Video games and the ideology of war

Honours thesis

David Proctor

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Video games have become a central part of Western popular culture, and while the academic study of the medium has progressed greatly in the past decade, analysis of games is still profoundly underdeveloped in comparison to analysis of other popular media such as film and television. Moreover, in the context of a highly mediated society characterized by volunteer-based militaries, direct experience with the reality of warfare is rare, and for the majority of citizens, war is something that is understood and engaged with primarily through the distorting lens of popular media. War is often a central theme in video games, but it is rarely examined with any substantial level of criticism. The goal of this project, therefore, is to explore the question *how is ideology present in the depictions of war and political violence in video games?*

This question is intended to get at the ideological implications of the fantasy violence that is the central feature of modern war-themed video games. This project is not intended to comment on a simple causal relationship between fantasy violence and real-world violence; instead, the goal is to describe the types of militarism that emerge from these games and explain how they seem intended to interact with the audience and influence their thinking on topics that are well removed from their direct experience, including the politics of the war on terror, the military-industrial complex, and the justification of modern conflicts. In other words, what is at issue is not the effects that video games have on their audiences, but the appeals that they use to draw those audiences in, and the ideological statements they seek to expose them to.

I will seek to address the research question by performing a discourse analysis on four especially important war-themed video games: *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare,* and its direct sequel, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*; *America's Army*; and *Medal of Honor*.

These titles were chosen in order to gather a sample representing various aspects of the genre that are important to this analysis. The *Modern Warfare* games have been colossal popular and commercial successes: *Modern Warfare 2* in particular accumulated over $1 billion worth of retail sales within three months of its November 2009 release (Activision Blizzard, 2010), and *Call of Duty* is widely seen within gaming culture as the dominant franchise, with competitors such as EA referring to upcoming titles as attempts to challenge the series' position at the top of the industry. One such challenge was 2010's *Medal of Honor*, a game set in the real-world battlefield of Afghanistan during the earliest days of the U.S.-led invasion; this game is especially interesting in this project due to its fictionalization of a real contemporary conflict. *America's Army*, a game developed by the U.S. Army as a free recruiting tool, will also be analyzed because of its very explicit design and use as an ideological tool.

Before these analyses can be attempted, however, it is of note that embedded within this research question are a number of assumptions that can be revealed through the following questions: is there ideological content in video games? If so, can it be analyzed using discourse analysis? How are video games capable of relating militarism to their audiences? In this section, I will draw upon relevant prior research and literature in order to provide answers to each of these questions.

Is there ideological content in video games?

'Ideology' is a contested concept that can be difficult to define, but for any meaningful analysis to be possible, it is necessary to decide which aspects of the vast array of scholarship on ideology are to be emphasized. I have therefore settled upon two

definitions of the concept upon which this project will be based. The first is provided by Michael Freeden (2003), who defines ideology as a set of ideas, beliefs, opinions, and values that exhibit a pattern, are held by significant groups, compete for control of public policy, and do so in order to justify, contest, or change the social and political arrangements of a community. John Thompson provides the second in his statement that "ideology, broadly speaking, is *meaning in the service of power*" (1990, p. 7). There is a certain degree of contradiction between these two definitions, but I will argue here that both provide an essential part of the puzzle of determining whether there is ideological content in video games, and that it is possible to reconcile the two.

The connection between these definitions and video games, which are often seen as intellectually bankrupt and politically uncomplicated, may seem tenuous, but when one considers the subtle pervasiveness of ideologies, the connection becomes clearer. Terry Eagleton (1991) argues that there is an ideological aspect to *all* communication and discourse. Eagleton tempers this statement by noting that ideology is not necessarily the defining feature of communication and discourse; for instance, I am not making an ideological argument if I ask my roommate to purchase coffee at his next stop to the grocery store. I am, however, communicating with him on the basis of shared assumptions about a capitalist organization of society and an implicit agreement that this structure is justified and merits our participation. Even if we make no overt arguments about how things are or how they should be, ideologies provide the shared meaning that we require in order to reach mutual understandings, whether we are having a complex political discussion or making a functional comment about household purchases.

Chantal Mouffe (1979) echoes this point in her comments about Antonio Gramsci's work on ideology and hegemony. Mouffe largely rejects the old Marxist line of thought that ideology is the imposition of false consciousness. To some in the Marxian tradition, the equation of ideology with false consciousness means that ideological forms of thought and understanding are built upon illusory non-truths that serve particular class interests; one of the main projects of Marxism, accordingly, is to 'escape' from this false consciousness by finding an objective truth, so that individuals and classes can understand the world from an objectively truthful standpoint that is not built upon assumptions that benefit any specific class. To Mouffe, by contrast, ideology is a practice of creating meaning. All discourse ultimately relies upon some form of shared understanding — there is no seamless overlap between the consciousnesses of two individual people, so if they are to communicate, they require some form of mediation that both will be capable of understanding. In Mouffe's theory, ideology provides a set of shared assumptions that allow two atomized individuals to obtain a shared understanding. She shares this conclusion with Michael Freeden's (2003) foundational definition of the concept: he states that ideology is a necessary oversimplification of the political that allows humans to make sense of it. In contrast to the argument that ideology creates 'false consciousness,' Freeden asserts that while ideology may not create a 'true consciousness,' it does create a political consciousness of some sort — a task that would be impossible without ideology.

Jorje Larrain (1979) takes this point in a different direction. Drawing upon the work of Karl Mannheim, Larrain asserts that ultimately, every point of view must be evaluated as ideological: since all communication relies upon some form of shared

meaning, which itself is a necessarily simplified version of the social world, and since all shared meaning is created from the assumptions laid down by ideology, all communication ultimately relies upon a shared ideology of some sort. In this sense, the old Marxist goal of escaping from ideology is impossible; not only must theorists give up hope of delivering a truly objective and truthful analysis, they now must learn to identify the ideological assumptions that are guiding their arguments and positions.

On the basis of this conception of ideology, we can conclude that since all discourse is in some way ideological, there is indeed ideological content in video games. John Thompson (1990) is hesitant to share this conclusion, however. Noticing a trend in writing about ideology to assign it this pervasive and universal character, he contends that in order to be useful as an analytical concept, ideology needs to be thought of as a quality that a text either reflects or does not, depending on its interpretations and uses in particular social contexts. Again, for Thompson, the defining quality of ideology is that it "refer[s] to the ways in which meaning serves, in particular circumstances, to establish and sustain relations of power which are systematically asymmetrical — what I shall call 'relations of domination'." (p. 7). This problematizes the question of whether there is ideological content in video games all over again: to Thompson, the question is not 'does the object of analysis participate in the discourse that shapes shared understandings of the world,' but 'does the object of analysis participate in the discourse that re-organizes the social world in order to be more favorable to powerful interests?'

Thompson's definition of the concept of ideology is considerably narrower than Freeden's, Eagleton's, Larrain's, and Mouffe's, and very explicitly separates the ideological from other forms of meaning on the basis of support for relations of

domination. In addition to those already described, Thompson also makes other explicit criticisms of particular tendencies in theoretical literature about ideology that would seem to make his definition of the concept incompatible with Michael Freeden's. As I will explain here, however, these contradictions need not compel the analyst to make a final choice between the two theorists.

Thompson's first criticism is that ideology should not be seen as a "kind of 'social cement' which succeeds in stabilizing societies by binding their members together and providing them with collectively shared values and norms" (1990, p. 7). This seems to contradict Freeden's assertion that ideology provides a shared basis of meaning upon which political understanding and communication can be built. There is a key difference between the two statements, however: the former is referring to values and norms, and the latter to shared meanings that allow the transference of information between atomized individuals. Ideologies may well be, as Thompson proposes, in constant struggle, competing to create a societal consensus that serves the interests of a diversity of powerful actors, with the potential result of a stalemate that prevents real social or political change. Simultaneously, these ideas and understandings can continue to allow groups of individuals to obtain shared understandings of the political world. As a result, there is no suggestion that the ideological content of video games must be consistent or in agreement with itself; it does not matter what the ideological statement is, so long as it is in the service of some kind of power.

Thompson also criticizes the tendency to see ideology in relation to institutionalized state power. In his words, "the institutions of the modern state, and the numerous other organizations (political parties, pressure groups, etc.) which occupy the

space commonly referred to as politics in modern societies, are extremely important sites of power and domination; but they are not the only sites, nor even necessarily the most important sites for most people most of the time" (Thompson, 1990, p. 9). This is not a contradiction of Freeden, but it is important to the question of whether video games can be considered ideological artifacts. The asymmetries of power between the state and other political groups and individuals would seem to imply that texts commenting on the organs and institutions of the state, including the military, are almost inherently ideological; as a result, video games such as *Medal of Honor* and the *Modern Warfare* franchise, which feature fictionalized accounts of the adventures of real-life state military organizations like the U.S. Army, the Marines, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the British Special Air Service, take on a strong ideological element, as do games like *America's Army*, which are directly created by state military organizations. More importantly, however, Thompson's point opens up the whole of cultural material and texts, including video games in general, as potentially ideological artifacts, not because of their origins but because of their content.

The main piece of Thompson's argument that I seek to bring to bear in this project, however, is the foundational nature of power in analyzing ideological text. As I will describe later in this chapter, video games can be accurately described as texts that participate in cultural and political discourse; in a variety of ways, video games make statements about the real world, and if these statements are in the service of some form of power, by Thompson's (1990) definition, they must be ideological in nature. Notably, Thompson rejects the common conception of mass communication (such as video games) as a new tool with which hegemonic powers manipulate and control the consciousness of

subordinate classes; likewise, this project must recognize that an accurate analysis of the ideological statements cannot include unfounded commentary on the ways in which audiences receive, interpret, and react to them. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that war is about power, and that the commentaries about war that are provided in video games share this feature.

Nico Carpentier and Erik Spinoy (2008) provide further guidance in Thompson's task of separating the ideological from the merely meaningful in their description of the ideological theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, which they assert is capable of expanding the tradition of discourse analysis and informing the study of art and media in a new and valuable way. Toward this end, Carpentier and Spinoy emphasize three key elements of Laclau and Mouffe's theory: social ontology, in which they argue that discourse is a process of establishing relations between concepts in a way that modifies their identities, and more fundamentally that meanings and identities are constructed through the process of discourse; political identity, which draws upon Gramsci's theory of hegemony to depict political identity as the site of a contest between different aspiring hegemonic forces vying for the power to define it; and radical democratic politics, in which Laclau and Mouffe argue that civil society should work together in a struggle to redefine contemporary liberal democracy in a more radical and pluralistic direction. In other words, Carpentier and Spinoy argue that a social constructivist conception of ideology combined with attention to exclusionary politics and social struggle between various hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces can bring to light the most important aspects of ideology contained within a text.

Carpentier and Spinoy (2008) agree with Eagleton and Larrain that ideology can be found in any text. In order to separate the most important ideological information, they use the metaphor of "nodal points" providing fixity of meaning: although they recognize that meaning is socially constructed, they also allow for certain, undefined fixed points of shared meaning that can be assumed to be fixed, allowing both a simplified analysis of these points as similar in theory to objective reality and the stabilization of contingent and contested points of knowledge. They add that the goal of the hegemonic process is to give selected contingent points of meaning the *de facto* status of a nodal point — to transform relative and contested meanings in order to confer upon them the (socially constructed) status of objective truth.

Based upon this body of theory, it is clear that if we accept that video games contain some form of discourse — an assumption that I hope to make explicit while performing discourse analysis — we must furthermore accept that this discourse holds ideological significance of some sort. Still unanswered, however, is the question of how these games are capable of drawing upon and contributing to ideological understanding of the world, and how this ideological material relates to the audience. To resolve these questions, I intend to employ discourse analysis to tease out the most ideologically significant elements of the games under discussion, but this intention raises another important preliminary question.

Can discourse analysis reveal ideological aspects of video game texts?

The task of analyzing and interpreting human communication is a titanic one. As the theories relating to ideology discussed in the previous section suggest, the fact that

communication is such a foundational component of human experience makes it extremely difficult to study. If we think of the process of analysis as divided into the steps of making determinations about the object of study and then communicating those determinations to other humans, we can see that the process of studying communication is complicated by the fact that the object of study is also a fundamental part of the process.

Discourse analysis emerged early in the study of communication as a way of overcoming this difficulty. Alexandra Georgakopoulou and Dionysis Goutsos (1997) assert that discourse analysis emerges out of the study of rhetoric, a field whose roots stretch into antiquity, when ancient Greek philosophers predating even Plato and Aristotle sought to understand how to influence their peers and participate effectively in public discourse. In this history, the study of language beyond the scope of the sentence was not divorced from the rhetorical concern of persuasion until the 1950s, and it was not until the late 70s and early 80s that discourse analysis of texts emerged as a distinct discipline. Georgakopoulu and Goustos heavily emphasize the importance of linguistics in discourse analysis, explaining that although "its scope embraces a broad range of disciplines from sociology to anthropology, and from education to psychology, among others . . . discourse analysis has built a significant foundation for itself in linguistics" (p. iii).

These two authors locate the early foundations of discourse analysis securely in the linguistic tradition of structuralism, or the analysis of formal structures and patterns of language (Georgakopoulou & Goustos, 1997); despite the proliferation of the basic method into a variety of new academic disciplines, they emphasize that this is the root

upon which all further developments have been built. They also note the foundational nature of the text as an object of analysis, asserting that this more wholistic concept of a unit of meaning offers a deeper and more accurate understanding of discourse than earlier methods that sought to understand micro-structures such as sentences in isolation. They define discourse analysis as "the study of the use of language for communication in context" (p. iii). This definition notably sets up discourse analysis as a collection of methodologies that view communication as a process, rather than a series of atomized communicative instances. Furthermore, this definition emphasizes context. To these two theorists, if a text is not understood as a phenomenon that both shapes social and cultural context and is shaped by this context, it cannot be understood at all.

This definition appears to be limited to the study of linguistic communication, however, which accounts for only a very small portion of the communicative potential of video games. Even if we limit our analysis to only the ways in which video games communicate information to the player, we will find visual images, audio cues, and even tactile feedback through such technologies as 'force feedback' controllers, in addition to the linguistic communication presented to the player through speech and written text. Furthermore, the interactive nature of video games further complicates the study of their discourse, as it makes it difficult to know with certainty how information will be presented to the audience, if indeed they receive the same information at all. The research question in this project relies upon an assumption that discourse analysis is capable of illuminating the relationship between video games and ideologies surrounding political violence. To justify this assumption, however, it must be demonstrated that discourse

analysis is capable of revealing these sorts of meanings taking all of the complicating features of the medium into account.

It is at this point that I will once again turn to Carpentier and Spinoy (2008), who again argue for the applicability of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory. Once again, the three most important aspects of this theory, according to Carpentier and Spinoy, are social ontology, or a recognition that meaning is socially constructed; political identity theory, or an emphasis on the perpetual social conflict between various hegemonic and counter-hegemonic groups; and radical democratic politics, or the attempt to increase the plurality of perspectives included in political and ideological discourse. These three key elements of discourse represent a framework that allows the analyst to distinguish between those aspects of a text that are of the greatest ideological importance and those that are necessarily ideological but nevertheless inconsequential in comparison. Again, all discourse is ideological, but Laclau and Mouffe have presented three elements of discourse that will allow for the greatest level of understanding of the ideological implications of a text.

Evangelos Intzidis and George Prevedourakis (2008) have accepted this conclusion and used the work of Laclau and Mouffe to analyze a selection of the *Medal of Honor* video games in a manner very similar to this project. (Although the games that Intzidis and Prevedourakis analyze are nominally part of the same franchise as the *Medal of Honor* title that will be analyzed in this project, they are profoundly different games — the title that I will analyze was a 're-boot' of the series that departed sharply from the tone, setting, branding, and even gameplay of the titles in the analysis described here.) Using Laclau and Mouffe's principles, they identify the manner in which the games

present an oversimplified and nationalistic impression of World War II by creating a dichotomy between the glorious American 'self' and a wholly evil Nazi or Japanese 'other.' They also expand on these conclusions, noting that the literal discourse in the games can be expanded to apply to the war on terror, and that although the games do not engage directly with subjects such as terrorism and al-Qaeda, they nonetheless provide implicit support for hawkish modern foreign policy. Their analysis also takes into account several discursive features unique to the medium of video games, including the projection of the player's virtual body into the game-world. If nothing else, Intzidis and Prevedourakis demonstrate that it is possible to carry out a compelling and valuable discourse analysis about war-themed video games.

Older toolboxes for the task of discourse analysis are also of value in this project. Georgakopoulou and Goustos (2004) make a distinction, for instance, between what they call the 'narrative mode' and 'non narrative mode' of discourse. The distinction between the two can most easily be thought of as the difference between narrative and argument: the narrative mode of discourse is defined by the temporally-ordered dissemination of information, while the non-narrative mode eschews chronological representations in favor of argumentative statements that seek to define concepts and phenomena or to make value judgments about how things should or must be.

These two modes of discourse correspond very neatly to the two key types of video game analysis identified by Ewan Kirkland (2005). The narrative mode describes 'narratology,' which studies the narratives, events, characters, and representations in video games, similar to how narratives have traditionally been studied in disciplines such as literature studies. The non-narrative mode corresponds closely to ludology, which

analyzes the rules that are the defining feature of games. A distinction between these two areas is crucial to any attempt to understand the ideological significance of video games: most video games include narratives of some sort that can be clearly understood to have ideological content, but an awareness of ludology is also essential, as unless a game has been understood as a system of rules that functions according to an internal logic, it has been understood merely as a story rather than as a game.

In a second article, Carpentier (2008) also demonstrates that his take on Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory is well-suited to interpreting discourse surrounding the topic of war. He begins by providing a set of analytical tools well suited to the analysis of this topic, and uses the example of the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq to apply them. Three key concepts that he identifies as useful for understanding the ideological significance of discourse surrounding the invasion include the primacy of the political sphere over the social sphere during wartime, social antagonism, and a struggle to achieve hegemony. In his analysis, the efforts of pro-war forces to achieve hegemonic status for their ideological model of the Iraq war were mostly successful, at least initially; for this project, an identification of how video games are able to employ similar discursive techniques toward similar ends will be informative.

In summary, I believe that it is true that discourse analysis is capable of capturing the pertinent ideological aspects of video game discourse. A great number of analytical tools meant to perform just such a project, most notably the discourse theory that Carpentier and Spinoy derive from Laclau and Mouffe's work, already exist. Additionally, successful and informative discourse analyses of video games, including the specific genre of video games of interest in this project, have already been performed.

If there is ideological material available to be analyzed in video games, the tools to find and interpret it exist.

How are video games capable of relating militarism to their audiences?

Quite separate from the question of whether or not there is ideological content in video games is the question of whether or not video games can make ideological and political statements — in other words, there is a distinction between the ideological content of a text and the ideological purposes toward which that text can be put. The definition of ideology that has been adopted in this project emphasizes that ideology permeates all human interaction because it provides the shared understanding necessary for political discourse; merely by engaging with war as a subject matter, video games become ideological. This does not answer the question of how war-themed video games, working in the service of power, are able to make militarism appealing to the audience. This is a complicated question with fragmented answers, but there is ample scholarship about meaning-making in video games available to assist in this task.

As Henry Jenkins (2006) notes, the question of whether video games can make political statements has been asked not only by academics, but also in courtrooms. He cites a 2002 case in which senior U.S. District Judge Stephen Limbaugh ruled that video games are not protected by the first amendment because video games do not contain discourse that can be described as "speech"; as a result, content restrictions on the sort of violence that can be depicted by video games would, under this decision, be deemed justified and legal. Jenkins argues passionately (and compellingly) against this conclusion. Although the notion that video games are just as capable of making political statements

as more culturally-entrenched media such as film and literature clearly does not have universal approval, he argues that it should. He characterizes the video game violence debate as a conflict between two standpoints: the 'effects model,' which seeks to understand the psychological effects that video game play causes on the human mind, and the 'meanings model,' which studies how audiences appropriate and negotiate meaning in video games. Jenkins argues that the effects model is too simplistic and literal to understand how players interact with video game violence; a meanings model, in which the capacity of video games to provide complex and contestable meanings is assumed, on the other hand, offers a more nuanced framework for understanding how players negotiate meaning through games. Notably, this conclusion ultimately gained the approval of the courts when the case was taken to appeal.

This project is not about the video game violence debate, but violence is of central importance to an analysis of depictions of war in video games: violence is a central aspect of militarism, but it is also repulsive, so it becomes important to understand how it is made palatable to audiences as a form of recreational entertainment. Anne Gjelsuik (2009) notes that there is an inherent paradox in violent media: in the example of war-themed video games, players are both witnessing and participating in painful and horrific experiences, but if the game is any good, they are simultaneously deriving pleasure from the experience. Among her attempts to reconcile this paradox are the ideas of 'pleasure as meta-emotion,' which recognizes that audiences can feel pain and pleasure distinctly and simultaneously, and the distinction between fiction-emotions, which are aroused by the digetic events within a text, and artefact-emotions, which are aroused by appreciation of texts for their technical and textual quality. Additionally, Christolph Klimmt et. al. (2008)

note that there is a paradox between the enjoyment that players derive from video games and their moral revulsion at such events in the real world. To reconcile this paradox, these researchers propose a model of 'moral management' that outlines a number of strategies that video game designers and players can use to allow the audience to overcome their potential moral trepidation toward committing simulated acts of violence. Again, these theories are useful to this project because they provide access to the ideological significance of the violence contained within video games; the contextualization and representation of real-world violence through the fantasy violence presented in video games are rich in ideological content.

Despite the usefulness of these theories, analysis of the manifest violence in video games is, for the purposes of this project, less important than analysis of the political and ideological significance of this fantasy violence. Beyond representation, video games are also capable of teaching. A variety of scholars agree that video games have great pedagogical value. James Paul Gee (2008) argues, for instance, that human learning is most effective when it is based upon experiences that are structured by goals, are interpreted, provide immediate feedback, have repeated opportunity for application, and are located in a context that encourages social interaction. According to Gee, video games fulfill every one of these criteria, and are therefore extremely valuable pedagogical tools (indeed, he centrally argues for their widespread inclusion as teaching tools in schools). Similarly, Katie Salen (2008) asserts that play is an important method of learning that has been unfairly marginalized based upon unjustified cultural norms identifying it as frivolous and unproductive. As a consequence, she also contends that games are highly valuable pedagogical tools, especially for childhood education. Torben

Grodal (2003) approaches the same questions from a more scientific approach, asserting that video games should become a major area of study for cognitive psychologists, who he explains will be interested in the synergy between video games and the human brain's tendency toward simulation. The significance of this research in the current project is the determination that video games are uniquely suited to transferring information between video game texts and the human mind. It is an oversimplification to say that video games can 'teach' ideologies — to do so would be to ignore the all-important role of active audiences — but at the very least it can indicate that video games are capable of teaching. Whether or not the attempt at teaching is successful, there does not seem to be anything special about ideological information or militaristic worldviews that makes them less amenable to being 'taught' than any other sort of information.

Indeed, a variety of scholars have also asserted that video games are capable of functioning as rhetorical tools as well as pedagogical ones. Ian Bogost (2008) asserts that video games are defined by procedurality, or the capability of computers to run algorithmic processes and manipulate symbols within the constraints of a set of rules. To Bogost, this capability, unique to video games, represents a powerful new form of rhetoric that operates by representing real-world social and cultural phenomena and in so doing making arguments about their nature. If a video game depicts an execution, for instance, it is representing a phenomenon that exists in the real world, but it is necessarily doing so within the constraints created by the rules of the game-world; these constraints define which aspects of the real-world phenomenon are emphasized, distorted, and left out, allowing the game to make an argument by implication about what an execution is and what it means.

Similarly, Gonzalo Frasca (2003) asserts that analyses of video games that rely upon a 'storytelling model' (similar to the study of narratology previously described in this paper) are incapable of providing a true understanding of the medium. Rather than simple representations, Frasca contends that video games can be better thought of as simulations, which are capable of modes of rhetoric and argument that simple narratives are not. In this theory, the distinction between representation and simulation is that the latter models the defining behaviors of one system by representing it through another system, allowing the representation of a greater number of pertinent aspects of the original system. Frasca also crucially distinguishes between the rhetoric of games with 'ludus structures,' which are defined by a win-state, and 'paidia structures,' which provide a set of rules to guide a simulation, but no win-state to provide an ending to the tale. The key rhetorical strength of a ludus-structured game is the implication that the aspects that define the win-state are desirable, both in the context of the game and insofar as they represent real-world phenomena; the key rhetorical strength of the paidia structure, which Frasca describes as "more subtle . . . and therefore more persuasive" (p. 231), is that the game's designer can infuse the internal logic of the game-world with rhetorical significance by manipulating the way that the game's rules work. Frasca uses *SimCity* as an example of this, explaining that "the designer could convey his ideology by adding or leaving out manipulation rules that deal with, say, public transportation, racial issues, or ecology" (p. 231).

There are a number of other theorists that have asserted that games have a rich rhetorical potential, and they have devised a number of tools meant to analyze this recently-identified capacity. Ken S. McAllister (2004) has proposed the use of a

"grammar of gamework" in order to more fully understand the influence of the agents that seek to manage the meanings of games, how context affects these meanings, and how these meanings manifest themselves in the game-text; he has also applied this theory by way of examples such as the exchange procedures in *Black and White*, a game in which the player takes on the role of a god competing with rival deities for worshippers and deistic power. Kurt Squire (2008) has additionally developed a toolkit for the analysis of open-ended 'sandbox' games, or "designed experiences." Squire has defined a typology of games that separates them based upon their purposes that is of great use in this project: two of the most important types that he identifies are "targeted games," which are rhetorical games designed to communicate a concept, and "epistemic games," which are intended to simulate real-world practice.

The idea that there is a difference between reality and hegemonic depictions of wars is well established. Erika Doss (2009), for instance, has analyzed American war memorials for ideological content, and found several defining features common in hegemonic depictions of war. To Doss, mainstream American war memory, despite acknowledgement of the horrific experiences and death associated with it, is ultimately supportive of armed conflict and militarism, emphasizing concepts like sacrifice that serve to legitimize the human toll of past conflicts while failing to criticize the situations that caused American deaths or the highly martialized nature of American culture. Michael Walzer (2006), argues that while military conflict is, at times, justified, there also exists a socially-agreed and morally obligatory 'war convention' that outlines the moral boundaries on human conduct in times of war, although this convention is regularly transgressed and those transgressions are often subject to illegitimate attempts

at justification by elites. Nina B. Huntemann and Matthew Thomas Payne (2010) also note that this disconnect between the reality of war and hegemonic depictions is one that benefits not only those that directly benefit from conflict, but also to entertainers that are part of what they call the 'military-entertainment complex.' This phenomenon is an active attempt to derive financial benefits for both parties by altering discourse about war and the military into a more militaristic form favorable to military interests.

This disconnect has also been analyzed with specific reference to the hegemonic function of video games. Much of this sort of analysis has focused on *America's Army*. Randy Nichols (2010) describes this game as the most successful 'advergame' ever released, and notes that its military producers exert extremely careful control over the rhetorical uses to which it can be put by placing strict limits on the extent to with users can modify or interact with it. David B. Nieborg (2010) similarly describes *America's Army* as a manifestation of U.S. 'soft power,' emphasizing that it is an example of modern-day propaganda. (Notably, Nieborg distinguishes the sort of power exercised by *America's Army* from 'hegemonic power,' characterizing it instead as 'sweet power,' or a form of power that aims to seduce audiences into accepting its hegemony, rather than attempting to enforce it from above.)

This sort of analysis is not limited to a single title, however. Joel Penney (2010) analyzed the World War II-themed iterations of the popular *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty* first-person shooter franchises and determined that while they share many of the aspects that are often used to define propaganda, they can more accurately be thought of as manifestations of a more narrowly defined conception of U.S. soft power. Meanwhile, Daphneé Rentfrow (2008) has compared representations of war in video games to

representations of war in early photography and film, when technological limits required the use of staging and re-enactments, similarly to how video games provide users with representations that are much less recordings of actual events than fictionalized representations of them. She asserts representations of war in video games are not substantively different from the way early war photography glossed over the horror and death that defined the First World War, rendering it little more than an empty expression of propaganda.

The quibbling over the distinction between 'soft power' and 'propaganda' in these texts is of little value to this project; what is important, however, are the accusations that either is present. Soft power and propaganda are both forms of political and ideological communication, and they are closely associated with attempts to spread militaristic worldviews; whether or not all video games fall into these categories, and whether or not audiences accept these messages uncritically, if the medium of video games is capable of attracting these criticisms, it must also be capable of making political and ideological statements. Even the producers of war-themed video games appear to agree that they have such significance, despite suspicions that they might want to separate themselves from accusations of propagandistic war-mongering. Matthew Thomas Payne (2009) has examined the role of the producers in games that are branded and endorsed by the U.S. armed forces and has asserted that they are self-consciously in the business of selling state-sponsored militarism. Indeed, Payne asserts that producers of military-authorized video games see their products as serving a social good by promoting 'military values' among the audience.

A still-greater number of theorists have made assertions about how video games 'sell' ideological material. Josh Smicker (2010) has used performance theory to analyze the implications that war-themed video games make about the nature, history, and future of real-world warfare. Most notably, he criticizes the genre of war games that he terms "proleptic," which are set in the present and near future, for implying that war is inevitable and uncritically allowing the military to have authorship over the audience's expectations of future conflicts. Marcus Power (2009) similarly criticizes contemporary war games for presenting a sanitized vision of American wars that serves to justify the worst excesses of the war on terror, noting that all participants in the military-industrial-media-entertainment complex benefit from the oversimplifaction of real-world conflicts that are presented in video games. C. Richard King and David J. Leonard (2010) provide a similar but more detailed critique, asserting that by setting military-themed video games in real-world locations where real conflicts are occurring, video games present and oversimplified vision of contemporary and future battlefields that has been emptied of its real-world inhabitants, and justify American military action in doing so.

Scholars have often asserted that contemporary war-themed video games regularly make important and clear statements about the location of the player in relation to the war on terror. Roger Stahl (2006) asserts that war-themed video games create a crossover between military and civil space, creating a context in which the player becomes a "virtual citizen-soldier" that is able to engage in some measure of practical participation in the war on terror. Nina B. Huntemann (2010) additionally used a series of focus group and participant observation sessions to analyze the relationship between war-themed video games and catharsis, realism, and military indoctrination, coming to the

ultimate conclusion that war-themed games provide players with a form of comforting agency in the U.S. national security situation that they cannot attain in the real world.

Video games have also been seen as powerful tools for 'war nostalgia,' with some scholars describing them as tools to seduce their audiences into accepting hegemonic depictions of former wars that retain political usefulness. James Campbell (2008) asserts that World War II games function as a method of cultivating nostalgia for what they (inaccurately) present as the last 'ludic' war (by which he means that World War II was the last war that seemed to operate within the constraints of a binding set of rules). Although he contends that video games more closely resemble war movies than real life and that games are poorly suited to simulating real-world history, he asserts that most players will nevertheless interpret their simulations as representations. Similarly, Patrick Crogan (2003) uses the example of *Combat Flight Simulator 2*, which recreates historical World War II air battles and allows the player to participate in them, to argue that temporality in video games is best thought of as "ergodic time," which is distinguished from linear time by its presentation of several potential paths that the player and computer create together by negotiating via an interface within the constraints of a set of rules. To Crogan, the key capability of ergodic time is that it allows the player a feeling of agency over history, despite the highly inaccurate simulations of actual events that the player is actually experiencing.

To summarize, this section has drawn upon a wealth of scholarship in order to argue that video games are indeed capable of making political and ideological statements. Not only is there already a large and developed body of scholarship analyzing the high pedagogical and rhetorical value of this medium, there is also a wealth of scholarship that

has examined games with the goal of exposing their ideological implications and statements, and while the existence of such discourse does not necessarily mean that audiences are uncritically accepting it, this analysis provides ample evidence that such discourse does exist. In combination with the conclusions of the first two sections of this paper, I believe that I have demonstrated that it is indeed possible to perform discourse analysis upon a selection of important war-themed video games and determine their ideological significance and functions. The goal of the remainder of this project is to take advantage of this possibility in practice.

Having examined the most relevant scholarship and foregrounded the most applicable elements of it, the goal of this latter half of the project is to anaylze selected video game texts using discourse analysis in order to answer the original research question: *how is ideology present in the depictions of war and political violence in video games?* Accordingly, this section will examine the most ideologically provocative narratological and ludological aspects of each of the four selected titles, and explain what implications the procedurality and narratives of each suggest about real-world warfare and violence.

Analysis of the games in this section will focus primarily upon the single-player campaigns, with the exception of the section about *America's Army*, for which the single-player offering is limited to an extended tutorial and a version of the multiplayer game in which other players are replaced by artificial intelligence "bots." The primary reason for this is to allow for a more detailed analysis of the narratological aspects of the games: whereas single-player games are most often treated by players as "designed experiences," similar to a work of fiction that one becomes lost in, most online game players quickly begin to see a game as a set of rules rather than a simulation of reality or a fictional world that they can become fully immersed in. An online game almost by necessity eschews a complicated narrative; the story of a team death-match is rarely more complicated than two teams struggling until a pre-determined number of people die or a timer runs out.

By contrast, the single-player campaign of a first-person shooter is an exacting, designed experience. Whereas an online multiplayer match can be populated by dozens of people, limiting the amount of planning that can go into a single user's experience, a single-player campaign can be designed down to the last detail because only one player will be interacting with the game at a time. If a single-player campaign is designed to be

highly linear, the developer can predict and even transparently guide the player's movements and actions by building different types of environments into the game, and can control the game's pace by juxtaposing different types of high-pressure engagements with periods of calm and pre-recorded expository scenes.

The single-player offerings of the *Modern Warfare* and *Medal of Honor* games are exactly this type of tightly-controlled linear experience. Although each player can make a variety of tactical decisions in each engagement, every player will face identical engagements in identical sequence, and every player will advance through an identical and tightly-bordered game environment that is carefully designed to look expansive and give the player a feeling of freedom. Essentially, the game tells the player that the whole world is open to them while tricking them into staying on the pre-determined path. Patrick Crogan (2003) describes 'ergodic time' as being defined by allowing the player to negotiate a variety of paths between two fixed points. This is an apt metaphor for how *Modern Warfare* and *Medal of Honor* work: the fixed points, at which every player is experiencing a nearly identical event, are densely packed throughout each level of these games. Although they will allow the player to maneuver through an arena during a firefight and the engagement may play out in a dramatically different fashion, every player will enter the fray at the same point, leave by the same exit, and proceed to the same destination afterward. As a result of this linearity, every player will encounter nearly identical narratological and ludological details while playing these games.

With this background in mind, in what follows, I examine how ideology is present in the narrative and ludology of *America's Army, Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2,* and *Medal of Honor*. For each game, I will describe the

relevant business and cultural context of the game's creation and release, the basic set of rules that define the game, and examples of procedural rhetoric and narrative argumentation in each.

America's Army

America's Army is a unique example of militarism in video games, in that it was explicitly created as a pro-military rhetorical tool. The game was developed by the U.S. Army with the goal of attracting new real-world recruits by providing a free game that is often distributed on CDs at recruiting events and U.S. Army offices, as well as online via its own web site and popular online video game store Steam in order to target key demographics. Originally released in 2002, *America's Army* has met with a measure of popular success: according to its own web site, it is currently "one of the ten most popular PC action games played online" (*America's Army*, n.d.). Noting that it "provides players with the most authentic military experience available," the game has been free to obtain and free to play ever since its original release on Independence Day in 2002. Since then, the game has been modernized several times and in a variety of ways; today, the game is released under the title *America's Army 3*, although it is not so much a sequel to the original game as an expanded and updated version of it.

Uniquely among the titles examined in this project, the goal of publishing *America's Army* is not financial (although two spin-off titles were released through a licensing agreement for profit on the Xbox, and *America's Army*-branded mobile and arcade games also exist). Instead, the explicit goal of the game is to encourage players to enlist in the real-world military, and take part in the real-world War on Terror. As a result,

its militaristic aspects are unsurprising. Accordingly, for the purposes of this project, the game will primarily be treated as an example of how discourse analysis can reveal these aspects.

At its core, *America's Army* is a team-based online first-person shooter. It is controlled from a first-person perspective; the player places their left hand on the keyboard to control movement, weapons selection, and similar concerns, and the right hand on the mouse, which can be moved in order to aim, and the buttons pressed to fire the current weapon or look down its sights for greater accuracy. At the beginning of each round, the player chooses one of four 'roles,' each of which must be unlocked by first completing the appropriate training missions. The roles of rifleman, automatic rifleman, grenadier, and squad designated marksman each offer a different set of weapons to use, and therefore compel the player to use different strategies. The game rewards teams that are able to combine several roles and complement the abilities of each. The player's health is represented with an icon on the bottom right of the screen in the shape of a soldier's silhouette; as different parts of the player character's body are damaged, they turn red, causing adverse effects such as slowed movement or impaired aim. If the head or torso is heavily damaged, the player is disabled, and must be revived by a friendly player within a time limit or they will die, and must wait until the next round of play begins to return to the game.

In general, the game is won by killing members of the opposing team without dying; further to this, there are a number of game types that define win- and lose-states, including: VIP, in which one team must escort one player to a set point before the other team kill them; secure and extract, in which both teams compete to claim an object and

return it to their own base; activated objective, in which both teams compete to either defend or destroy important objects scattered throughout the map; and others. The game's manual does describe a back-story in which the players are participating in an American military response to unrest in the fictional Eastern European country of Czervenia, where the government has been forcing civilians out of their homes and executing those who remain, forcing an American response when the U.N. is too paralyzed to resolve the situation multilaterally. In terms of narrative, this plot represents a problematic endorsement of the unilateral military adventurism that defined the Bush Administration's foreign policy, but it has almost no bearing on the actual game, and aside from an Eastern European aesthetic in most levels, this back-story is never alluded to during gameplay.

Every player starts the game with a series of identical training missions in which they are introduced to the controls and tested in order to 'qualify' to use each of the roles available. The game's militaristic attitude is put on display immediately as the player is treated to an introductory video depicting the player character riding a bus to boot camp and remembering the oath of service that they took back at the recruiting station. Once the actual mission begins, it becomes clear that the training missions are not merely an opportunity to learn about the controls of the game; they're also an opportunity to learn about the U.S. military. In 'basic rifle marksmanship' training, for instance, the player is instructed to obtain a weapon and ammunition from a nearby tent, where a genial attendant named Sergeant Osoona explains his job to the player, assuring them that "if there's anything you need at the range, I'm here to make sure you get it." Boot camp in *America's Army* is physically based upon an actual U.S. Army training ground and

exactingly reproduces the real-life firing ranges that actual recruits would qualify on. This detailed re-creation downplays and obscures other aspects of boot camp, however — the stereotypical abusive drill sergeant is conspicuous in his absence, replaced instead by a relatively soft-spoken cast of training staff who give the player a set of dry, functional instructions, making no attacks on the player more severe than telling them to be disciplined with their ammunition because "I don't want to write your mamas and lie about how smart you were."

The blunt attempts at army education are not limited to training missions. The main menu also includes a button labeled "go army" that takes the player to a database of recruiting information, outlining the range of careers offered by the U.S. military, offering explanations of what the army lifestyle is like, summarizing the benefits that are available to members of the military, and providing a list of "real heroes," which detail the life stories of U.S. soldiers that have committed some sort of heroic action, explaining why they chose to join the military and what they feel they got out of the experience. Clearly, this is ideological information intended to serve powerful interests by convincing players that a military career of some sort is a good choice for them.

Ian Bogost's (2008) procedural rhetoric is very clearly present in *America's Army*, but is of an unusual character, since the game purports to be offering "the most authentic military experience available" — the implication being that the procedurality of the game is as close to reality as possible within the constraints of the technology on which it is built. In truth, the game is a profoundly simplified and sanitized representation of combat. A player who is healed by another player after being shot down, for instance, is able to continue the game as if they had never been injured in the first place. Blood flies out of

wounds when characters are shot, but their bodies bear no lasting scars, and never become dismembered. The authentic military experience that the game purports to offer is, in fact, an experience in which all violence is heavily censored. The purpose behind this is clear: if players were regularly witnessing their character's body being mutilated in combat, they would be less likely to volunteer for it.

Another interesting piece of procedural rhetoric is the 'honor' system. As the player wins matches, completes objectives, and kills enemies, they gain 'honor points,' which give the player priority when selecting roles and unlocking advanced training for new types of weapons. These points are persistent between games, since they are linked to the player's *America's Army* account. Honor can also be lost, however, by violating the 'rules of engagement' that are laid down in each level. Most of the time, the rules of engagement are simply to refrain from attacking teammates or civilians, and the player is punished harshly for violating these rules. Again, this piece of procedurality implies that there is a similar mechanism at work in real life — that the American military does not attack civilians and does not condone friendly fire. The first point in particular is demonstrably false: civilian deaths have been dismissed as "collateral damage" in many recent conflicts, despite the all-important value that appears to be placed on their lives in this game. The ideological implication of this procedural rhetoric is, again, clear: the U.S. Army does not attack civilians, because doing so is wrong, and the American military as depicted in *America's Army* does not do wrong.

Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare

Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare has been one of the most important titles in the video game industry for the past decade. Originally released in November 2007, the game's publisher, Activision, told its investors that the game was a "blockbuster" that had been the year's second-best selling game and amassed over 9 million unit sales within three months of its release (Activision Blizzard, 2008). The original *Call of Duty*, released in 2003, was a World War II-themed first-person shooter that was the debut title of studio Infinity Ward that allowed the player to experience the war from the perspective of an American, British, and Russian soldier. The title has long placed a high emphasis on frantic pacing and a chaotic atmosphere. After several more games set in World War II, the fourth major entry in the series was the first to move beyond that conflict and into the realm of proleptic fiction.

Modern Warfare is set in the year 2011. The plot begins with the player assuming control of British Special Air Service Sergeant "Soap" MacTavish, who, along with his team and his commander, Captain Price, attempt to recover a Russian nuclear weapon from a frieghter, and are foiled when the ship is destroyed by Russian fighter jets. Meanwhile, in an unnamed Middle Eastern country, revolutionary leader Khaled Al-Asad publicly executes the country's president, completing a coup d'etat that prompts an American response. The SAS team returns to Russia to rescue an informant, Nikolai, who has been captured by the Ultranationalists, a revolutionary group seeking to return the Russian Federation to the glory days of the Soviet Union. Afterward, the player, as American marine Sergeant Paul Jackson, joins an American invasion of the Middle Eastern country intended to dethrone Al-Asad; after days of fighting, Al-Asad detonates a

nuclear weapon in the country's capital, killing 30,000 American soldiers including Jackson. The SAS team tracks down and captures Al-Asad in Russia, where they learn that he had been working with Ultranationalist leader Imran Zakhaev. After a flashback in which Captain Price recounts his nearly-successful attempt to assassinate Zakhaev in Pripyat fifteen years earlier, the team attempts to capture Zakhaev's son for questioning, failing only because the son opts to commit suicide rather than accept capture. In retaliation, Zakhaev captures a Russian missile field and fires eight warheads at major U.S. cities; the SAS team is narrowly able to recapture the base and cancel the attack. Almost every member of the SAS team is killed in the escape, but Soap is ultimately able to kill Zakhaev and survive until Nikolai rescues him.

The game is a first-person shooter, controlled from a first-person perspective from which the player can move, shoot, crouch, crawl, throw grenades, make melee attacks, and so forth. When gunfire, explosions, or other hazards damage the player character, the screen begins to turn red and an audio cue warns the player that they are near death. If the player is able to find a place to take cover and wait for a few seconds, they will recover and be able to continue to play the game normally, as if they had never been damaged; if they are damaged further, the character dies, a war-related quotation is displayed, and the player is required to restart the level from a checkpoint. Because characters, including the player character, can easily be killed with a single grenade or a couple of shots to the head or chest, making effective use of cover and outmaneuvering the enemy is an important part of the game. The player can carry two weapons at a time, and has the option of exchanging the guns they're carrying with ones they find in the field if they feel that the new weapon is of more use or if they run out of ammunition; different guns are

suited to different situations, promoting careful thought about what sorts of engagements are likely to be ahead and what the most appropriate combination of weapons is. The game's win-state is achieved by completing objectives, which are fed to the player at the beginning of missions and as they progress; objectives often include reaching a point controlled by the enemy, defending a point from an enemy onslaught, or capturing an important person or object. In multiplayer mode, the objectives often include killing the opposing team's players a set number of times, seizing and defending control points, and destroying a special object held by the opposing team.

An apt example of both Bogost's (2008) procedural rhetoric and Frasca's (2003) observation that ludus-structured games argue for the desirability of the conditions of the win-state is the emphasis that the game places on attacking. Most first-person shooter video games present a single-player experience in which the player progresses through a linear series of engagements that always start in the same state: the player will encounter an area with a pre-determined set and number of enemies, engage with them in the manner of their choosing, and continue to the next challenge or engagement once the enemies have been defeated. *Modern Warfare* is different: for most of the game, the player is attacking enemy-held areas, but rather than engaging a pre-determined number and set of enemies, the game 'spawns' new enemies until the player is able to trigger a change that will stop this process, usually by moving the character past enemy lines.

An example of this is in the early level "War Pig," in which the player, Sergeant Jackson, is positioned in the unnamed Middle Eastern country and must join with the rest of his squad to escort a tank through a series of enemy-controlled streets in which the tank is vulnerable to enemy rocket fire. An early segment of the level has the player, the

player's squad, and the tank at one end of a narrow lane lined with multi-story enemy-controlled buildings; the objective is to escort the tank safely down the street to the next intersection. The challenge in this encounter is not to eliminate the enemies before moving forward; if the player attempts that strategy, new enemies will continue to "spawn" in the back areas of the buildings and rush out to meet the player infinitely, eventually overwhelming them. The only way to stop the game from creating new enemies is to advance down the street and through the buildings, gaining control of their back rooms. In other words, the only way to progress is to aggressively push forward as quickly as possible.

Bogost (2008) writes that procedural rhetoric makes arguments about real-world phenomena by representing them in a particular way through the rules of the game. In this case, the argument being made is that victory is more or less inevitable for the more aggressive force. If this is the case, there are some remarkable real-world implications: the United States should not hesitate to bring its considerable military power to bear on foreign threats, encouraging the use of military force to deal with new problems such as instability in Libya; wars that have dragged on should be ended by a dramatic increase in force, as in the Iraq/Afghanistan "surge" strategies; and the United States should make investments in technologies that increase their attacking capabilities, such as armed and unmanned aerial drones or next-generation fighter jets. Most fundamentally, the exaggeration of the importance of aggressive action in war downplays the possibility of non-violent solutions or of refusing to become involved in foreign entanglements.

Aside from its ludological aspects, *Modern Warfare*'s narratological properties are ideologically charged in profound ways. One especially key aspect of the narrative is

that nearly all of the challenges and threats presented to Western powers in the course of the story are solved by sending a small, covert team into the area to destroy the threat as secretively as possible. In the opening credits of the game, the player controls the president of the unnamed country as he is roughly tossed into the back seat of a car, driven through a town in which civilians are fleeing and revolutionary fighters are staging mass executions. Eventually, the president is dragged out of the car for a televised execution at the hands of Al-Asad. In response, the United States commits to a full-scale Iraq-style invasion of the country, eventually leading to 30,000 American deaths in a nuclear blast. By contrast, the secretive, small-scale actions undertaken in the levels where the player controls a SAS member are nearly always successful: a four-man squad is able to rescue a double-agent from a safehouse amid an intense firefight between Russian Ultranationalists and Loyalists; following the nuclear detonation, the SAS is able to locate the safehouse where Al-Asad is hiding, capture him, and discover the identity of the Ultranationalist leader; in Captain Price's Pripyat flashback, a two-man team attempts to assassinate Zakhaev while he meets with hundreds of Russian soldiers, successfully surviving the attempt and wounding the target; another SAS team manages to locate and corner Zakhaev's son, who only avoids capture by committing suicide; and the team ultimately assaults a nuclear missile field captured by Ultranationalists, successfully fighting through hundreds of soldiers and issuing recall codes for eight nuclear warheads, even managing to kill Zakhaev in the process.

One implication of this story is that large-scale warfare cannot solve every problem. This conclusion is not an endorsement of peace, however — it is an endorsement of making aggressive action secretive and precise. The conflict in *Modern*

Warfare is not won with a large-scale public military effort like those of World War Two or the Iraq War, in other words; it is won by small teams secretly and illegally bringing the fight to the enemy without the knowledge or approval of the public. *Modern Warfare* does not advocate large-scale war; it advocates wars that can be denied, that have a low political cost associated with them, and that are removed from the arena of public and political debate. John Thompson (1990) would note that in the most successful strategy employed by the heroes in the game, control over the conflict is conferred exclusively upon powerful agents such as the colonels and generals in charge of the SAS, as well as their civilian political commanders. In the two-level Chernobyl flashback, for instance, the player's character, Captain Price, introduces the level by observing that "it was the first time that our government had authorized an assassination order since the Second World War." The attempt is very nearly successful, and if it had managed to eliminate Zakhaev, almost all of the conflict that the game depicts could have been avoided, indicating that such an action on the part of the government was justified. There is no critical examination of the fact that complete control over this sort of aggressive foreign action is undemocratically conferred upon a few powerful government ministers and their military subordinates, or any reference to the sordid history of such practices, such as the CIA actions that allowed the current governments of Iran and Venezuela to take over.

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 is the first direct sequel in the *Call of Duty* franchise. Even before its release, it was widely expected to become one of the best-selling games of all time, and it delivered on the promise: after selling 4.7 million units (worth $310

million) in its first 24 hours of release, qualifying it as the single most lucrative entertainment release in any medium up to that point in history (Cork, 2009), *Modern Warfare 2* went on to amass over $1 billion worth of sales within three months of its release (Activision Blizzard, 2010). While the critical response to the game was more muted than the response to its predecessor, *Modern Warfare 2* quickly became the dominant title within the games industry, although the launch of *Call of Duty: Black Ops* was a full $50 million more lucrative than *Modern Warfare 2* (CBC News, 2010). *Modern Warfare 3* is currently slated for release this November; all indications are that it, too, will outperform the previous entries in the franchise.

Modern Warfare 2 picks up the story five years after the conclusion of the previous game. Despite the victory over the Ultranationalists, the Russian Federation has succumbed to the rebels and begun to venerate Zakhaev as a martyr. One of Zakhaev's lieutenants, Vladamir Markarov, has begun a campaign of terrorism against Europe. American Lieutenant General Shepherd draws a player character, Joseph Allen, into the secretive CIA Task Force 141, ordering him to go undercover and infiltrate Makarov's terrorist organization; after Allen participates in a massacre of civilians at Zakhaev International Airport in Moscow, however, Makarov reveals that he was aware of Allen's true identity and kills him, leaving his body to be found by Russian authorities, provoking Russia into declaring war against the United States. Meanwhile, Soap MacTavish, as well as newcomer Roach Sanderson, have also joined Task Force 141; while the player controls American ranger James Ramierez as he attempts to defend Virginia and Washington, D.C. from the Russian invasion, Task Force 141 searches the globe for evidence that will implicate Makarov in the airport massacre. Their investigation

eventually brings them to a former Soviet gulag, where they rescue Captain Price, who eventually hijacks a nuclear submarine and detonates a warhead in the atmosphere above Washington, D.C., creating an EMP pulse that cripples the invading force, allowing American forces to re-capture the capitol. Task Force 141 attempts to capture Makarov at two safe houses, but after they miss their target, General Shepherd betrays his soldiers, killing every 141 operative except for MacTavish and Price, who manage to escape. The two survivors contact Makarov and offer to kill Shepherd for him, and are directed to a base in Afghanistan; after a chase, the pair manage to take their revenge, but Makarov remains at large and MacTavish and Price are now fugitives.

The gameplay and core game mechanics of *Modern Warfare 2* are nearly identical to those of its predecessor. One key change is the emphasis on 'last stand' mode. In the multiplayer element of the game, a player that is killed will sometimes enter this mode, in which they can only move by crawling slowly, and can only use a pistol; a player in this mode is very easy to kill, but is also able to attack other players nearby, making them a continued threat. In the single-player element of the game, the player is unable to enter this mode except at pre-determined points in the plot, but enemies are able to enter it quite regularly, and do so much more often than they did in *Modern Warfare*. In terms of the game-logic, this addition is another thing for the player to worry about — enemies that appear dispatched can return as a threat in just a few seconds, and as a result, it's advisable to continue to shoot an enemy not merely until they fall down, but until they stop moving entirely.

This gameplay element is a piece of procedural rhetoric that, similar to the emphasis on always pressing forward (an element that is, if anything, more foregrounded

in this game than in its predecessor), also functions as an endorsement of aggression. The simple implication is that mercy is a liability. There are only two points in *Modern Warfare 2* in which it is possible to take prisoners: the first is in a Brazilian favela where the player is required to shoot a fleeing enemy in the leg so he can be caught and interrogated, and the second occurs later in the same level, when the information supplied by the first foe leads the player to his boss, one of Makarov's cronies. With these two exceptions, every group of enemies in the entire game will fight the player to the last man — not one will surrender, even when faced with a clearly superior force, and even when that force has already annihilated that character's allies. Unless they are retreating, the U.S. Army and the CIA in this game do not leave any enemy soldiers alive; those who are merely wounded quickly become threats once again through last stand mode, leaving the player and his allies with no choice but to cut them down. The taking of prisoners and treatment of enemy wounded are described by Michael Walzer (2006) as important parts of the war convention, but in the world depicted by *Modern Warfare 2*, compassion and mercy are impossible. The victorious side is not the one that manages to disable the other, but the one that manages to annihilate every member of its opposition.

Modern Warfare 2 is also somewhat unique due to its inclusion of innocent civilians, a very rare phenomenon in war-themed video games. A game like *Grand Theft Auto*, set in a major urban city, may have dozens of civilians on the screen at any given time, but *Modern Warfare 2* is the first *Call of Duty* game to include them, and almost any other game in which the player takes on the role of a solider does so in a zone populated solely by combatants. There are two levels in *Modern Warfare 2* that feature civilians: the first is 'No Russian,' the infamous level in which the player takes on the

role of an undercover Joseph Allen as he stalks through a Russian airport and guns down dozens of unarmed civilians; the second is 'Takedown,' in which the player, as Task Force 141 operative "Roach" Sanderson, pursues a fleeing man through a Rio de Janerio favela, often while the inhabitants of the slum run terrified through the battlefield, threatening to become caught in the crossfire. In 'No Russian,' there is no penalty for attacking civilians; the implication of the game's plot is that Allen participates in the massacre, even though the game doesn't punish the player for refusing to fire. In 'Takedown,' however, the game will end in a failure-state if the player kills a civilian — instead of the screen getting covered in blood and the player character falling over, as happens in the usual game fail-state (that is, the death of the player character), the game simply goes out of focus, and text on the screen appears, saying "you shot a civilian. Watch your fire!" before returning the player to the previous checkpoint.

'No Russian' is an interesting and confusing narratological artifact. The game doesn't make any clear value judgment on the player's actions: before the massacre begins, Shepherd tells the player that they will lose a part of their soul, but their actions will ultimately serve a greater good. The game never explains how this is the case, unless Shepherd's ultimate betrayal can be seen as an explanation that he was lying to the player. The game refers to the massacre as an act of evil, but that does not change the fact that it places a machine gun in the hands of the player and directs them to use it to murder dozens of innocent, unarmed people. Ultimately, it seems most likely that the level was not included in order to make any point about terrorism or violence against innocents; instead, 'No Russian' is an attempt to duplicate the shocking originality of the *Modern Warfare* sequence in which the player controls a greviously injured American soldier as

he crawls through the wreckage of a helicopter and into a street, eventually succumbing to his injuries. 'No Russian' isn't an attempt at political commentary, in other words; it is an attempt to shock the player, and perhaps to generate lucrative controversy around the game. The ideological result, however, is a level in which the player participates in a massacre and is offered no clear value judgment on their actions. The deaths in this level mean nothing; it is merely an illustration of faceless foreigners being gunned down. They are separated from the American civilians affected by the Russian invasion, the defense of whom is presented as an imperative, despite the fact that the game never exposes them to danger by depicting them in the in-game battlefield.

The treatment of civlians in 'Takedown,' by contrast, is a clear example of procedural rhetoric. The game is purporting to represent a realistic military operation, and one of the ways to trigger the game's fail-state is by killing a single civilian. The implication is that in the real world, Western military units would consider the death of a single civilian to constitute a failure of their mission. Well-publicized contemporary military actions show us that this is not true: the campaign of Predator drone attacks on Al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders located along the Afghan-Pakistani border, which was started by the Bush administration and dramatically expanded under Obama's leadership, regularly and knowingly results in the deaths of civilian noncombatants. Further, Brian Glyn Williams (2010) cites many examples in which hellfire missiles were used in assassination attempts that killed the wives, children, and innocent family and associates of Taliban and Al-Qaeda leaders, often missing their targets entirely. The idea that American forces avoid harming civilians at all cost is a clear example of Thompson's

(1990) “meaning in the service of power” — it’s an implication that is inaccurate, but which serves to justify American military actions generally.

Medal of Honor

Medal of Honor, released in October 2010, is a first-person shooter developed by Danger Close and DICE and published by EA Games. The game represented an early step in EA’s effort to create a game that could eventually overtake the *Call of Duty* franchise’s financial dominance of the video game market. *Medal of Honor* was the second game with that title; the original was a World War II-themed first-person shooter released in 1999 that spawned a long and lucrative series of similar games. In recent years, the series had lost its reputation for quality, and the new *Medal of Honor* was therefore an attempt to ‘reboot’ the series for the modern age. The World War II theme was jettisoned entirely, and the game instead places the player in the boots of a series of soldiers participating in Operation Anaconda in the early months of the 2001 American invasion of Afghanistan. Upon its release, the game was generally dismissed as a decent but unambitious *Call of Duty* imitator, and it is true that the gameplay is very similar to that of the *Modern Warfare* series; the controls for both games are identical with the sole exception of the left bumper button, which throws a special grenade in *Modern Warfare* but allows the player to lean and peek around corners in *Medal of Honor*. Another one of the most notable changes is that while the player can only carry two weapons in *Modern Warfare*, they can carry two weapons plus a sidearm in *Medal of Honor.*

What makes *Medal of Honor* interesting for this project is its setting — it purports to provide a realistic depiction of a real-life modern conflict, including at least a few

sequences based upon incidents that actually occurred. The single-player campaign begins in the first days of the invasion, when a Navy SEAL codenamed Rabbit, along with his squad, are ambushed while trying to locate an informant, ultimately discovering that the Shah-i-Kot valley contains several times the enemy force that army intelligence previously believed. After Rabbit and his team capture the Bagram airfield and establish a forward base for American forces, their stateside commander, General Flagg, asserts that he does not trust Rabbit's new intelligence and orders a force of rangers to attack the valley within 24 hours. The player then takes on the role of Delta Force sniper Deuce, who travels behind enemy lines destroying targets, allowing a small force to be sent into the valley early, but General Flagg inadvertently orders a gunship to open fire on this force, necessitating their retreat. The player then moves to take control of army ranger Dante Adams, who joins the attack on the valley, but is immediately set upon by a superior force of Taliban fighters. The rangers are only saved by a pair of helicopter gunships arriving at the last moment before Adams' team is overrun. The game returns to control of Rabbit, whose team is moving throughout the valley and destroying enemy targets; eventually, the team is ambushed, and although Rabbit and one other soldier are able to escape via helicopter, two other soldiers are left behind. Contravening orders from General Flagg, Adams' team is placed on the same mountain to rescue the missing soldiers, and although most of the missing soldiers are successfully rescued, Rabbit is captured and mortally wounded before he can be evacuated.

The narrative in *Medal of Honor* is an excellent example of Patrick Crogan's (2003) 'ergodic time,' which he says affords the player a feeling of agency over history. *Medal of Honor* certainly purports to represent history; it reproduces several actual

battles from the early weeks of the Afghanistan invasion, including the assault and capture of the infamous Bagram airbase, the assault on the Shah-i-Kot Valley, and the Battle of Takur Ghar. The game's depictions of these battles are very distinct from their real-world counterparts, however, in both ludological and narratological terms. The game's depiction of combat is highly sanitized: bodies bleed when they are shot, but aside from some blood splattered on their clothing, they do not show any visible wounds. Even a character that is hit point-blank with a rocket will simply be tossed back from the explosion and land, intact but dead, with small patches of blood staining their body. The representation of civilians — at least 1,000 of whom were killed as a result of the early stages of the real invasion (Conetta, 2002) — is limited to a single shepherd, who is quietly knocked unconscious by one of the player's allies; the dozens of villages and the town that are visited through the campaign are all deserted save for Taliban fighters and enemy mercenaries. The game's setting does indeed provide the player with a sense of agency over history, but the history that it provides is an inaccurate one that either removes those aspects that reflect poorly on the American military entirely (such as with the absence of civilians) or depicts them as the fault of an individual rather than faults in the system (such as when General Flagg unwittingly orders an air strike on an American convoy).

The level in which the player assists in capturing the Bagram airbase is particularly interesting. The player rides into the battle in a pickup truck, fights their way to a control tower on foot, and once the tower is captured, calls in air strikes and single-handedly destroys Taliban reinforcements who are mounting a counter-attack with infantry, technicals, and tanks. The procedural rhetoric in this sequence is quite unique:

the player is physically separated from the actual combat by a long distance, and is completely safe from the Taliban advance. The sequence has the player looking through a pair of binoculars and "painting" targets for artillery and gunship strikes; the mission will be successful so long as the player is able to prevent enemy vehicles from getting too close to friendly forces, which is a simple task, given the power of the player's weapons. The procedurality of this sequence is, in effect, arguing that the advanced technologies that the American military has access to make it nigh-invulnerable to less-advanced armies such as the Taliban. The player, and by extension the American soldier, is effectively invulnerable when in cover, but is able to call upon American military technology to attack the enemy wherever they can be found. This can be seen as an endorsement of high spending on military research and development and weapons procurement, two very important areas of interaction between government and industry in the United States.

A final noteworthy point in this game is its ending. After defying General Flagg's orders and flying into enemy territory in an attempt to rescue the two missing soldiers, Rabbit's helicopter is hit by an enemy RPG, and he is thrown to the ground; as Adams, the player is inserted into the battle zone, he attempts to find the missing soldiers, eventually locating them as prisoners. The player's point of view shifts to Rabbit, who slowly succumbs to his injuries while waiting for evacuation. Once the final shot has faded to black, the following text appears on the screen:

> To our brothers, past and present —

This is a dedication to America's servicemen. A dedication to the debt we owe to Warriors lost and to all of our military forces who continue to defend freedom around the world. Men and women who have honorably served throughout our nation's history — who stood and continue to stand fast in the face of a determined enemy and defeat them with unwavering discipline.

Most Americans do not know what our Special Operations Forces community experience. They do not know what these Warriors endure in combat, nor do they understand the selflessness and love of the brothers beside them. Men within this community bring the fight to the enemy, engage aggressively and stand their ground.

Born unto a different cloth, these men could have chosen a life of prosperity and chased every opportunity afforded by our great nation. Giving life as they live it, they choose to leave these pursuits behind and devote themselves instead to a higher calling, living with indomitable purpose, by simple truths — Brotherhood. Honor. Sacrifice. Words molded onto their character, exemplified by their actions.

It is their final hour we celebrate — our fallen brothers who shine a light on the greatest attributes of dedicated men. With their sacrifice, legends are born and will live as examples to inspire the heroes that will lead our nation to victory in the years ahead; making our founding fathers proud and acting as a promise to America's next generation.

This is to our fallen brothers. You will be remembered in our community's history as the greatest heroes. As men who shouldered our nation's burdens, you

> will remain as beacons for our heroic ideals. Taught to be proud and unbending in failure and humble in success, there are no greater examples for which this nation stands for and of which this nation is built from — the ideal of service to country and to others.
>
> To our community and all who wear the uniform — thank you for your service to the nation.
>
> And, to those in this hour who are in the fight and keep our enemies awake at night.

This ending scrawl is very dense with ideological content. It is a perfect example of mainstream American war memory as described by Erika Doss (2008): it uncritically venerates all soldiers, especially the dead, as heroes, but makes no criticism of the violence that caused the deaths or of the interests that motivated the conflict. Especially noteworthy is the capitalization of the word "Warrior": not only are the sacrifices of our soldiers to be admired, but the very occupation of making war is to be venerated. The soldiers described here "defend freedom" and "lead our nation to victory"; any criticism of them or of their task is unjustifiable, because "most Americans do not know what our Special Operations Forces community experience." The American military is fetishized to the point of absurdity — the people referred to in this passage are "born unto a different cloth," "shine a light on the greatest attributes of dedicated men," and "make our founding fathers proud"; they are, in other words, almost superhuman.

Summary and conclusion

To summarize, this chapter has offered a case study of four games in order to determine how ideology is present in their depictions of war and political violence. In each, I have applied several of the instruments and phenomena detailed in the previous chapter, taking care to ensure that each analysis approaches the game from both a narratological and ludological perspective.

What has been revealed is a collection of narrative and procedural rhetoric that is overwhelmingly pro-war and pro-military. To varying degrees, each of these games claim to offer a realistic approximation of real-world combat, but this analysis has determined that in truth, each presents a highly sanitized and simplified depiction of gun violence that make insinuations which excuse and obscure real-world atrocities. These games all simplify both the causes of political violence and the violence itself, removing a great deal of the moral nuance that permeates all of politics and violence in the real world.

The most glaring omission in this research is the role of the audience. Regardless of how I interpret the ideological information presented in these games, I cannot predict how audiences will interpret or interact with it; future research should therefore focus on potential correlations between video game play and attitudes toward political violence and related issues such as military spending. Additionally, a more focused case study on a single game would be especially instructive; with only a few pages to devote to each game being analyzed, I have omitted a great deal of important ideological information in each of these games, and there is a great deal more ideological meaning to be found in them.

Despite this, what this research has revealed is a set of war-themed games that uncritically sell and support American military adventurism, including wars that are not fictional, even if they are unpopular. The sum of this research is a picture of a video game industry that actively participates in the ideological machine that justifies war and political violence by removing its moral difficulties.

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