

MILITARY VIDEO GAMES AS INTERACTIVE SPECTACLES OF WAR:  
REPRESENTATIONS OF MODERN CONFLICT IN CALL OF DUTY: MODERN  
WARFARE (2019)

A Thesis  
submitted to the Faculty of the  
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences  
of Georgetown University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of  
Master of Arts  
in  
Communication, Culture, and Technology

By

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Washington, DC  
April 20, 2021

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**ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines the representations of modern conflict – including concepts of proxy warfare, private military companies, political insurgency, terrorist forces, the “fog of war,” and military rules of engagement—as depicted in the widely popular and influential video game *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*. As part of this examination, I also consider the game’s portrayals of those who fight such conflicts, and how such portrayals often “flatten” and stereotype non-Western identities.

In discussing the foregoing concepts, the thesis analyzes the video game industry’s desire to design exciting, adrenaline-filled gameplay for players--while simultaneously attempting to create authentic military scenarios that lead players to reflect on the horrors of war. The thesis argues that the industry fails in this attempt at authenticity and reflection--and instead appropriates, glorifies, and commodifies these concepts of modern conflict for the sake of commercial gain.

To Professor Macovski for his unbreakable patience, empathy and compassion during the writing of this thesis.

To Professor Tinkcom for his guidance and indispensable advice over the last two years.

To the boys of Smokehouse and Savage Platoons for the good times (and the bad).

To my Mom for forcing me to go outside and teaching me to love reading.

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

How is conflict represented in media? One of the more popular media forms which typically represent conflict are military-themed video games. This thesis asks whether these games are created out of an earnest desire to create an authentic representation of war—in order to encourage the player to reflect on the nature of war -- or more simply to appropriate and commercialize military themes and war imagery for profit.

The thesis begins by identifying the connections between war and play, specifically focusing on the foundational work of Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga and his book *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Huizinga views play as having an inherent, culture-forming function, in that play precedes culture and influences the rituals and rules which govern society. In this regard, Huizinga also views war specifically as a “palpable and primitive” form of play (Huizinga 89). War, as a play-element in culture, accordingly also serves a cultural forming function. For example, Huizinga, writing in 1938, saw the rise of Nazi Germany and the possibility of total war as “banishing war’s cultural function” (Huizinga 90).

Continuing this line of inquiry, this thesis also addresses not only this culture effect of play and its connection with war, but also the persuasive effects of video games, the most prevalent form of modern play. As a media form, video games are sometimes seen as a non-artistic, juvenile endeavor, unworthy of serious academic consideration. Game Studies scholar Ian Bogost, however, argues that video games are a form of “procedural rhetoric,” which he defines as the “art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images or moving pictures” (Bogost ix). In other words, the rules and boundaries in games, as well as the procedures and mechanics in modern video games possess a unique persuasive power which is used to convey some form of meaning to the player.

With these questions in mind, this thesis will then examine the relationship between the military and the entertainment industry. This relationship seems to influence the production of these popular military-themed video games, as discussed by Tim Lenoir and Luke Caldwell in their book, *The Military-Entertainment Complex*. For Lenoir and Caldwell, the “military-entertainment complex of today is better characterized as an opportunistic nexus of coinciding interests between mass entertainment industries and the military” (Lenoir and Caldwell 90). This nexus “revolves around the commercial exploitation of military experiences” in order to “produce strong affects and assumptions far more than the communication of specific forms of knowledge, strategies or traditional forms of propaganda” (Lenoir and Caldwell 90). Furthermore, the goal of these military themed video games, according to Lenoir and Caldwell, is no longer to communicate a coherent, militaristic ideology, but more simply to use the imagery and experiences of warfare in order to create a “source of repeatable entertainment experiences” for the player’s enjoyment (Lenoir and Caldwell 84).

The phrase, a “source of repeatable entertainment experiences,” is reminiscent of the *Call of Duty* franchise, one of the most popular and influential video games on the modern video game market. The games of the franchise fall under a video game genre known as “first-person shooters,” in which the player experiences the game through the eyes of the game protagonist and is typically armed with some version of military weaponry –in order to play in militarized scenarios. The *Call of Duty* franchise began in 2003 with a series of games centered on World War II and reached a high tier of popularity with the release of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* in 2007. In examining this particular series, Lenoir and Caldwell focus their analysis on the series’ portrayals of advanced technologies, like drones and satellite imagery. They further suggest that the game’s designers generally avoid any attempt at accuracy or authenticity. The

“commercial exploitation of military experiences,” in other words, is centered more on the exploitation of the experience of using advanced military weaponry and technology –rather than on any attempt to represent war authentically. As a result, in the latest iteration of the series, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*, the game designers sought to bring the game’s narrative to a more grounded and authentic level, in response to some of the criticism of the previous games’ convoluted plots.

With the foregoing issues in mind, I chose three missions from the games narrative which illustrate this attempt at authenticity and realism. In my analysis, I show how this game, despite its sophisticated and realistic depictions of modern war, still meets the earlier criteria of being “commercial exploitation of military experiences.”

## CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Playing games and fighting wars appear to be two fundamentally separate phenomenon. Generally speaking, play is inherently an enjoyable and free activity, while war is —of course— an activity of violence and domination. Yet there is a connection between the two, fundamental to a society’s culture. Civilizations throughout history conducted warfare in accordance with their cultural beliefs and values, in the same way that they played games following certain rules and regulations, founded on similar values. In Western civilization, for example, Ancient Greek city-states often used contests in place of open warfare to settle disputes and would also pause periods of warfare to honor the ancient athletic tradition of the Olympics (Huizinga 96). Huizinga examines this relationship between war and play, describing war as the “most intense, the most energetic form of play and at the same time the most palpable and primitive” (Huizinga 89). Yet before examining this connection between war and play, we must first understand how scholars characterize, define, and formalize an understanding of play’s place in culture. Hence in this section, we will also examine the characteristics and definitions of warfare, specifically focusing on a neglected area of military history: namely, the effects of culture on the conduct of warfare. Following these sections, this thesis will go on to identify the precise connections between warfare and rule-based forms of play (i.e., games).

### *Defining Play and its Cultural Function*

Play is an inherent component of human culture, yet it is also a difficult concept to define. In defining play, Huizinga makes a provocative claim that “play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing” (Huizinga 1). Huizinga further defines this foundational “play-element” in culture as existing outside of “ordinary life” and “not serious, but

at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly.” This play-element is also “disconnected from monetary interests or profit” and occurs in its own special time and space, “according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner.” It also fuels the creation of social groups that express their difference from the ordinary world (Huizinga 13).

Building on this definition, Huizinga stresses the distinction between the view of play as an element *of* culture versus his view of play as an element *in* culture. Huizinga views play as aiding in the creation of culture rather than being created out of culture. Play, according to Huizinga, accomplishes this creation by possessing a “civilizing function,” through which “culture arises in the form of play” (Huizinga 46). Huizinga further explains the culture-forming effect of the “play-element” as fundamental to basic social functions - specifically law, war, education, philosophy and art – all of which contribute to the creation of a culture.

Huizinga’s characterizations of play are eloquent and persuasive, but they are also overly broad and abstract. In critiquing *Homo Ludens*, sociologist Roger Caillois uses Huizinga’s characteristics of play to create more specific classifications of four forms of games, so scholars may more directly analyze these play forms in culture. These four types of games are “Agon” (competition), “Alea” (chance), “Mimicry” (simulation), and “Ilinx” (“the pursuit of vertigo”) (Caillois 14-23).

Caillois contributes another important concept to our understanding of play by precisely identifying the importance of rules in the creation of games: “rules are inseparable from play as soon as the latter becomes institutionalized” (Caillois 27). He acknowledges the tension between the “basic freedom” in play and the boundaries imposed by game rules; for him, the polar elements of this tension represent a spectrum of play, from “Paidia” to “Ludus.” At one end of this spectrum, Caillois defines *paidia* as the “spontaneous manifestation of the play instinct”

reminiscent of an “infant laughing at his rattle” (Caillois 28). On the opposite end of this spectrum, *Ludus* represents the forms of play bound by rules. This is a principle associated with struggle, contest, suffering, and victory or defeat. To Caillois, *Ludus* is the “refinement of *paidia*, which it disciplines and enriches” and “provides an occasion for training, and normally leads to the acquisition of a special skill” (Caillois 29). This emphasis on training and refinement is similar to the type of exercises and drills used in military training. Finally, Caillois provides the simple example of a child mastering the yo-yo or kite flying as examples of *ludus* (Caillois 30).

### *The Connection Between War and Games*

To Huizinga, the connection between war and play is fundamental to the formation of culture and, much like Caillois, he centers this connection on the presence of rules and competition in both. He presents the play-element in war as bound by rules and states that “all fighting which is bound by rules bears the formal characteristics of play by that very limitation” (Huizinga 89). He also emphasizes that society views war as a “cultural function” only when war is fought “within a sphere whose members regard each other as equals or antagonists with equal rights” (Huizinga 89). As soon as war is fought “outside the sphere of equals” and against the criminal “heathens,” or “barbarians,” according to Huizinga, war loses its play-quality and loses its cultural function. In this context, war must be a competition between equals, bound by rules--in order to align with Western values of honor and a fairness. Military training exercises and drills often emphasize these values as well.

Huizinga further explores this connection by comparing the development of rules and procedures for games with the rules and laws governing war. He clearly distinguishes between the ludic, or playful, element in war and the agonistic, or competitive, nature of play. Huizinga

gives an example of Greek city-states' fighting wars against one another, while following rules reached by the mutual agreement of both sides. These rules also specified when and where battles would occur, and which weapons were allowed, in a manner similar to modern military rules of engagement (Huizinga 96). These rules of war also echoed cultural values of honor and chivalry, which the Greeks also valued in their playful sport competitions -- when they held ritualistic games to appease the gods and insure a bountiful harvest (Huizinga 56). The ancient Olympics, for example, were a ritualized athletic contest for the Greek city-states, in which they abstained from war, halted any conflicts in progress, and sent their best athletes to compete and win glory for their city. If a certain city's athletes were more successful than the others, it could be a validation of that culture's system of beliefs and their warrior-athletes. Military games, drills and exercises then also served as a method for improving the prestige of the state.

This connection between war and play also appears in modern American popular culture -- and is directly reflected in the video game industry's most popular genre: military-themed video games. To begin with, American popular culture is heavily militarized. The Department of Defense wields significant influence over the production of military-themed media because of collaboration with the entertainment industry, most notably the film industry. The military offers filmmakers access to otherwise inaccessible military equipment -- like aircraft, naval vessels, and consultation on making a military film authentic -- with the understanding that the military will have some control over the films script, themes, and message. The military also attempts to influence the production of the previously mentioned military-themed video games— especially for purposes of recruitment and image-making. This desire to influence is most clearly seen in Department of Defense Instruction 5410.6: “DoD Assistance to Non-Government, Entertainment-Oriented Media Productions.” In fact, this Departmental Instruction establishes

policies and instructions for the military on assisting with the production of “feature motion pictures, episodic television programs, documentaries, and electronic games” (DoD 5410.6 1).

This Instruction establishes three notable military policy regulations for media produced in collaboration with the entertainment industry:

- (1) Presents a reasonably realistic depiction of the Military Services and the DoD, including Service members, civilian personnel, events, missions, assets, and policies;
- (2) Is informational and considered likely to contribute to public understanding of the Military Services and the DoD; or
- (3) May benefit Military Service recruiting and retention programs (DoD 5410.6 1-2).

Most importantly, this DoD Instruction outlines the existing relationship and open collaboration between the military and the entertainment industry, known as the “Military-Entertainment Complex,” which will be further explored later in this thesis.

### *Video Games and the Play-Element in Culture in the Digital Age*

Before examining the modern influence of warfare on military-themed video games, we will need to contextualize video games as a media form and explain how games convey meaning. Ian Bogost, a central theorist within the field of Game Studies, adopts an approach which maintains that video games are a type of “procedural rhetoric” or “persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images or moving pictures” (Bogost ix). The “persuasion” Bogost speaks of is not a verbal or visual attempt to persuade someone, like visual rhetoric in film, but rather uses the rules and procedures of a game to encourage the players to take certain actions. These actions may be simple procedures necessary for playing the game, like walking and jumping, but they could also be more ideological. The use of weapons and shooting in the military-themed games examined in this

thesis, for example, convinces the player that their only option to play the game is to fight in the virtual war.

Returning to the influence of the military over media production, we find that Bogost offers a crucial example of a video game as procedural rhetoric—an example that is central to the theme of this thesis. The example focuses on his analysis of *America's Army*, a video game funded and publicized by the United States Army in 2002 for the purpose of recruitment. In the design of *America's Army*, players are able to play only American soldiers, and are limited in the actions they can take within the game. In one game level, for example, the player must complete a “Basic Training”- style firing range exercise, in which the game teaches the player the basic controls for shooting weapons. A Drill Sergeant (a “non-playable character”) is giving the player instructions, and if the player chooses to point a weapon at the Drill Sergeant and fire they are immediately arrested and placed in a virtual jail cell (Bogost 76). Bogost views the rules and procedures of *America's Army* as a “manifestation of the ideology that propels the U.S. Army” and further argues that the “game encourages players to consider the logic of duty, honor, and singular global political truth as a desirable worldview” (Bogost 79).

When we consider the persuasive power of games, it becomes clear why the military would want to create a game like *America's Army*, which serves as a perfect example of the military's attempts to influence this specific sphere of American popular culture. By the early 2000s, video games in the United States reached a level of cultural relevancy comparable to television and film, and the military wanted to embed its influence into this media in the same way it did with military-themed films, like *Top Gun* and *Black Hawk Down*, supported and influenced by the military (Sirota 2011). In that sense, *America's Army* is a piece of propaganda aiming to communicate a pro-military cultural ideology about the purpose and functioning of the

United States Army. It also strictly enforces the “rules of engagement,” a set of procedures and policies which guide the conduct of soldiers in a warzone and limit which persons or equipment can be engaged.

Today, play and war are again brought together in a commercialized, commodified form controlled by corporate forces, rather than the forces of the State. This shift reflects the postmodern culture of consumption, in which play is now a product to be consumed. Play has thus evolved from the inherently free play-forms articulated by Huizinga into the highly technological, commercialized, and commodified form seen today. This evolution has also consumed the production of military-themed games, which are now more widely produced by the entertainment industry, with less substantial input from the military.

### *The Military-Entertainment Complex*

Despite the United States’ massive military budget, military recruitment has been declining and criticism of products like *America’s Army* may have persuaded the military to focus its efforts elsewhere. The Department of Defense instead prioritizes the development of a relationship with various corporate partners in the media and entertainment sectors to outsource platforms for advertisements and recruiting efforts, as well as public relations efforts. In *Virtuous War*, James Der Derian coins the term “Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network” to describe this relationship between the military and various corporate interests, as it exists in the post-9/11 world. Der Derian describes the evolution of this changing relationship by contrasting President Eisenhower’s fears of the Military-Industrial Complex with modern, advanced technologies:

Unlike the fifties version presaged by President Eisenhower’s farewell address, with its computers the size of boxcars, clunky tele-type machines, centralized command systems,

and glowing vacuum tubes, the new MIME-NET runs on video-game imagery, twenty-four-hour news cycles, multiple nodes of military, corporate, university, and media power, and microchips, embedded in everything but human flesh (so far) (Der Derian 125).

This evolving network envisioned by Der Derian explains how the relationship between the military and corporations evolved beyond the industrial research and production of technology, equipment, and weaponry for warfare; it now involves, most importantly, a concentrated expansion of the attempts to control the production of American news and entertainment media dealing with military topics, in order to communicate pro-military narratives. Video games are also entwined in this network, as a media form of interest to the Department of Defense, but the military's influence remains tenuous, since they are dependent on the fluctuating trends of the video game industry.

The foregoing collaboration is directly apparent in the production of what Roger Stahl calls "militainment." Stahl defines "militainment" as emblematic of a trend in popular culture, in which war has become a spectacle consumed by U.S. audiences through extensive TV and media coverage and exposure. This spectacle, according to Stahl, is also manufactured by news and entertainment media – often working together with military officials. Stahl characterizes this spectacle as a war "without victims, without bodies, and without suffering... This war is easy to watch on the couch with a bag of chips. This war is, above all, clean" (Stahl 10). In that sense, this "clean" image denies not only the authentic horrors of war but also the possibility of reflecting about them.

Building on Stahl's critique of "militainment," Timothy Lenoir and Luke Caldwell synthesizes the views of Der Derian, Stahl, and other scholars into the concept of the "Military-Entertainment Complex." Lenoir and Caldwell acknowledge the collusion between the military and the media -- critiqued by Stahl, Der Derian, and others -- but also acknowledge the shift in

this relationship, as affected by economic forces. They correctly identify a gap in the analysis, brought about by a focus on military-produced games in the early 2000s, in which scholars ignored the “role of media markets and commercial media firms in the careful construction and commodification of the experience of modern warfare in the popular imagination” (Lenoir 27). As we have noted, Lenoir and Caldwell contend that now the video game industry produces military-themed media almost exclusively, by appropriating military imagery and branding in order to commercialize militarism and military experiences. The military’s influence in this relationship is now similar to the previously described relationship between the military and the film industry: Lenoir and Caldwell describe it “as an opportunistic nexus of coinciding interests between mass entertainment industries and the military” – one that “revolves around the commercial exploitation of military experiences that produce strong affects and assumptions far more than the communication of specific forms of knowledge, strategies or traditional forms of propaganda” (Lenoir 90). Representation of events and characters in wargames, for example, focuses on a certain type of “affect” which “displaces the primacy of ideologically motivated narrative in favor of the creation of ‘epically real’ fantasy war-fighting experiences” (Lenoir 91). Lenoir and Caldwell identify the shifting of trends of current games in the Military-Entertainment Complex that are “heavily dependent on representations of sophisticated military technologies but only loosely connected to contemporary real-world military actions and rules of engagement” (Lenoir 91). Lenoir and Caldwell also identify the waning influence of the military’s game production in favor of the “market pressures of digital enterprise that shape militarism in the American popular imaginary” (Lenoir 97).

Bearing in mind the substantial economic forces present in the production of these games, we should briefly return to Huizinga’s characteristics of play in order to point out his distaste for

the commodification of play - a criticism that will be central to the upcoming analysis. Specifically, Huizinga feels that play is an activity “connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it” (Huizinga 13). Huizinga wrote *Homo Ludens* in the 1930s, and the closest equivalent to the commodified forms of play games were professional sports. Huizinga criticizes this form of play as increasing in seriousness, thereby depriving it of its playful characteristics through the enforcement of stricter rules and the creation of what Huizinga dubs a “commercial racket” (Huizinga 197). When we consider the substantial amount of commercialization and commodification present in video games, this point will be important in analyzing the role of these games in American society.

For my analysis, I chose the latest iteration of the popular *Call of Duty* franchise, entitled *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*. The *Call of Duty* franchise is the most popular series of military-themed video games. The series’ success dwarfs that of any game or simulation produced by the military (like *America’s Army*). As we shall find, the *Call of Duty* franchise derives its success from its exciting and engaging combat-centered gameplay and storytelling.

In this thesis, I examine three missions, or game levels, from *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*: first, I examine the opening mission of the game’s narrative, “Fog of War,” and that mission’s representation of proxy warfare, mercenaries, insurgents, and conventional forces. Next, I analyze the mission “Piccadilly” and its depiction of terrorist attacks against a civilian population. As we shall see, such attacks specifically violate the U.S. military’s “rules of engagement,” which limit how soldiers can legally respond to such conflict endangering civilians. This thesis’s final section analyzes the mission “Hometown” and its depiction of non-Western identities and insurgencies. In analyzing these three missions, this thesis examines the video game industry’s desire to simulate exciting and adrenaline-filled for the entertainment of

the players, while also attempting to create authentic military scenarios so the player may also reflect on the horrors of war. This thesis argues that the industry fails in this attempt at authenticity and reflection and instead appropriates, glorifies, and commodifies these concepts of modern conflict for the sake of commercial gain.

### CHAPTER 3. “FOG OF WAR”

This section identifies a tension within the design of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* between curating an exciting, adrenaline-filled experience for players and also simultaneously attempting to encourage earnest reflection on the effects of modern warfare in the Post-9/11 era. In the opening mission of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*'s story, entitled “Fog of War,” the game places this tension at the forefront of its narrative by looking at several essential elements of proxy warfare. Three specific elements of proxy war seen in this mission are mercenaries, insurgents, and conventional special operations forces.

Proxy warfare is a form of indirect warfare in which a “dominant actor, or the principal, [leverages] an intermediary, or a nondominant actor (the agent, or proxy), against an adversary to achieve the dominant actor’s objectives” (Fox 3). An example of proxy warfare is the United States of America’s battle against the Islamic State in which “U.S. forces, in conjunction with coalition partners, fought through Iraqi and Kurdish intermediaries to militarily defeat the Islamic State in Iraq” (Fox 4). There are different ways these intermediaries are used in proxy warfare, based on their organization into two separate entities: first, Private Military Companies (PMCs), or mercenaries; and second, the funding and arming of insurgencies. Mercenaries are a corporate form of this intermediary, in that they work for PMCs, or private military companies officially employed by a government for military or security purposes. Insurgents, however, are indigenous residents of a region, typically involved in an armed struggle against the ruling government or foreign invader. These intermediaries are also typically referred to as “non-conventional,” since they are not aligned with any established nation. In contrast to these intermediary forces, the forces of the “dominant actor” are more conventional, since they are the armed forces of a nation-state, like the United States military.

In this mission, the player inhabits this latter, Western, dominant actor perspective as they control the player-character, Alex. Alex is a member of the United States military, but is also a high-level “Operator,” or member of a special operations force. As a member of this specialized section of the military, Alex occupies a liminal space between the conventional and the non-conventional. That is, Alex is a member of the conventional United States military who is also expected to perform in non-conventional environments with non-conventional tactics and strategies, like those seen in a proxy war. Alex’s appearance reflects this non-conventional nature, since he has a non-military haircut and facial hair, which violate conventional military regulations governing a servicemember’s appearance. His appearance is significant because special operations members, like Alex, are allowed by the military hierarchy to grow long hair and beards to help them to integrate within or infiltrate a local, civilian population if necessary, or to simply avoid identification as a member of the US military while in public.

This specific mission also represents two other elements of modern warfare: rules of engagement and what is known as the “fog of war” (Clausewitz 101). These rules of engagement, which will be explored in further detail in the next section, are rules that limit the actions of soldiers in warfare. The “fog of war” refers to a concept in military theory describing the overall uncertainty of war. This concept is best described by the influential Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz who suggests that “three quarters of the factors on which action in war is based are wrapped in a fog of greater or lesser uncertainty” (Clausewitz 101).

This chapter will argue that although this latest iteration of the *Call of Duty* franchise does compel some reflection from players—by including these “uncertain” elements of proxy warfare--it still ends up emphasizing the first element of this dichotomy: that is, excitement and adrenaline. What is more, the game emphasizes these last elements for the specific purpose of

commercial marketing and exploitation. In fact, there is essentially no reflection, since the game never asks the player to consider why they must take these actions limited by the rules of engagement or the fog of war -- or even why the United States is involved in this kind of conflict at all. Instead, the narrative assumes that the player accepts this state of conflict as normal. There is no real question asked about why Alex and the Marines should be involved in the first place.

*“Fog of War”: Synopsis and Setting*

“Fog of War” is the first mission in the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* story. The playable character in the section is Alex, a CIA Special Operations Officer. Alex is attached to a group of Marine Raiders tasked with verifying the presence of chemical weapons at a facility near the fictional city of Verdansk, Kastovia. Kastovia is described as a former Soviet republic, located in the Caucasus Region and sharing borders with the Russian Federation and Georgia. For the context of this section, the fictional Kastovia is important because it closely resembles recent areas of conflict in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus Region, especially the areas affected by the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea and the resulting Russo-Ukrainian War. The chemical facility that Alex and the Marines infiltrate is allegedly owned by the villain of the story, Roman Barkov, a rogue Russian General who is occupying the fictional country of Urzikstan. Barkov commands units of the Russian Armed Forces as well as mercenaries. These mercenaries are defending this chemical facility and tasked with transporting chemical weapons into Urzikstan.

Alex and the Marines are advised by their superiors, including CIA Station Chief Kate Laswell, that the rules of engagement are still at play, specifically noting that any use of forces against uniformed members of the Russian Armed Forces is prohibited. Alex and the Marines

confirm that the facility is occupied only by mercenaries from a private military company, and they call in an airstrike on the facility during which white phosphorus is used against the mercenaries. After the airstrike, Alex and the Marines attack the retreating mercenaries and move through the facility attempting to locate the chemical gas. Upon locating the gas, the group begins to leave the facility before a reaction force from the Russian Armed Forces begins to respond to the attack, a scenario which would bring the Americans into direct conflict with uniformed Russians. As the group is leaving, however, they are ambushed by an unknown force, and the Marines are killed while Alex is left for dead. Alex witnesses his attackers speaking Arabic and assumes they are members of the Al-Qatala terrorist organization. The mission ends with Laswell being told by her superior that the attack on the facility increased military tensions between the United States and Russia.

#### *Proxy War, Mercenaries, and The Fog of War*

As previously mentioned, this mission takes place near the fictional city of Verdansk in the fictional nation of Kastovia , which are similar to real places affected by the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea and the resulting Russo-Ukrainian War. The representation of this former Soviet republic reinforces the theme of this section, centered on proxy war as the dominant form of warfare between nuclear-armed nations, specifically the Russian Federation and the United States. For the last decade, the United States and the Russian Federation have engaged in proxy wars with one another across the globe -- in areas like the Donbass Region of Ukraine as well as Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. This type of conflict is also similar to the type of war seen during the Cold War between the USSR and the United States, especially in the Vietnam War and the Soviet Occupation of Afghanistan.

A proxy war typically involves a conflict between two states which is supported or instigated by other states that are not directly involved in the conflict. Such a proxy war is often fought by non-state actors. This type of warfare is a product of nuclear proliferation and mutually-assured destruction, which made open combat between two superpowers undesirable -- as it could likely result in the annihilation of both nations, if not the entire world. This concept is important to understand, because it is part of the anxiety communicated in the narrative concerning Alex and the Marine Raiders accidentally engaging members of the Russian Armed Forces. If the Americans directly engage in combat with uniformed Russians, then they may risk dragging the United States into a full-scale conventional war with Russia. Since the Russians in this level are mercenaries, however, their deaths are allowed via the rules of engagement, because they are not directly associated with the Russian military. As we shall see, it is later revealed that some of the mercenaries are actually members of the Russian military.

This particular situation also reflects a real, historical encounter known as the Battle of Khasham, in which American forces killed an unknown number of mercenaries from the Wagner Group, a Russian Private Military Company typically employed by the Russian government. The real-world Wagner Group is often accused of being an unofficial extension of the Russian Armed Forces disguised as a PMC which allegedly enables the Russian government can deny involvement with the Wagner Groups actions.

In this mission, the game designers communicate a fictionalized version of this tense political reality to the player, as seen in the dialogue that occurs between non-player characters as the player plays through the mission. First, two of the Marine Raiders, who use the callsign (a unique phrase used to identify someone on a radio) “Hitman” (a common US military callsign), positively identify two Russian mercenaries on patrol in the woods near their location:

**Hitman 7-1:** Two mercs, no uniforms.

**Hitman 7-2:** They're game, drop 'em (Fog of War (level)/Transcript).

After killing these two mercenaries, the player, as Alex, observes the facility through Alex's binoculars, while the other non-player characters confirm the absence of any Russian military before they begin the attack:

**Alex:** One in the tower, left side high, not Army.

**Alex:** Patrol vehicle. Contractors.

**Hitman 7-1:** Security. Good targets (Fog of War (level)/Transcript).

After the attack on the facility begins, the player hears dialogue from the mercenaries, who are surprised by the presence of the Americans attacking them:

**Merc 2:** (*in Russian*) F---- Americans! What the f--- are you doing here (Fog of War (level)/Transcript)?!

After searching some of the dead mercenaries, one of the Marines identifies that some are actually uniformed Russian military, which compromises the previously established rules of engagement:

**Hitman 7-3:** We got a problem- These guys are Russian army...

**Hitman 7-1:** Spetsnaz [Russian Special Forces]

**Alex:** 3-1 to Watcher... Barkov's hired guns are Spetsnaz. We got Russian army KIA, - We need to bug out now.

**Laswell:** (*on radio*) Negative. Command wants mission accomplished on this. Not our choice.

**Alex:** Never is. 3-1 out (Fog of War (level)/Transcript).

This dialogue between Alex and his CIA superior also identifies the pressure on the operatives to accomplish their mission, despite the American's technical violation of the rules of engagement.

This violation of the rules of engagement, which results in the death of uniformed Russian soldiers, brings uniformed American and Russian soldiers into direct conflict. The American's

attacked the Russians because they believed they were mercenaries, and therefore occupied the role of intermediary in a proxy war, inasmuch as could be engaged without causing an international incident. The dialogue here illustrates the fog and ambiguity that modern soldiers, like Alex, face as a result of proxy warfare. These soldiers are expected to act perfectly in imperfect situations.

### *Alex and the Non-Conventional Western Operator*

The American's operating in the proxy warfare environment are not conventional members of the military, in that they are members of elite special operations units. This section will focus on the role of Alex as a glorified yet conflicted example of the type of Operator who fights in a proxy war as well as the difficult positions that such operatives are put in by the military. The conduct of a proxy war is reliant on covert and special military operations. Alex, a CIA operative working with conventional forces of the US military, is also representative of the increasing role of non-conventional Operators in the American way of warfare.

Alex himself is non-conventional in his appearance: his hairstyle and his facial hair, for example, are not in compliance with conventional military regulation which govern appearance. Alex would not be placed on any recruiting poster, yet he is still representing an image many recruits may strive to be: an expert who travels through multiple, complex militarized scenarios and is respected by his comrades-in-arms. Alex is also the most played protagonist of the campaign, since the player controls him for seven of the fourteen story missions. There is also a mystique around his identity as his name is often stylized in quotes as 'Alex' and he is typically referred to by his callsign "3-1" or referred to as simply "CIA" by other non-player characters. Alex represents the elite covert forces of the United States who have surpassed the conventional military and moved to working for governmental agencies like the CIA. His character is also

reminiscent of past fictional American military characters, like John Rambo from *Rambo*, who are eventually betrayed, forsaken, or disavowed by their own governments. As we saw state earlier, this mission attempts to portray a realistic scenario from a proxy war, but the game also glorifies and creates a mystique around characters like Alex. Generally speaking, Alex represents the operatives who are expected to accomplish their mission in difficult – and often impossible – positions.

### *Conclusion*

In *Fog of War*, the player is introduced to distinct and disturbing characteristics of modern warfare: mercenaries, the political climate created by proxy warfare, and the uncertain “fog of war.” The player, in control of Alex, a highly skilled CIA Operative with an impressive military background, is given a sense of power and purpose as they begin the game’s narrative and take part in the first mission. The designers of the game also want the player to feel as though they are engaging with an authentic representation of modern warfare. Although this mission includes concepts borrowed from real, modern conflict like mercenaries and proxy warfare, the game’s narrative remains vague in terms of whether it delivers any specific ideological message. The game’s narrative is vaguely supportive of the Western cause against terrorism and authoritarianism, but there is little time left for reflection before the narrative jumps to the next scene. The player is not meant to reflect on the possible geopolitical consequences of the outcomes of this mission; instead, this mission serves as an exciting, adrenaline-filled set piece meant solely for entertainment.

## CHAPTER 4. “PICCADILLY”

This section continues the examination of the uncertainty of war from the previous chapter’s analysis of “Fog of War” and further builds on the line of thought articulated by Lenoir and Caldwell. As discussed earlier, that approach identifies the themes and imagery of the earlier games of the *Call of Duty* franchise as “leveraging discourse about terrorism and nuclear proliferation to produce a sustained adrenaline rush” for the player experience (Lenoir and Caldwell 128). In the most recent addition to the *Call of Duty* franchise, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*, we see the appropriation of another discourse attempting to produce the same feelings in the player: the tension between the rules of engagement, which limit conventional forces with the intent of reducing civilian casualties in a conflict, and the use of non-conventional terrorist attacks against civilian targets by non-state actors. More specifically, the game explores a conflict between two kinds of forces: the first is a conventional, force representing the uniformed Western militaries and government agencies. These conventional forces operate according to what are known as the official “rules of engagement”—which specify when, where and how uniformed conventional forces can engage enemy combatants. The second is a group of non-state actors: a group of terrorists who operate without any such rules of engagement—and can accordingly choose to attack civilian targets.

Whereas Lenoir and Caldwell argue that the earlier games of the franchise were “not meant to make players reflect, but...feel excited and heroic,” I argue that this particular scene from the recent addition to the franchise encourages the player to look beyond such excitement—and in fact to reflect directly on the bureaucratically imposed limits of modern warfare versus the agile and devastating effects of terrorism. At the same time, I show that the game still

appropriates the rules of engagement and terrorism for the sake of creating an exciting experience for the player.

This section will accordingly contrast two forms of military tactics and engagement: first, the bureaucratic rules of engagement used in military conflicts by conventional forces; and second, the use of unlawful and unconventional terrorist attacks. This section will also discuss the “adrenaline-rush discourse” described by Lenoir and Caldwell which is still present in this iteration of the *Call of Duty* franchise. As mentioned in the previous section on “Fog of War,” the game’s narrative aims to be generally apolitical—and, as such, the franchise’s encouragement for the player reflect on the rules of engagement and terrorism is still oversimplified for the purposes of commercial exploitation. This chapter adds to the concepts examined by Lenoir and Caldwell by addressing the game’s use of the rules of engagement in this particular mission. In order to analyze the representation of these two forms of military engagement, I will first provide definitions of the terms “rules of engagement” and “terrorism,” as defined in official American military doctrine. Although these definitions are from American sources, they are indicative of the internationally acceptable Western way of warfare.

#### *The Rules of Engagement in American Military Doctrine*

The rules of engagement, or ROE, as described in American military doctrine, are defined as “Directives issued by competent military authority that delineate the circumstances and limitations under which United States forces will initiate and/or continue combat engagement with other forces encountered. Also called ROE. See also law of war” (DOD Dictionary 188). Further defined in the doctrine are three distinct purposes for the establishment of ROE by the American military: Political, Legal, and Military (CJCSI 3121.01B). The political purposes of ROE “ensure that national policies and objectives [of the United States] are

reflected in the actions of commanders in the field, particularly under circumstances in which communication with higher authority may not be possible”... and also reflect the military’s understanding of “issues such as the influence of international public opinion (particularly how it is affected by media coverage of a specific operation), the effect of host country law, and the content of status of forces agreements (SOFA) with the United States” (CJCSI 3121.01B).

The military purposes of ROE “provide parameters within which the commander must operate to accomplish his or her assigned mission” (CJCSI 3121.01B). These parameters include: providing a “limit on operations and ensure that U.S. actions do not trigger undesired escalation, i.e., forcing a potential opponent into a ‘self-defense response,’ regulating a “commander’s capability to influence a military action by granting or withholding the authority to use particular weapons systems or tactics,” and reemphasizing “the scope of a mission” such as when a military unit is deployed for a training exercise and is only allowed to force in self-defense (CJCSI 3121.01B).

Finally, the legal purpose of ROE is to “provide restraints on a commander’s actions, consistent with both domestic and international laws, and may, under certain circumstances, impose greater restrictions than those required by the law” (CJCSI 3121.01B). American military doctrine also specifies that “Commanders may also issue ROE to reinforce certain principles of the Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC), such as prohibitions on the destruction of religious or cultural property or minimization of injury to civilians and civilian property” (CJCSI 3121.01B).

Of course, these definitions and purposes of ROE defined by military doctrine reflect only a small piece of the wider bureaucratic processes establishing limits on the use of force by the United States military. The ROE are most important in the context of this chapter because

they are designed to limit the use of military force in non-military, or civilian, areas, such as a city. In contrast to these bureaucratically limited rules of engagement, terrorism serves a separate purpose meant to exacerbate violence and chaos rather than limit them.

### *Terrorism in American Military Doctrine*

Terrorism is defined in American military doctrine as:

The unlawful use of violence or threat of violence, often motivated by religious, political, or other ideological beliefs, to instill fear and coerce individuals, governments or societies in pursuit of terrorist goals. (DoD Dictionary 215)

Terrorism's characterization as "unlawful" places it in proximity to the previously defined terms mercenary and insurgent which can also be defined as unlawful. Terrorism, however, is distinguished from the actions of insurgents or mercenaries as terrorism usually attacks individuals or groups of civilians who otherwise would not be engaging in any kind of conflict. Terrorist attacks may also occur in areas which are not in a state of war, such as New York City during the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks against the World Trade Center buildings.

In this section, I will apply these definitions to the Call of Duty: Modern Warfare mission "Piccadilly" in which the player experiences and reacts to a fictionalized terrorist attack on Piccadilly Circus in London. I will analyze how the player character, a Special Air Service (SAS) Operator, is initially limited by his rules of engagement. I will then contrast the limits imposed on the player against the violent terrorist tactics used by the enemy non-player characters. Finally, I will explore how this scene is meant to encourage the player to reflect on the military reality of attempting to apply limiting rules of engagement in an uncertain violent situation like the terrorist attack depicted in this mission--but still separates itself far enough from reality to ensure that the game will remain commercially viable.

### *“Piccadilly”: A Brief Synopsis*

During this mission, the player controls British Special Air Service (SAS) Sergeant Kyle Garrick, who is tracking a group of Al-Qatala operatives with the help of the London Metropolitan Police Service Counter Terrorist Specialist Firearms Officers (CTSFO) – a section of the Police Service specializing in counterterrorism. Garrick and the officers eventually confront a group of Al-Qatala operatives in a white van and attempt to detain them. The terrorists detonate munitions in the van, cause numerous civilian casualties, and begin to attack the surviving police officers and Garrick with machine gun fire and explosive vests. Garrick and the police eventually fight off the terrorists while also clearing out occupied buildings and rescuing hostages. Garrick eventually encounters Captain John Price, an experienced SAS officer, who joins him as he clears the last building. Upon entering the last building, Price and Garrick are both faced with an intense moral dilemma: the Al-Qatala operatives placed an explosive vest on a single hostage, and the resulting explosion from his vest will kill Price, Garrick and the other hostages in the building if something is not done. Garrick notices that the bomb’s timer is already at six seconds until it detonates and looks to Price for guidance. Price, as a more experienced operator, chooses to toss the single hostage over the side of a railing, ignoring the hostage’s plea for help. The hostage’s vest explodes, killing him, while Price, Garrick, and the other hostages survive. The two main themes of this section are the limiting effects of the “rules of engagement” and the use of terrorism as a form of warfare against civilian populations.

### *The Rules of Engagement*

We will first examine the limits imposed on the player’s character by the game , concerning the rules of engagement. One of the mission’s main objectives is “Maintain the

Rules of Engagement.” These rules of engagement are especially important because, this mission does not take place in a conventional theater of war, but rather in a simulated version of Piccadilly Circus in London – a popular tourist and commercial district in the city. Because of the presence of civilians, the SAS and Metro Police (and the player) are bound by rules which limit their ability to attack their enemy (i.e. the rules of engagement). In the first place, they need positive identification that the Al-Qatala members are armed and dangerous. Secondly, they are also not able to fire on the Al-Qatala members unless they are fired upon first. The Al-Qatala operatives also blend into the civilian environment using civilian van and civilian clothes, further complicating the situation for Garrick’s team. Despite the danger to the public, Garrick’s team is also told there is no additional military support available, so as to not alarm the public. The lack of support limits the tactics that Garrick, the only member of the military present, and the police can utilize. All this information about the ROE and the tense situation it creates is delivered to the player via a cinematic cutscene. The player assumes control of Garrick as the team exits their vehicle and approaches the van containing the Al-Qatala operatives. After the Al-Qatala operatives detonate their bomb and begin attacking the city, the rules of engagement now allow Garrick’s team to engage in combat with the operatives, but only after a member of the team is killed and multiple civilians are injured or killed. The player is also unable to prevent the explosion as it occurs in a non-playable cutscene.

After this initial attack, the player must then fight and navigate through the game environment of Piccadilly, which is crowded with people, while being attacked by Al-Qatala operatives armed with machine guns and bomb vests. This situation places the player in a simulated environment where they experience a dramatized version of the constraining factors imposed by the rules of engagement. Since this mission is a policing action Garrick’s team is

equipped only with small-caliber pistols. The Al-Qatala operatives, however, are armed with a multitude of high-powered assault rifles, machine guns, and explosive vests. Garrick, a member of the British Military, is also alongside the non-military personnel of the Metropolitan Police Service who are thrust into a distinctly military situation. Because of this situation, Garrick and the police officers are quickly outgunned by the terrorists and must acquire assault rifles from Al-Qatala operatives they kill.

The high risks for friendly fire, crossfire, or accidental shootings of civilians also limit the player character throughout this mission. Through the course of the mission, the player will fail their objectives and the mission if they kill any civilians. (They are also rewarded with an in-game “achievement” if they do not shoot any civilians by accident.) In stark contrast to the rules for the player, a non-player character is technically able to violate these Rules. Captain Price, a non-player character, technically disobeys the rules of engagement and sacrifices a civilian in order to save a majority of other hostages. Price represents a more experienced type of operator: one who knows when the ideal rules of engagement can no longer be followed, because of the reality of the situation. This particular scene shows an attempt to communicate the Navy SEAL consultants’ views on “performing perfectly in imperfect situations.”

At the end of this mission, the two SAS operators, Garrick and Price, express disgust at the terrorist attacks and the limiting nature of the rules of engagement:

**Kyle:** (through gritted teeth) It shouldn't have happened in the first place, sir. They sent us in half-assed, so everyone can just keep pretending we're not at war.

**Price:** Yeah, lie of the f-----' century, that is.

**Kyle:** (exasperated) Then why have we got our hands tied? Let's just take the bloody gloves off and fight... (sighs and turns to face Price) Sir...

**Price:** Go on.

**Kyle:** We don't stand a chance in hell with these rules of engagement, Captain. They can tell us where, they can tell us when...don't tell us how. My men were tracking that cell for weeks (Piccadilly (level)/Transcript).

In including Price and Garrick's pained conversation, the game puts the player in a position to experience the stress and tension of attempting to perform "perfectly in imperfect situations." The concept of "rules of engagement" and, the tensions between the ideal and real situations in which they are applied, are clearly seen in this particular mission. The moral, ethical, and tactical challenges the player witnesses are also a result of this tension. Furthermore, these tough situations are a result of the use of terrorism as a modern form of warfare.

### *Terrorism as a Modern Form of Warfare*

Sergeant Garrick's frustration is indicative of a common feeling that occurs when a conventional military force encounters modern forms of terrorism. The Al-Qatala operatives in this mission are not in London to secure a foothold or strategic position or to gain any territory; rather, they attack Piccadilly to create chaos and mayhem. Part of the Al-Qatala operatives' mission is to bring the war to the home front of Western nations which have not suffered the same types of occupation, violence, and strife as many Middle Eastern nations have. An example of this ethos is present in the dialogue of the mission, when one of the Al-Qatala operative's states: "Your government has brought nothing but death to our lands! We shall return this death in kind. You will bleed as our children have bled!" These scenes of terror and chaos inflicted by the fictional Al-Qatala operatives, despite being depicted in the dramatized form seen in the game, provide an example of how destructive terrorism can be as a form of warfare.

Terrorism serves as a viable offensive option for resource-poor militant groups seeking to attack countries, like the UK or USA, with substantially more technological sophistication and professional militaries. The Al-Qatala operatives can marginalize the conventional military and

police forces with asymmetric tactics, like suicide bombers and enemies in civilian clothes, which violate any standard, institutional rules of engagement. There is also an interesting parallel here with the tactics used by the Al-Qatala terrorists and the Urzik Liberation Force “freedom fighters” --which will be explored in a later section.

As mentioned in the previous section, these terroristic tactics also place a heavy moral and ethical burden on the Western operators. When an Al-Qatala operative places an explosive vest on a single hostage, and the resulting explosion from his vest will kill Price, Garrick and the other hostages in the area. Price is forced to sacrifice one hostage to save the other hostages, Garrick, and himself. This compromises the Western operator’s moral position and forces them to bend their own rules of engagement.

### *Conclusion*

Overall, this disturbing scene supports Lenoir and Caldwell’s view of the creation of exciting, visceral imagery, and also supports their critique of the earlier scholars of the military-entertainment complex. The “clean war” articulated by Stahl, in other words, is no longer considered ideal for representing the way the global war is going. Audiences want to see and are given the complex moral problems which these highly skilled individuals face, however over-the-top or dramatized they may be. One of the military consultants for the game describes a similar theme when explaining that his job as a Navy SEAL dictated that him and his team “be perfect in imperfect situations.” These imperfect situations would never appear in a game sponsored by the government, like *America’s Army*, as they would face far too much criticism. In “Piccadilly,” the player is able to experience the use of ideal rules of engagement which encounter the reality of urban conflict and terrorism. The player also witnesses the destructive power of modern terroristic warfare and the resulting “moral outrage” from such an attack. At

the same time, these themes and dialog are still being communicated by a strongly Western voice and the discourse here is skewed.

In *Piccadilly*, the player (in control of SAS Operative Kyle Garrick) is placed in a weak position by the game designers: at the beginning of the mission, the player is instructed not to fire their weapon and they are subsequently attacked by terrorists—who are armed with significantly more powerful weapons than the player. The player character in this mission, Kyle Garrick, is in a sense the opposite of the player character Alex. Whereas Alex is an experienced, elite operative, Kyle is a relatively new member of an elite group. Kyle is also limited by the rules of engagement and the compromising situation created by the terrorist attack—both of which force Kyle to navigate through a civilian environment, avoiding civilian casualties, while also trying to eliminate the terrorist threat. Rules of engagement are designed with the intent of limiting civilian casualties. In a situation like the one in this mission, however, the player sees how civilians and enemy combatants can become mixed together, making it difficult or impossible to distinguish friend from foe.

The game designers use the rules of engagement as a limiting force in gameplay in order to make the player feel powerless against the terrorist attack. The previously mentioned discussion between Kyle and Captain Price about their shared frustration is meant to encourage the player to share in that frustration as well. At the beginning of the level, the player is only equipped with a small pistol and will fail the mission if they shoot before given proper clearance from their superiors. This limited status prevents the player from being able to act and prevent the first attack which begins the overall terrorist attack on Piccadilly Circus. The subsequent chaos of the mission and the reflective frustration of Price and Kyle is a direct result of the limits imposed on the player in that beginning moment.

Similar to the analysis from the previous sections, however, the impact of this disturbing scene is blunted by its disconnection from real-world politics. Although *Modern Warfare* aims for authenticity, this scene bears little resemblance to real-life terror attacks, like the London Underground bombings of 7 July 2005. The fictional attack against Piccadilly Circus is instead dramatized and made into an “adrenaline rush” experience for the player to feel a visceral sense of action and drama, but the narrative only briefly reflects on why the Al-Qatala organization chose to attack London. The designers do not intend for the player to reflect on this act of terrorism, but rather simply to experience it in the same way one would experience a roller coaster at an amusement park ride.

## CHAPTER 5. “HOMETOWN”

The previous chapters’ analyses focus on the representation of the Western perspectives of the American character, Alex, and the British character, Kyle Garrick--and their respective roles as members of conventional Western militaries. In contrast, this chapter analyzes the representation of non-Western identities in another mission within *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*: entitled “Hometown.” This chapter accordingly shifts from the Western-centered perspective by analyzing the depiction of non-Western characters, locations, and ways of warfare. Specifically, there are two central examples of non-Western identities in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*: 1) the fictional nation of Urzikstan, where the fictional Urzik Liberation Force also operates. 2) The role of Russia as the antagonist in the narrative--including the specific depictions of Russian soldiers committing crimes against the civilian Urzik population. In this mission, the player controls Farah Karim, the central non-Western identity in the game.

The mission “Hometown” depicts the fictional invasion of the nation of Urzikstan by Russian forces in the 1990s. The first part of this chapter’s analysis focuses on the depiction of this fictional nation and its inhabitants. In this mission, the player is in control of seven-year-old Farah Karim, -- an Urzik girl and one of the main characters of the game -- during the invasion of her home by Russian forces. The mission is a flashback to the young Farah; before the mission, Farah was an adult and a secondary character who interacted with Alex as he infiltrated the occupied Urzikstan. The adult Farah is also a leader of the Urzikstan Liberation Force, an insurgent group committed to the goal of expelling the Russians from Urzikstan, as well as combatting the Al-Qatala terrorist organization. In examining the portrayal of the Urziks, this chapter also expands on the previous analysis of the use of the term *insurgent*, seen in the chapter on “Fog of War,” by looking more closely at the depiction of the ULF and Farah Karim as

insurgents fighting against foreign occupation. Insurgents are members of an armed resistance, usually rebelling against foreign occupation with the goal of liberation and political autonomy.

The second part of this chapter analyzes the depiction of Russians in “Hometown.” In this mission, the Russians are portrayed as acting with callous indifference towards the population of Farah’s village. Russian soldiers deploy chemical gases against unarmed civilians and casually massacre the survivors of the initial attack. As the player navigates through the mission as a young Farah, they encounter three unique Russian characters: the soldier known as “J-12” and a duo of Russian soldiers named Luka and Andrei. As a young, unarmed Farah, the player must evade and eventually kill these Russian characters in order to escape the ruined village. This part of the analysis will focus on the portrayal of the Russians as antagonists: including the one who attacks the player, and the two others whom the player must attack in order to complete the mission.

Finally, this chapter will continue the line of analysis articulated in the previous section: that *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* emphasizes a design that gives the player exciting, and adrenaline-filled experiences—instead of compelling the player to reflect on what they are experiencing. This section’s critique focuses specifically how the complex social, religious, and cultural aspects of Middle Eastern identities are flattened into the fictional Urzik ethnicity. Although the depiction of the Urziks subverts most stereotypical depictions of Middle Eastern identities as terrorists or other hostile villain roles -- by placing the Urziks in the role of insurgents struggling for freedom -- the Urzik identity still fails to transcend these flat, stereotypical depictions. Farah Karim, for example, is a young, female leader and fighter, which subverts previous stereotypes of Middle Eastern women. And Farah’s appearance is also similar to that of Kurdish militia fighter Asia Ramazan Antar, a young fighter in the Kurdish Women’s

Protection Units (YPJ), whose unique appearance was objectified by Western media and described as the “Kurdish Angelina Jolie.” Nevertheless, this chapter argues that Farah, and by association the Urzik ethnicity, is also objectified for the sake of a Western audience.

*Urzikstan and the Flattening of Identity: Middle Eastern Identity in Military Video Games*

In American military video games, like the *Call of Duty* franchise, characters with Middle Eastern identities are typically antagonists. Vit Sisler, a professor of New Media Studies at Charles University in the Czech Republic, argues (in his influential article “Digital Arabs: Representation in Video Games”) that in military video games the “diverse ethnic and religious identities of the Islamic world have been flattened out and reconstructed into a series of social typologies operating within a broader framework of terrorism and hostility” (Sisler 203). This flattening of identity is seen in the character of Farah and the fictional Urzikstan and the Urzik ethnicity in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*. While the Western characters of Kyle Garrick and Alex possess a level of authenticity as realistically represented members of real-life armed forces, and citizens of real countries, Farah and the other Urzik characters’ entire identity is fictional and flattened in the manner described by Sisler. Although both of these characters are fictional, the Middle Eastern identity, represented in the Urzik ethnicity, is flattened more than the Western identities. Jacob Minkoff, a design director for *Call of Duty*, acknowledges this flattening in an interview with Polygon.com, a popular gaming journalism website. Minkoff addresses the criticism that Western countries have realistic representation as “flagged soldiers” (referring to the flags worn on their uniforms), while the Middle Eastern characters are given a completely fictional flag and identity -- and one language, Arabic. Minkoff explains the difficulty in addressing this oversimplification from the perspective of the video game industry:

[W]e just didn't want to get wrapped up in the politics of any specific real world country. That's because, number one, we don't know enough about the politics of any given country to be able to do it respectfully. And, number two, it would tie our hands as developers where we have these ideas of emotionally impactful narrative moments, exciting gameplay moments, and we want to be able to bring those to the screen without having to worry about, "Well, that's not accurate to this conflict..." So it makes sense for us to fictionalize the Middle Eastern country, but not the places that the Middle Eastern — that the terrorists from that country attack (Hall 2019).

This quotation supports the central point, made earlier in this thesis, that suggests that this game is emphasizing excitement and adrenaline more than reflection. Although this game flirts with reflection through emotionally impactful moments, it quickly moves onto the next mission. What Minkoff does not say, but this chapter does, is that part of the designers' motivation is just commercial—and that this tendency persists throughout this game. More broadly, this is a trend in which the industry ignores something important: in this case, the geopolitics of the Middle East.

For Minkoff and the other designers of *Call of Duty*, creating the fictional nation of Urzikstan gave them freedom to create "impactful narrative moments" and "exciting gameplay," without the need to understand the complex politics of the Middle East. These impactful and exciting moments are all based in the fictional setting of Urzikstan, during a foreign occupation by Russian forces. An insurgent group known as the Urzikstan Liberation Force (ULF) resists the occupation and fights against both the Russian occupiers and the Al-Qatala terrorist organization responsible for the Piccadilly terrorist attack mentioned in Chapter 4. The Urziks, as insurgents, occupy a place in the game's "exciting" narrative, which allows the designers to appropriate the current state of conflict in the Middle East without needing to understand the full implications of non-state actors within a proxy war. This representation of the Middle Eastern role in this conflict is best reflected by the Urzik character of Farah Karim. Farah is a commander in the ULF and is zealous in her commitment to liberate her home country. In the

mission “Hometown,” the player is given a narrative explanation for Farah’s motivation to fight against the Russians.

### *Farah Karim*

As we have noted, the player in this mission controls a seven-year-old Farah Karim, during a Russian attack on her village in the 1990s. In contrast to the other two playable characters, Alex and Kyle Garrick, Farah is not a highly skilled soldier but a civilian child. As Farah, the player does not have access to the wide arsenal of weaponry and equipment afforded to the Western characters. In fact, Farah spends the majority of this mission unarmed and unable to defend herself or her brother. While playing as Farah, the player spends most of their time hiding from and evading Russian soldiers. The player is able to locate a weapon only at the end of the mission, when they find the revolver and use it to kill two Russian soldiers, Luka and Andrei. Farah’s lack of lethality is still present in this scene, however, because she is too small to fire the revolver quickly, and it takes her more time to reload the weapon, compared with the older characters.

By making Farah a child, and therefore unable to fire the gun quickly, the designers of this mission have essentially placed the player in a position of weakness and danger. Other characters, like Alex, are adults; they are given an arsenal of powerful weaponry--which makes the player who controls such characters feel powerful. Even Kyle, who is outgunned by the terrorists in the “Piccadilly” mission, eventually acquires weaponry to defend himself. Throughout the rest of the game, Farah too appears as a fully capable adult fighter. Yet when the player finally inhabits Farah, they are placed in this place of weakness -- possibly to encourage reflection on the precarious situations faced by civilians in combat zones. In the end, the choice to make Farah a young fighter—with crucial implications for the player’s role-- falls back onto

tropes that place women and children into helpless victim roles. Here again, however, the designers appropriate this situation – that of a child soldier – and flatten her identity in order to make the scenario more palatable for Western audiences. This creates another exciting and visceral scene, similar to what we have seen in the previous chapters, without necessarily reflecting on the horrors of this scene.

### *Representation of Russians in “Hometown”*

As Farah, the player encounters three distinct Russian characters during the course of the mission: a Russian known as “J-12” and a duo of soldiers named Luka and Andrei.

#### *J-12: The Monstrous Russian*

The player first encounters a Russian soldier known as J-12 who attacks Farah and her family in their home during the Russian invasion of their village. J-12 wears a gas mask, which obscures his face, and wears a piece of traditional Russian military clothing known as a Telnyashka, a blue and white striped undershirt, and he also has several Russian-style tattoos. The Telnyashka and that tattoos mark J-12 as a distinctly Russian character. J-12 kills Farah’s father and attempts to kill Farah and her brother Hadir by chasing them around their home. The player, as Farah, avoids J-12 and eventually sneaks up behind him and kills him with the help of Hadir. Farah and Hadir steal J-12’s gas mask which allows them to navigate through the chemical gas spreading through the village.

The character of J-12 prompted a significantly critical response from Russian gamers who boycotted or wrote negative reviews of *Call of Duty*, alleging the representations of Russians in the game were negative stereotypes. In an interview with Polygon.com after *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare’s* release, the game’s art director Joel Emslie expressed regret over this

response: “What I was going for artistically was [...] we’re always trying to work for a cinematic experience. I’m trying to create something really memorable. And I kept thinking, metaphorically, these children are being chased by a monster in a maze” (Hall 2019). This controversy is a perfect example of the emphasis on exciting and memorable moments in military themed video games as opposed to encouraging reflection on the nature of conflict.

### *Luka and Andrei*

After killing J-12, the player guides Farah and Hadir through the remnants of their village. As they attempt to escape, Farah and Hadir witness Russian soldiers executing civilians and destroying homes and buildings. In contrast to the portrayal of conventional military forces in “Fog of War” and “Piccadilly,” the Russians in “Hometown” are portrayed as not limited by the same rules of engagement mentioned in those previous sections. As the player navigates through the mission, Russian soldiers are seen killing multiple groups of defenseless civilians. Giving the player this view of helpless civilians again recalls a theme that comes up earlier in this thesis, one that shows that soldiers are put in an “imperfect” position when they attempt to negotiate around rules of engagement -- particularly those relating to civilians. The game shows the Russians as following a radically different set of rules of engagement – one that instead focuses on killing civilians to exterminate the entire village. As the player navigates through the level, they overhear a group of Russian soldiers speaking about the nature of the mission:

**Russian Soldier 1:** (In Russian) This one's still breathing...

**Russian Soldier 2:** (In Russian) We have orders to kill the wounded...

**Russian Soldier 1:** (In Russian) Have you ever been on a mission like this?

**Russian Soldier 2:** (In Russian) Never. But what are we going to do -- break orders (Hometown/Transcript)?

There is a moment of reflection as these Russian soldiers acknowledge the severity of what they are being asked to do, but they justify their actions by saying that they are just following orders. Unlike the earlier scene in “Piccadilly,” in which Kyle Garrick expresses his frustration with the restrictive rules of engagement that limited his team’s response to the London terror attack, these Russian characters are instead given orders to kill civilians and act without restraint.

As the player makes their way to the end of the mission, they encounter two other Russians named Luka and Andrei. These two Russians are guarding a truck which the player needs to reach and start to escape and complete the mission. Luka and Andrei can be observed by the player: the two soldiers discuss a revolver they stole from a civilian they recently killed. The player is then directed to find the revolver and use it to kill both Russians so that Farah can get to the truck and escape. If the player shoots one of the soldiers, the other will shout his name in shock. If Luka is shot, for example, then Andrei shouts “Luka! No!” This scene is one of the only times in this game in which the generic enemies are given a name and react with grief over the loss of their comrades. In contrast to the scene with J-12, Farah is the attacker in this particular moment. Over the course of this mission, Farah goes from being assaulted to being the aggressor. Also, these two Russians are given names in contrast to the character of J-12 who is only known by his callsign. In a way, Farah’s killing of the last two Russians reflects her evolution into a combatant by what she experienced over the course of the level: in the beginning, she kills J-12, a masked, monstrous figure, but by the end she ruthlessly kills Luka and Andrei in order to escape and survive. At the same time, Luka and Andrei are not innocent bystanders, but rather participants in the extermination of Farah’s village.

Overall, Russians in this mission are shown as cruel or indifferent to the suffering inflicted on the village. Russian soldiers are shown ruthlessly executing the villagers of Farah’s

hometown, and the player also witnesses J-12 mortally wounding Farah's father. Since the player controls Farah, they are meant to identify with the struggle of the Urziks and see the war through the eyes of civilians. In order to reinforce this perspective, Russian identity is also flattened in a manner similar to the flattening of Middle Eastern identities. Russian characters are seen committing acts of violence, typically against civilians or other vulnerable people, to make the mission of "Hometown" more visceral and exciting. The player never controls a Russian character, however, so the Russians are never given the same amount of agency as Farah or the Western characters. Also, although both the Russian and Middle Eastern characters identities are flattened, the Urzik identity is entirely fictional while the Russians are based on a real-life country and its military.

### *The Objectification of Identity for Excitement*

As the foregoing quotation suggests, Jacob Minkoff claims that the motivation for these simplifications of identity allows him and the rest of the design team to create "emotionally impactful narrative moments" and "exciting gameplay," without worrying about complete accuracy in the depiction of modern conflict. Yet this simplification and flattening with respect to non-Western identities skews the narrative of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* toward representing modern conflict in a way that emphasizes the dominance of the Western way of warfare. Although the character of Farah Karim is given a level of agency previously denied to Middle Eastern characters, she is still an objectified and flat representation of the complex, diverse identities of the Middle East. Here again, the game does not ask the player to "reflect" on such oversimplifications. This diminishment of accuracy for the sake of excitement and impactful moments is the same type of appropriation described—in another context-- by Lenoir and Caldwell. The argument of this section adds to Lenoir and Caldwell's argument by applying

their concept of “exciting” (oversimplified) gameplay to Sisler’s statement regarding flattened identity.

Lenior and Caldwell’s analysis revolves around the role of advanced technology in the creation of these exciting gameplay scenarios rather than representation and identity. Yet, in the present analysis, we see that the designers also appropriate, oversimplify, and distort the complex politics and ethnicities of the Middle East for the sake of injecting just enough authenticity into the game to create these “emotionally impactful narrative moments.” Nevertheless, they still emphasize excitement and feelings of adrenaline for the player, instead of encouraging reflection on the nature of the conflict. This appropriation of identity for the sake of excitement denies characters like Farah the ability to transcend the limits of their fictional identities. Any reflection gained while the player inhabits a young Farah’s perspective--as she witnesses the destruction of her village and the massacre of her family--is blunted by the outcomes of the game’s narrative. This outcome occurs when Farah’s brother Hadir betrays her and their allies, and then joins Al-Qatala to seek violent revenge; because of his betrayal, the ULF is branded a terrorist organization, and Alex both abandons the United States and sides with Farah and the ULF. Farah is then placed back into the background of the game’s narrative, while Alex and the other Western characters again become the central focus of the narrative.

## CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION

We have seen that *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* contains exciting, disturbing, provocative, and at times authentic portraits of modern conflict: an airstrike of white phosphorus decimating Russian mercenaries, a car bomb ripping through the crowded streets of London, and a seven-year-old forced to kill adults for survival as her village and family burn behind her.

Returning to Huizinga's view of play as an element in the creation of culture and Bogost's stance on the persuasive power of video games, we see that the influence of these scenes and missions in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* affect the player's understanding of modern conflict and its effects. At the same time, we have expanded on Lenoir and Caldwell's view of the Military-Entertainment Complex revolving around the "commercial exploitation of military experiences" and the use of war as a "source of repeatable entertainment experiences." For we can now reconsider the cultural function of play and the persuasive power of video games -- limited by designers' continued use of stereotypes and flattened, fictional identities, combined with unreflective, adrenaline-filled scenes. All of which creates an exciting, but ideologically vacant, spectacle of warfare.

These limitations have not escaped the notice of game critics and governments. In particular, they have reacted to *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*'s controversial scenes involving fictional atrocities committed by Russian soldiers --which have also resulted in negative online reviews from Russian gamers and an outright ban of the game by the government of the Russian Federation. As the Biden administration in the United States expresses a desire to end the two-decade conflict in Afghanistan, there is also a question of how the conflict known as the "Global War on Terror" will be remembered in future media. For example, *Six Days in Fallujah*, a game which seeks to tell the story of the infamous Battle of Fallujah in Iraq in the early 2000s, is

already receiving criticism during its development, as game journalists question the desire expressed by the game developers to tell the story of the Iraq War “without politics” (Hall 2021).

Although the developers eventually acknowledged that this view of the “Global War on Terror” was quite impossible, their controversial stance seems to remain the norm in game development. We must accordingly consider questions for subsequent research: Is it possible to make a war game, set in a modern conflict, that is truly separated from our own political reality? What is the responsibility of the game designer -- who acts as the artist and architect of these persuasive culture-forming objects known as video games? Can a military-themed game, like *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*, ever be used to critique or criticize the nature of war honestly? And finally, is an anti-war game even possible?

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