubt contributed to the developer's decision to commit more fully to a sci-fi reimagining for the next entry. Indeed, aside from the 'near future' narrative framing and occasional light integration of futuristic technologies, *Ghosts* is all but indistinguishable from its 'modern' predecessors. In this sense, the game acts as the connective tissue between the present-day visions discussed in the previous section, and the future visions discussed here. The most notable aspect of *Ghosts*' narrative – which essentially retreads the now firmly established theme of elite warriors singlehandedly defending America against some or other existential threat – is in its choice of enemy. Following a nuclear obliteration of the Middle East, America faces the 'Federation of Americas', a union of oil-rich Latin American nations set on subjugating their northern neighbour. Given America's long and problematic real-world history of intervention in various Latin American nations (e.g. O'Rourke 2018), *Ghosts*' narrative represents a form of projection wilder even than *Modern Warfare*'s nightmarish Russia-scapegoating.

*Ghosts* was followed by *AW* which represented the franchise's first overtly sci-fi-themed game, and the first to be led by Sledgehammer Games. Aside from its distinctive sci-fi

setting, and expanded futuristic tech gameplay offerings, the most striking feature of *AW* is the appearance of Oscar Winning Hollywood actor, Kevin Spacey, in the role of the archvillain. Rendered here through then cutting-edge CGI motion capture technology, the inclusion of Spacey in a *Call of Duty* game in and of itself represented a watershed for the franchise, and to some extent gaming more broadly. Indeed, having already established itself as one of the most profitable video game franchises of all time, *Call of Duty* was now attracting bona fide Hollywood stars, and furthering the case for gaming as a media on par with cinema and television. *AW* was widely praised at the time (e.g. Oravasaari 2014; D'Argenio 2014) for its update of the franchise's 'run-and-gun' gameplay via futuristic 'Exo Suits' which enabled players to perform giant leaps across the battlefield and run horizontally across walls, among other acts of superhuman athleticism.

While it is arguably best remembered for its gameplay innovations, *AW* also offers an interesting take on the series' extant jingoism. To recapitulate the game's 'enemy-within'-style narrative, *AW* follows the adventures of player-controlled protagonist, Private Jackson 'Jack' Mitchell, who, after being discharged from the Marines due to injury, joins a squad of elite private military contractors working for the fictional private military company (PMC), Atlas. After losing both his arm and his best friend, William Irons, during a botched mission to defend Seoul against North Korean invasion, Jack is invited by Jonathon Irons – CEO of Atlas and also William's father – to continue his career at Atlas with a new Atlas manufactured robotic arm, and without the stifling constraints of the conventional military. In a nod to 9/11 conspiracy theories (e.g. Meacher 2003), Spacey's Irons is later discovered by Jack and his squad to have withheld crucial information about incoming nuclear attacks on the West in order to set himself and his corporation up as self-styled global saviours. Shocked and betrayed by Iron's actions, Jack returns to the military's embrace in order to bring down his one-time father figure.

*AW*'s relationship to technology is deceptively ambivalent. In the tradition of its 'modern' predecessors, there are two villains here: the scheming PMC archvillain, Irons, and a secondary red herring, 'Hades', who leads the terrorist group responsible for the nuclear carnage of which Irons withholds crucial foreknowledge. However, in a sci-fi-appropriate evolution of the contemporary era games, Hades' grievance has less to do with America and the West *per se* than it does with their ever-growing reliance on technology. A neo-Luddite, Hades' stated terrorist aim is to see humanity return to its 'natural state' through an

obliteration of its technological foundations. At first glance, in alignment with the game's heavily promoted Exo Suit gameplay features, the conflict here between technophobic terrorists and 'advanced' warriors would appear to position *AW*'s narrative as a pro-technological one. Moreover, as the solitary *Call of Duty* with (Exo Suit-enhanced) female squad member, the context also offers a quasi-transhumanist (e.g. Pilsch 2017) expansion of the franchise's usual gendered horizons.

And yet this boosting of American technological superiority poses problems for a franchise in which – much like the 'old Hollywood warriors [whose] martial prowess was grounded in their moral character' (Gibson 1994: 81) – the soldier's basic virtue and resourcefulness (and corresponding skill of the player) have always been positioned as the decisive factors. To square this circle, *AW* has Gideon, Jack's mentor and partner throughout the game, chime in at various points with counter-sentiments such as 'the best weapon you have is the one between your ears' and 'try not to fall in love with the toys. It still comes down to the soldier that uses them'. Later, during the game's climax, Jack and his squad discover that Irons has maintained control of their Exo Suits and they are forced to jettison the metal frames and rely solely on their own resources. The final pursuit of Irons then culminates in a moment of somewhat heavy-handed symbolism in which the archvillain is sent tumbling over the edge of a burning building, saved only by hanging on to Jack's Atlas manufactured robotic arm. In one final rebuke of both Irons and the technology he provided, Jack severs his forearm prosthetic, sending Irons to his death.

*AW*'s engagement with concerns around the increasing presence of PMCs in American military activities, and the 'relative impunity' (Leander 2010) with which they operate, is as intriguing as it is problematic. Indeed, it calls to mind Debord's (2009) notion of 'capitalist recuperation': the process through which radical/oppositional ideas are absorbed and repackaged to become palatable to status quo interests. In its apparent critique of the unaccountability of PMCs, and broader questioning of multinational corporate power, *AW* presents as the most radical *Call of Duty* to date. However, the game's franchise-typical Manichean distinction between, in this case, a virtuous (albeit forever bureaucratically suffocated) conventional military, on the one hand, and a nefarious profit-driven PMC, on the other, muddies their real-world interdependency. Expunged from *AW*'s fictional account is any sense of the increasing 'centrality of contracting in American warfare' (McFate 2016) and how this privatisation of conflict represents a conscious decision on the part of successive

governments to maintain the ‘War on Terror’ in a less accountable manner, and in the face of growing civilian discontent (Singer 2008).

In contrast, the relationship between the military and Atlas in *AW* is framed as an antagonistic one, and necessary only because – in much the same way as 2019’s *Modern Warfare* – the former have lost their mettle – they are *too* beholden to notions of civic accountability, democracy and the like. In one key scene, Irons meets with a general and his team in order to propose a typical highly-irregular-yet-highly-effective mission. When the general refuses to give sanction, citing that ‘it would be an act of war without congressional authority’, Irons snaps back, ‘We don’t need Congress!’ Later, when the archvillain’s world conquering agenda is exposed, things take an altogether more surrealist turn. Irons and his company take up residence in New Baghdad – a city built by the PMC from the wreckage of America’s war in Iraq – and the corporate mogul becomes the city’s cultish despot. Essentially reducing legitimate critiques of American foreign policy (e.g. Ryan 2007) to the ravings of a madman, we see giant TV screens emblazoned on skyscrapers that broadcast footage of Irons as he lists off America’s crimes and failures, and rants about a glorious end to its hegemony.

Infinity Ward returned to lead development for 2016’s *IW* and took the franchise into the far-flung future of 2180. Now fully decoupled from any real-world contemporary context, this even more overtly sci-fi setting sees *Call of Duty* come full circle back to the naïve sentimentality of its World War II mythologising. Indeed, stripped of the space suits, laser guns and so forth, *IW* is essentially a love letter to American individualism and comradery, and the superiority of these values over the blind devotion inculcated by totalitarian systems. Praised both for its expansion of *AW*’s sci-fi gameplay mechanics, and its unusually open-ended level design (e.g. Takahashi 2016; Bistak 2016), *IW*’s narrative is straightforward and heavily reliant on the sort of spectacle that developers would ultimately roll back with the *Modern Warfare* reboot. The game’s future setting echoes the book and television series, *The Expanse*, in which humanity has colonised the galaxy and exported therein all its Earthbound and intra-human tensions and conflicts. However, *IW* bears none of *The Expanse*’s geopolitical ambivalence, and instead adopts this basic premise to tell a simpler tale of good versus evil.

In this sense, *IW*’s true ideological progenitor is *Star Trek* which, in its own ‘end of history’-style (Fukuyama 1993) Western liberalist future, conveys a subtext that ‘both mirrors the



geopolitical realities of American power in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and recapitulates the manifest destiny of 19<sup>th</sup> century US western expansion' (Davidson 2017). Indeed, much like *Star Trek's* 'Starfleet', *IW's* 'United Nations Space Alliance' (UNSA) is essentially an American military organisation with ally characters from various other nations along for the ride. Vague in motivation, the villain is the totalitarian 'Settlement Defense Front' (SDF) and its cruel and unyielding leader, Salen Kotch. The most distinguishing aspect of this narrative conflict between the two sides lies in the developers' atypical decision to push a central theme to the forefront. Encapsulated in the UNSA's and SDF's respective catch cries 'Peace to the Fallen' and 'Death is no Disgrace!', this is very explicitly an ideological conflict between an American belief in the sanctity of individual life, and a totalitarianism all too ready to sacrifice its adherents to the greater cause. The theme plays out most prominently in the game's unusually close attention to death as the ultimate warrior sacrifice. For example, when the villainous Kotch is introduced, he murders one of his own soldiers in front of his indifferent fellow squad members simply to make a point about their complete devotion; later, in a similar demonstration, another henchman proudly commits suicide in front of the heroes just to frustrate their pursuit of Kotch. This is contrasted with the UNSA's Marines-style 'leave no man behind' stance whereby soldiers offer to sacrifice themselves on a number of occasions, but always against the wishes of a humane military leadership.

Another aspect of *IW* which brings the franchise historically full circle to *COD WWII* is its deeply sentimental reading of warfare and heroism. Indeed, the elite squad dynamic is marked by a similarly maudlin sense of comradeship throughout the adventure: affectionate quips are traded back and forth; familial bonds are formed and nurtured amidst the frenzy; and the game even concludes with a brief sequence in front of a markedly anachronistic war memorial in which departed heroes are given a respectful final honouring. Furthermore, when key supporting characters are killed, *IW* devotes an unusual amount of time and attention to emphasising each sacrifice. Oddly, the most poignant instance involves Ethan, a sentient wisecracking robot soldier who sacrifices himself during the game's climax – clearly, every soldier matters here. Elsewhere there is a more general sense of melodrama to both the script and the actors' delivery which, again, positions the narrative as something more akin to *COD WWII* than to the two preceding sci-fi entries, or any of the contemporary-themed ones.

## ***Conclusion***

Regardless of time period/genre, *Call of Duty* is always engaged in a process of American mythmaking. Furthermore, like all mythological narratives, the games invite a range of sociological interpretations that lie beneath the propagandist functions on which militarisation analyses shed critical light. Tellingly, this mythmaking effort is most successful, and least interesting, with the earliest World War II-themed *CODI-3*. As discussed, *CODI-3*'s naïve mythological coherence can be argued to be at least in part due to the games' technological limitations: game engines at the time were only beginning to offer the sorts of tools required for creating modes of visual storytelling comparable to cinema or television. As a result, there is a simple three-way unity to these earliest entries that lends itself to *Call of Duty*'s Manichean agenda – between the visceral moment-to-moment gunplay, the rudimentary plotting and characterisations, and the intermittent and grandiose documentary-style contextualisation. Later games in the franchise are no less engaged in the same mythologising project, but they increasingly strain under the weight of two factors: the developers' effort to imbue their games with a narrative sophistication that is inherently hostile to myth; and their questionable decision to mythologise time periods much closer to home.

With respect to the former, the contradictory attempt to engage in more sophisticated and intellectualised forms of mythmaking is broadly analogous to Nietzsche's (2000: 124) thoughts about the Socratic-rational 'degeneration and transformation' of ancient Greek myth at the hands of Late Classical Greek playwright, Euripides. Here, the inherent dissonance between the developers' intellectualising instincts, and their mythmaking ones, is most pronounced in *COD WWII*: the core coming-of-age narrative and veneer of remediation inevitably clash as forms of cultural understanding. The 'modern' games eventually buckle under similar weight. While *MWI-3* presume to offer nothing more than a fantastical propagandising of contemporary conflict, 2019's *Modern Warfare* essentially tries to civilise these earlier, more honestly jingoistic games while retaining their core agenda. Moreover, *Modern Warfare*'s veneer of visual 'realism', along with the intention to have the narrative speak more directly to grim real-world events, essentially turn the naïve propaganda of *MWI-3* into something much more insidious, and absurdly revisionist.

This then brings us to the second argument. Put simply, it is much easier, indeed by definition, to mythologise the past (and the distant future) than the present – especially when the latter is so mired in ambivalence, and guilt. *Modern Warfare* exemplifies this

predicament. Here, the dissonance between reality and mythology essentially leads to a sort of narrative derangement: having tasked themselves with the impossibility of conveying real-world contemporary horror within a mythic framework, developers run the gamut from simple *MW1-3*-style exaltation, to insidiously pseudo-realistic propagandising, to the kind of psychotic projection that only manifests when reality is too traumatic to confront. As the enduring antagonist in these ‘modern’ games, Russia, in this sense, gradually sees itself transform across the series from the oddly incongruent villain of earlier entries to *Modern Warfare*’s Jungian ‘shadow’ projection. As Jung (1992: 93) suggests, ‘Everyone carries a shadow, and the less embodied it is in the individual’s conscious life, the blacker and denser it is’. The first two sci-fi games, *Ghosts* and *AW*, both suffer from similar dissociative tendencies, with the former’s hysterical construction of Latin America as near future global aggressor, and the latter’s abnegation of guilt in respect to American PMCs.

In *Call of Duty*’s fictional historical shift from WWII to more contemporary settings, a range of other tensions and ambivalences emerge that, however unconsciously, position the franchise as something more than just a simple military-entertainment complex product. Echoing the abovementioned broader struggle to mythologise the present, the depiction of heroes from sentimental brothers to cold proceduralists betrays a sense of ennui with respect to the nebulous goals and purpose of America’s War on Terror. Indeed, the odd amalgamation of Russian and Middle Eastern antagonists across the ‘modern’ games similarly suggests that America is no longer even sure who it is fighting against, let alone why. The anti-bureaucratic sentiment that runs deep in both *Modern Warfare* and *AW* furthers this sense of internal tension, betraying a culture as much at war with itself as it is with any external forces. In this sense, while the military-entertainment complex provides an important starting point for examining something like *Call of Duty* – and, as noted in the introduction, developers’ collaboration with military advisors is not insignificant – there is also a need to move beyond the framework in order to capture the ‘elemental drives and anxieties’ (Heins 2013: 3) that lie beneath even the ideological substructure.

As discussed, the far-flung future of *IW* sees *Call of Duty* come home to the naïve unity of its earliest entries. Now completely divorced from reality, this third sci-fi game is freed to recommence Mills’ Golden Age ‘American celebration’ in a manner of which even the sentimental *COD WWII*, with its cursory ‘games as art’ remediations, can only dream. Indeed, echoing Carroll’s (2002: 2-3) estimation of the West’s baser cultural instincts, *IW* ‘is

heavily draped in tactics for inducing oblivion, so as not to know, so as to restore the pretence that all is well...’ Importantly, the game’s return to naivety suggests that technological limitations might ultimately have had little to do with *CODI-3*’s similar character – indeed, the common denominator arguably lies elsewhere. As stated, every *Call of Duty* aims to mythologise America and its role in the world. Released across 2003-2006, and in the aftermath of 9/11 and the subsequent Iraq War, *CODI-3* seems to have exploded into popular culture as both salve and enabler: offering nostalgic comfort in times of confusion while framing the nation’s ill-advised military response as part of an unbroken moral teleology. In democratic societies, such unabashed paeans only make sense in the immediate aftermath of catastrophes. The reality of their ambivalences, and the ensuing clash of ideological perspectives, soon set in and relegate triumphalist unity to the realm of pure fantasy.

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