Digitally Shaping Minds: The Politics of American Empire in Video Games

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> We are the most powerful military force in the history of man. Every fight is our fight. Because what happens over here, matters over there. We don't get to sit one out. Learning to use the tools of modern warfare is the difference between the prospering of your people, and utter destruction. We can't give you freedom. But we can give you the know-how to acquire it. And that, my friends, is worth more than a whole army base of steel. Sure it matters who's got the biggest stick, but it matters a helluva lot more who's swinging it. This is a time for heroes. A time for legends. History is written by the victors. Let's get to work.[1]

In 2020, it may still surprise most Americans to learn that this familiar mantra was repeated not by a politician, a commentator, or even on a TV show like *House of Cards*, but rather by a video game character. Those same people might wonder when and how such political boasts became part of what is now a vast repertoire of gaming possibilities. The American War on Terror was a catalyst for renewed large scale US military activity around the globe at the start of the 21st century. Considering the expansive imaginary worlds that have arisen since the simple and pixelated early days of games such as *Pong* and *Missile Command* to today's flirtations with virtual reality gaming, it is pertinent to wonder about the nature of politics in a pop-culture element that immerses its consumers by turning them into participants in virtual events at the intersection of imagination and perception.[2] This article seeks to provide a limited answer to a legitimate question: what are the politics of American empire present in

[1] *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, dir. by Jason West (Activision, 2009). The character General Shepard is describing American military power and position in the 21st century.

[2] *Missile Command*, designed by Dave Theurer (Atari, 1980); *Pong*, designed by Allan Alcorn (Atari, 1972).

video game titles of the turn of the 21st century? It utilizes studies pertaining to video games as an American cultural phenomenon that gained popularity in the 1980s, in combination with studies dealing with American militarism of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, as well as Orientalism and Modernization Theory within US foreign relations.[3] Within this historical framework, a close analysis of video games of the 1990s through early 2010s, particularly those with military and science fiction plots, reveals themes of patriotism, modernity, race, female roles, and masculinity amid story lines that convey messages about the nature of American power and position in the global hierarchy of the mid-20th through early 21st centuries. These sociocultural aspects of a source of popular recreation contribute to a generational transmission of values associated with the Cold War, Orientalism, and Modernization Theory, betraying underlying apprehensions and conceits about American Exceptionalism (a stand-in term for modern American global empire comprised partly of virtual space).[4] The following sections contain discussions regarding issues that garnered the attention of non-gamers during the 1990s,

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[3] Matthew Kapell and Andrew B.R. Elliott, *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013); Andrew J Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War* (Cary: Oxford University Press, 2014); Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East Since 1945*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Michael E. Bonine, Abbas Amanat, and Michael Ezekiel Gasper, *Is There a Middle East?: The Evolution of a Geopolitical Concept* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012); Ian Almond, *The New Orientalists: Postmodern Representations of Islam from Foucault to Baudrillard* (London: Tauris, 2010).

[4] Modernization Theory refers to an ideological construct that promoted and justified the spread of American values through military activity and infrastructure projects carried out in the so-called Third World nations during the Cold War period. See Michael Adas, *Dominance by Design: Technological Imperatives and America's Civilizing Mission* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), and Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World America's Cold War Battle against Poverty in Asia* (Harvard University Press, 2010). Orientalism is understood here as a largely academically discredited mode of perceiving the Orient and ultimately all those places and peoples not considered to be of the amorphous West. It originates from a set of knowledge derived from ancient texts which European studiers and interested parties used to make inferences about non-Christian lands.

as well as of the characteristics of various America-centered games.

What Is and What Is Not in Video Games

Like movies and anything else, there is a moral economy of what is and what is not permitted in video games.[5] That is to say that within societies, populations collectively determine what sort of behavior is and is not permissible in a given time and place, and under what moral reasoning. Some things are shockingly rendered in detail, while others are out of bounds or unthinkable. At least initially, some of the most controversial titles, such as *Doom* and *Duke Nukem*, appeared primarily on PC, as opposed to early game consoles like *Nintendo* and *Atari*.[6] These titles caused objections among 90s parents unaccustomed to the new phenomenon of readily-available, crudely-identifiable and interactive-animated violence featuring world-constructing details like bloody gore and concepts like dismemberment. While *Doom* was noted for its bloody combat against demonic hordes, *Duke Nukem* was at least as violent, with animated sequences such as decapitating an alien monster and defecating down its neck while reading a conspicuously-appearing newspaper.[7]

Such virtual activities and imagery fell into place quite well with the American culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s. Today, we have advisory warnings such as those used for movies placed on music as well as on video games. In the case of games, the level of appropriateness for children has been determined by

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[5] George T. Diaz, *Border Contraband: A History of Smuggling Across the Rio Grande* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), explains the concept of moral economies in relation to what was permissible behavior for different groups on the U.S./Mexico border.

[6] *Doom II*, dir. by Sandy Petersen (GT Interactive Software, 1994); *Duke Nukem 3D*, designed by Allen H. Blum III and Richard Gray (FormGen, 1996). More complicated games with more controversial material may primarily or at least initially release for computer rather than console usage, due both to technological differences in the machinery as well as that computers are multi-purpose machines and are not marketed in manners specifically aimed at child consumers. Additionally, computers are generally far more expensive to buy and maintain, and their usage is also more likely to be monitored by vigilant parents than is that of console users.

[7] Radioactive Grandpa, "Duke Nukem 3D - End of Episode 2," YouTube video, 0:56, April 8, 2008, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cgRRweh1jsg.

the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) since its establishment in 1994.[8] This is considered here to be a continuation of a trend exemplified nine years earlier. The year 1985 saw the formation of the Parent's Music Resource Center (PMRC), notably championed by future Democratic Vice President Al Gore's wife Tipper Gore and Susan Baker, the wife of James Baker, the Republican Chief of Staff under Ronald Reagan. The purpose of the PMRC was to combat what its proponents saw as degenerate musical content dealing with cursing, explicitly sexual or violent language, and, of course, the occult.[9] Which youths were the subject of worry and why is certainly relevant to the topic of culture wars, but it is sufficient to say here that on the surface the PMRC was taking on parental concerns that have often been the source of anxiety in the United States.

Video games joined this melee of values in December of 1993, when *C-SPAN* broadcasted a sputtering, if well-intentioned government hearing prompted by the extreme violence present in the fatality sequences of *Mortal Kombat*. The hearing was headed by Senators Joseph Lieberman and Herbert Kohl and included teachers and psychologists, all of whom were alarmed at what they saw as an imminent threat to the social development of American youth. Aside from extreme violence, topics minorly addressed were the abuse of women, racist and sexist tropes, general criminality, insufficient educational content, and insufficient game variety for female interest.[10] These concerns were expressed haphazardly and barely scratched the surface of what the participants of the hearing said they were upset about. For example, a distinction was made between the older, more cartoon-like violence of the original Nintendo versus that of games such as *Mortal Kombat* on the Sega Genesis and Super Nintendo. Despite

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[8] "Our History", ESRB, https://www.esrb.org/history/ (Accessed August 16, 2019). The previous year, TV news reports highlighted outrage over the extreme violence displayed in the competitive hand-to-hand combat game *Mortal Kombat*, resulting in government interest in the game.

[9] "PMRC's 'Filthy 15': Where Are They Now?" *Rolling Stone*, Penske Corporation, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/pmrcs-filthy-15-where-are-they-now-60601/ (Accessed August 16, 2019).

[10] "Video Game Violence" C-SPAN video, 2:49:48, December 9, 1993, https://www.c-span.org/video/?52848-1/video-game-violence; *Mortal Kombat*, designed by Ed Boon and John Tobias (1992, Midway).

the fact that all three consoles had side-scrolling Beat-'Em-Up style games with simulated blood and street violence similar to 1980s martial-arts films, Nintendo was viewed as exhibiting less violent games partly because it boasted a set of content standards for the games appearing on its platforms.[11] Violence was apparently more palatable with older graphics than in *Mortal Kombat*, even though one could fight martial arts gangs across all three mentioned consoles. Interestingly, the representatives of Nintendo and Sega of America were pit against each other at this hearing regarding values. The picture is one of game companies jockeying for moral and political high-ground, amid generational critics of the medium who did not fully grasp how it was intertwining itself with American society.

Political themes in video games broadened gradually over time as graphics technology improved and the increased capability for various forms of storytelling vastly expanded the gamer's experience beyond simple points accumulation and high-scores in games such as *Pac-Man*, *Millipede*, *Tetris*, and to some extent *Super Mario Bros.* and *Duck Hunt*.[12] However, except for critics who were perhaps opposed to the content of video games in general, most games did not meet with the level of specific

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[11] *Streets of Rage*, produced by Noriyoshi Ohba (Sega, 1991); *Final Fight*, produced by Yoshiki Okamoto (Capcom, 1989); *The Adventures of Bayou Billy*, directed by Kazuhiro Aoyama and Tsukasa Hiyoshi (Konami, 1988); *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, produced by Konami (Konami, 1989); *Double Dragon II: the Revenge*, designed by Yishihisa Kishimoto (Technōs Japan, 1988). The *Streets of Rage* and *Final Fight* series appeared on the 16-bit Sega Genesis and Super Nintendo, respectively. The original Nintendo also had side scrolling 8-bit games of this type, such as *Bayou Billy*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, and *Double Dragon II: The Revenge*, the last of which featured a small red flash indicating an impact from a thrown knife.

[12] *Pac-Man*, directed by Toru Iwatani (Namco, 1980); *Millipede*, designed by Ed Logg (Atari, 1982); *Tetris*, produced by Nintendo (Nintendo, 1989); *Super Mario Bros.*, produced by Shigeru Miyamoto (Nintendo, 1985); *Duck Hunt*, produced by Gunpei Yokoi (Nintendo, 1985); Kapell and Elliot, *Playing with the Past*, 279-297, 281. Kapell and Elliot explain that the game *Missile Command* was a manifestation of the Reagan-era debate over the legality and practical application of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) shield program known as Star Wars.

notoriety that characterized *Doom* and *Duke Nukem*'s reception.[13] For the most part, political themes were subdued in the background or went unnoticed as unproblematic in the majority of games that featured one fiction or another. Of course, most games did not exhibit political messages or problematic behavior that drew condemnation beyond that which saw video games as frivolous addendums to the idiot box. But all things are political when placed into the context of a society and its ideologies.

With the exception of publicly scrutinized games like *Mortal Kombat*, *Night Trap*, *Doom 2*, *Duke Nukem 3D*, and *GTA*, the politics involved in 90s titles taking place in a digital version of our world were not overwhelmingly about the mistreatment of women, violent or criminal behavior, gun usage, the occult, or other domestic hot-button issues that might be debated on evening news discussion panels.[14] Rather, a form of imperial politics was entering video games in ways that were unproblematic for the majority of consumers and critics. These politics were concerned with the public face of America, so to speak, in the same way that action movies and other aspects of culture have served to project an image of power and benevolence.[15] Accordingly, these politics

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[13] Kappell and Elliot, *Playing with the Past*, 3; *Grand Theft Auto III*, produced by Leslie Benzies (Rockstar Games, 2001). Immediately after September 11, 2001, *Grand Theft Auto 3* (*GTA3*) was objected to for its blatant criminal activity and because players of the early version of the game could fly a plane into buildings just as they could crash cars into anything in reach. Kapell and Elliot mention the game in the same context as violent games like *Doom* and *Quake*.

[14] *Night Trap*, directed by James Riley (Sega, 1992). *Night Trap* was another game that drew criticism at the 1993 hearing. The objective of the game is to prevent young women from being killed and drained of blood by blocky assailants who wield a drill device. While there was some confusion among those testifying as to whether the player was harming or saving the women from harm, the game was held up as an example of violence against women and female victimization. The designers of the game expressed outside the hearing that the player only encountered the assault on the women when the game was lost. Additionally, they explained the game was supposed to parody 1980s vampire films. The critics were unimpressed.

[15] Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), demonstrates the purposeful and spontaneous deployment of American culture for the cause of influencing people and events around the world during the Cold War. A

set bounds for what was and was not generally acceptable to portray regarding America's role in the world. These unwritten rules revolve around other problematic issues, such as how race and gender are addressed through cues, the ideologically constructed and racialized form of America's enemies, as well as the premise and assumptions of plots that pose Americans as saviors of helpless peoples and establishers of benevolent or practical world order.

Unlike movies, some of which can contain educational material, video games generally do not exhibit stories dealing overtly with racism. While independent and amateur programmers may produce low-budget, avant-garde games from their basement or during night shifts maintaining servers, there are no major video game titles in which the ultimate point of the game is to overthrow oppressive white southern plantation owners. Nor are there any historical cameos of individuals such as Nat Turner, in the same way Fidel Castro is more likely to make an appearance.[16] Lynchings and historical racial tensions are not likely to make their way into story lines as blatantly as they might in a movie like *Django Unchained*. Nor will players find much in the way of opportunity to reenact the Trail of Tears, the Armenian Genocide, the pogroms of the Russian Empire, or the Nazi-perpetrated Holocaust.[17]

When playing WWII games, it has been determined on some level that it would be problematic to allow players to drop the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, just as Germany finds it unacceptable to display the swastika rather than the Nazi

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variation of reactions to this trend can be seen from the German post-war perspective in Uta G. Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

[16] *Call of Duty: Black Ops II*, directed by Dave Anthony (Activision, 2012). This is not to say the Cuban revolutionary leader appears in a positive light. Fidel Castro appears as a villainous prop within sight range of the player in the game. The same game has players killing Angolans in support of apartheid South Africa.

[17] *Ethnic Cleansing*, developed by National Alliance (Resistance Records, 2002); *White Law*, developed by National Alliance (Resistance Records, 2003). To the extent that players can find these kinds of historical topics, they are often of low quality and produced by white supremacist organizations. Aside from utilizing outdated graphical tools, these organizations do not put the same time and resources as legitimate gaming studios into the making of what is essentially a recruiting and propaganda tool.

Cross in WWII games, and game developers at the start of the century removed the ability to fly a plane in *Grand Theft Auto* immediately after September 11, 2001. This is, at least in part, due to historical and political incongruencies that are painful or embarrassing. Historical details that are glossed over or not discussed in polite political conversation can be troublesome in a competitive industry where popular narratives contribute heavily to a game's reception. Games allowing players to take part in slave rebellions and sympathize with the sensibilities of real or fictional black slaves struggling against American social structures of power would muddy the waters in terms of the image of America that emphasizes values of justice, racial equality, and progressivism more generally. They would, in effect, challenge people who became aware of them to recall and debate anew actual American history that is less emphasized than contemporary political declarations that seek to establish legitimacy and suzerainty, as well as interfere in the sovereignty of other nations on the planet. Digitally lionizing figures such as Nat Turner, Pancho Villa, Ho Chi Mihn, and Che Guevara by allowing gamers to be or meet those characters as allies would betray that there are other perspectives and historical circumstances that contribute to the making of our world besides those placing the United States automatically on the right side of history, or at least in a kind of no-win situation where it was compelled to act harshly.[18]

Consider that, inconveniently for the American military, Vietnamese film makers also have the ability to make movies about our "Vietnam War," which they saw as a continuation of their war of independence from the weakening French Empire of the mid-20th century. In those movies, the United States does not feature favorably, with U.S. soldiers appearing as oafish, violent, and sexually predatory caricatures to be resisted and driven away. While these movies exist, there are no major games in which a

[18] Arthur M. Eckstein, *Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War, and the Rise of Rome* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). The idea of living in a tough neighborhood justifying militarism is visible in Eckstein's analysis of the Roman Republic that utilizes international systems theory. Today, the tough neighborhood analogy is commonly used to describe the geopolitical situation facing Israel, while the notion that the world is a dangerous place is often referred to by American politicians and commentators seeking militarized action in one place or another.

player takes part in the Tet Offensive or takes up the role of a survivor of Mei Lai trying to save civilians from American marauders as he or she escapes mass murder. This is due to video game programming being far less prevalent in a given country than is its national film industry. Lastly, images of extreme racial violence between Blacks and Whites could fan further racial tensions in a country that has never been post-racial, while images of dropping atomic bombs on allies can cause tensions between peoples that are supposedly as one pair of gripped hands of friendship. This latter point applies to the embarrassed German preference of the Nazi Cross over the swastika in WWII games when one considers the rehabilitation of the Germans that had to take place after WWII in order to bring them partially into the American zone of influence.[19] In this way, for reasons other than strictly playability, some things are politically and popularly inconvenient to view, participate in, and explain in video games because they go against particular world views that see America as truly the most desirable answer to global problems. This relates to what political premises and assumptions go into the story making that involves America and its enemies.

Politics of Imperials

With the end of WWII and the development of Cold War rivalries in most if not all arenas of international interaction involving the United States, there was a particular trend to images of Americanness that were disseminated to domestic and global audiences through cultural productions such as films and music that promoted American conceptualizations of openness, racial justice, equality, masculinity, and love. These productions served to showcase American good will and contributed to outshining the Soviets in global popularity.[20] However, another element of the

[19] The cross was a pre-Nazi symbol and was common among European military orders.

[20] Willian J. Lederer and Eugene Burdick, *The Ugly American* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1958); Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels*; Christopher Endy, *Cold War Holidays* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Adria L. Imada, *Aloha America: Hula Circuits Through the U.S. Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012). Of course, not all cultural productions posed the United States in a positive light. The dissident

wonderful world outlook painted by such professed values was the acceptably proliferating images of American militarism spreading to the entire world. Beginning in the late 1990s, military-themed shooting games joined this trend, gaining widespread popularity with a flaring of proliferation predictably occurring in the years immediately following September 11, 2001.[21]

The story lines and tropes found in a wide selection of military shooter games demonstrate perceptions about America's geopolitical interests as well as what aids and hinders those interests. Basically, the United States as a political entity appears as an arbiter of benevolent order, while enemies stand in the way of the good, the sane, and the practical. *Medal of Honor: Frontline*, released in 2002, was notable at the time of release for its opening mission, the D-Day landings that Steven Spielberg had so masterfully pioneered cinematically for the movie *Saving Private Ryan*.[22] Graphically bland farm boys and New Yorkers piled in landing crafts observe and vomit nervously while naval guns blast overhead and planes fly sporadically. Artillery and machine-gun fire easily dispatch the poor, doomed individuals placed in front of those who survive. As the captain gives his orders to American soldiers with Italian, Jewish, and Polish last names amid the Mill-



Figure 1 – Screenshot from *Medal of Honor: Frontline* D-Day Opening Mission. 2002. Alchetron. Accessed March 22, 2021. The iconic storming of the Normandy beach in Medal of Honor: Frontline, allows players to digitally experience the urgency of the largest amphibious landing of World War II.

film director Oliver Stone famously depicted the darker side of the American effort in Vietnam in *Platoon*, and there was also the acknowledged notion of "The Ugly American." Additionally, the U.S. military has long been visible in what has been described as the military tourism complex in locations including Hawaii, Japan, Vietnam, Korea, France, and Germany. Part of this dynamic has been the promotion of military prostitution in various places.

[21] The use of "predictably" stems from the perspective put forth by Andrew Bacevich's work. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism.*

[22] *Medal of Honor: Frontline*, produced by Rick Kane (EA, 2002); *Saving Private Ryan*, directed by Steven Spielberg (Paramount, 1998).

ers and Pattersons, the craft is shattered by a shell that sends young men flailing into the ocean waters. Men sink and drown, gunfire pierces the water, and blood trails upward in spurts or strings. The player is one of the fortunate ones who reaches the shore and gets to gamble on life for a longer period. The dire sacrifice of the great generation is presented at this early point in the game, and the player gets to partially experience and participate in that past perspective. In the end, players could encounter what Americans have groomed themselves to feel about their place in the world since the war's end in 1945. Namely, that Americans brought peace and order to Europe, delivering it from Nazi occupation and its two-thousand-year history of division and warfare.[23] Like the body of Cyrus carried by Alexander, Americans have carried that trophy mantle to legitimize and justify their assumption of world leadership after WWII. In this way, WWII games from the turn of the 21st century contribute to the American cultural matrix that informs Americans as to what their significance to world affairs is.

The Cold War and 90s Transition to…

Games that take place in the Cold War are closely tied with narratives about how and why America takes armed action around the world. *Operation Flashpoint: Cold War Crisis* features a fictional and secret limited conflict that unfolds in 1985 over the course of several days between the United States and the USSR on a pair of islands in the North Sea.[24] Aside from Cold War-era banter and the planning of battles, topics of dialogue are largely about how bad the Russians are or the need for American presence and action.[25] The dictatorial qualities of the Soviet state are demonstrated through the predetermined verdict and execution of a Soviet commander who fails to defend a location against the player, as well as in the summary execution of the primary

[23] The introductory scene to the game starts with General Dwight D. Eisenhower's 1944 D-Day statement to soldiers, sailors, and airmen.
[24] *Operation Flashpoint: Cold War Crisis*, directed by Marek Španěl (Codemasters, 2001). In reality, this region was important to the USSR in terms of its oil resources.
[25] The player is told that the United States is the only NATO force in the area.

antagonist's assistant and possible love interest, Angelina.[26] Additionally, the presence of Soviet troops is clearly an abusive one to the local population, as seen when a guerilla fighter details to a US soldier how his people have lost friends and family to the villainous Russians.[27]

US soldiers express concern for the islanders while repeating a benevolent or detached mantra that they do not wish to be where they are, that the fight is not theirs, and that they are doing everything they can to protect themselves and help the local population.[28] Thus they become reluctant world police. The locals desire American intervention but do not trust that the Americans will commit sufficiently to aiding them against the Soviets. Shortly after meeting the American soldier controlled by the player, the guerilla operative tells the American that he prays for him and for the island to be delivered from the Soviets. By the end of the game, when the radio reports on the resolved conflict, the guerilla is expressing gratitude for the American efforts, simultaneously stating that the world will never truly know what was done to save it from the Soviet threat. One can easily come away with the sense that the guerilla prayed to the god-like Americans for salvation. American military forces appear as benevolent defenders of humanity who enable an oblivious world to live in relative peace. The covert operations of the 1980s and 90s are

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[26] Angelina is the only woman in the story and does not play a major role in the game. Her significance is related to the presence of women in the actual Soviet military, both due to an ideological perspective on equality between the sexes, as well as because women earned greater legitimacy in Soviet military circles during WWII.

[27] The guerilla commander met by the player states that he and his compatriots wish for the Russians to leave, preferably in as many coffins as possible. The US soldier concurs, claiming at one point that the US will help drive the "Ruskies" "into the sea," a controversial statement that has a debated origin and is often attributed to Palestinians regarding Israeli settlers. Later, the guerilla bribes Soviet soldiers at a checkpoint with vodka, before telling his smuggled American friend that as children the Soviet soldiers received liquor in their baby bottles from their mothers.

[28] "Well Jesus George, there's ten thousand people in that town…!" A special forces operative at the start of the game exclaims this over the phone when he is informed of the Soviet attack. This, along with the concerns of soldiers who encounter the persecuted locals, as well as references to war crimes committed by the Soviets, represents the human rights concerns harbored by the game's characters.

presented as quietly and efficiently leading the fight against Communism's spread around the world. In this way, the fictional geopolitical incident in the game serves as an allegory for the US perspective on its role, and that of its enemies, in world affairs.

As expressed in such games, US military power stands in defense of justice, international law and order, and human rights. An in-game radio broadcast regarding Reagan-era anti-drug trade agreements represents the American commitment to these values in principle. This commitment is carried out by well-trained professionals using sophisticated technologies such as satellites, infrared aerial sensors for detecting heat signatures, and night-vision goggles.[29] In effective consequence, however, such agreements more closely represent the extension of American laws, security concerns, and jurisdictions over other sovereignties.

Where gender and race are concerned, the characters Angelina, Jennifer Mui, and Sam Rivers, a black tank operator, have various cultural and political portrayals that can be identified historically. Angelina is an example of a Soviet woman advancing under the Soviet system to a position of relative influence within the military. This is in line with Soviet ideals about equality of the sexes as well as with the reality that women did gain wider acceptance in the Soviet military. However, she is also in a romantic relationship with the rogue Soviet general, who discards and kills her. This brings to mind actual historical questions about the roles and treatment of women in the Soviet military, regarding sexual interactions in particular, which are questions the United States has had to contend with regarding its own military in recent years.[30] On the other hand, the Western female expert Jennifer Mui is a witty mercenary who is a highly trained, self-reliant soldier working in a world of American, Chinese, and Russian men, regularly impressing them with her ability to get things done when overlapping objectives and red tape bar official military

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[29] Various U.S. historians have written about American notions of professionalism, technology, and expertise in relation to people and lands the U.S. wishes to civilize. See for example Michael Adas, *Dominance by Design.*

[30] Artemy Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); Svetlana Alexievich, *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992).

action.[31] Born in Hong Kong, she is an Asian female warrior, but unlike the *dragon ladies* of Korea and Vietnam, Mui throws her lot in with the British armed forces and the Western "free world."[32] Unlike Angelina, who stands on the side of Soviet aggression, tyranny, and vague national greatness, Mui's professional success is not conditioned or contested. The same can be said for the less vocal but equally professional and lethal female soldiers controlled by the player in the *Ghost Recon* series against the front lines of North Korean and Mexican military units.[33]

Gender and race related themes of Orientalism, Modernization Theory, and the Cold War translate into these games through the irrational or nefarious temperament of America's foes, the modern westernized female versus the more circumscribed existence of Angelina, and the intention of the tech-savvy and professional US to restore and maintain order in *Operation Flashpoint*. Just as female characters are scripted in a manner that demonstrates variable modernities through varying levels of agency and professional expertise, race appears as a relative feather in a progressive cap or a peripheral other in which modernity can be imagined. Sam Rivers, the black tank operator in *Call of Duty,* represents a bit of American history that is not often emphasized, namely the less-touted contributions to American forces by non-white combatants during WWII. Symbolically, the snowy mission in which one plays a black soldier fighting Germans from a tank turret or on foot, provides a vehicle to imagine marginalized people in socially unintuitive contexts that yield alternate possibilities and outcomes. Displays such as Sam Rivers' broaden the gamer's historical and political frame of reference. Just as the first interracial and homosexual kisses on television broadened the scope of relationships viewed in programs and movies, Rivers' mission is part of an appetite for

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[31] *Mercenaries: Playground of Destruction*, designed by Robert Djordjevich (LucasArts, 2005).

[32] Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, *Radicals on the Road: Internationalism, Orientalism, and Feminism During the Vietnam Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), details the orientalist concept of Asian women as dragon ladies.

[33] *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon 2*, designed by Christian Allen (Ubisoft, 2004); *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter*, designed by Christian Allen (Ubisoft, 2006); *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2*, designed by Yann Masson and Christophe Pic (Ubisoft, 2007).

diverse, lesser-known stories from WWII that may someday include the Tuskegee Airmen, the Mexican soldiers of Squadron 201 who fought the Japanese under the Americans, or the black soldiers who fought under Charles de Gaulle.

…The War on Terror and 21st Century Empire

The voluntary War on Terror initiated after the September 11 attacks of 2001 was politically marketed in the United States as an endeavor against non-state terrorists such as Al-Qaeda, as well as state facilitators of non-state terrorism such as the Afghan government under the Taliban. The effective result of this ploy was the activation of US military force and claims of legitimate jurisdiction in territories in or affecting other sovereignties. What followed in the ensuing two decades includes the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, newly visible American torture, freshly soured relations with Iran, the unprecedented drug war in Mexico, dirty wars employing undeclared drone warfare in places like Somalia and Yemen, and the Syrian civil war, with its proxy dimensions and political posturing around human rights. In all these cases, concerns about terrorism variously defined blur the boundaries between state and non-state actors as well as legitimate and illegitimate political actors. This is reflected in the *Modern Warfare* sub-series of *Call of Duty*, which debuted in November of 2007 and was the first foray outside of WWII made by the series.[34] Notably, contemporary political issues relevant to the War on Terror, as well as adversarial nation-states that are positioned relatively outside of American hegemony, form the basis for the series' narrative.

During the course of the series' conflicts, US forces battle suicide bombers, Russian soldiers, and Middle Eastern troops wearing uniforms that resemble America's real-life military opponents in the Middle East, before narrowly averting a singular Russian launch of a multi-warhead nuclear missile. This launch, along with the detonation of the nuclear weapon against US forces in the Middle East, reflects American anxieties and claims regarding WMDs in the hands of terrorists, as well as nuclear programs that may be pursued by governments not aligned with the United

[34] *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, directed by Jason West (Activision, 2007).

States. These concerns are part of the motivation for the War on Terror and justify American military activity around the world, which is perceived domestically as vigilance. Coupled with the American leadership mantle over the amorphous West since WWII, these motivations form the basis for statements such as the ones made by *Modern Warfare 2*'s General Shepard at the onset of this article. Another of the general's insights expresses that, "Despite what the world may say we are not savages. We don't kill civilians, we use precision. There's an evil man hiding in these shadows, and we're going to bring him into the light. Once his face is revealed, we will write history, gentlemen." This sentiment is rendered hollow when one considers that in reality the *WikiLeaks* "Crazy Horse" video demonstrates the US absolutely does kill civilians and suggests that they can be killed quite precisely.[35] Furthermore, it is the military, realistically speaking, who makes the initial decision as to whether someone is a civilian or a combatant, not international law. Lastly, Shepard's statement has orientalist tones in that western heroes must expose eastern despots while writing the history that concerns the entire world,



Figure 2 - *Wikileaks Collateral Murder*, 2007 (released 2010), The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (left) and Screenshot from *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* Death From Above Mission, 2007, Call of Duty Fandom (right). Years before WikiLeaks popularized the "Crazy Horse" video, which shows US forces firing on Iraqi civilians from a helicopter, the players of this series were covertly surveilling and firing upon enemies in populated areas from aircraft high above.

[35] leaktube1, "Wikileaks Collateral Murder - Crazyhorse Apache Attack on Armed Men – Beware," YouTube, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Hx-jA2m_hY. Soldiers can be heard eagerly seeking permission to fire on targets. At one point a little girl is shot, and one of the soldiers responds "oh well." Another soldier comments that it is their fault for bringing a child into battle with them.

revealing a theme of occidental energy and spontaneity versus a peripheral eastern stagnation and disarray in need of fixing.

In contrast to the above-mentioned games, *Spec Ops: The Line* exposes players to graphic displays that are critical of US foreign policy, including large scale killings perpetrated by American forces on civilians, mass graves, and white phosphorous strikes and their barbaric aftermath.[36] People lay burned black amid the screams and pleas of the dying. Piles of bodies are riddled and gored by gunfire and explosions. Mutilated soldiers killed by other soldiers and civilians hang. Flies buzz and the stench of death and disembowelment is brought to the player's attention. *Spec Ops: The Line* places a comparable emphasis on the death and disenfranchisement brought about by war as most other games place on the killing of enemies and the heroism and strength of the soldier. Remorselessness and remorse alike are clearly voiced as well. Unlike the corny dialogue between professionals in *Cold War Crisis*, these modern slayers of despotism are not well-spoken, as seen when dispatching a foe in-game or during a cinematic bludgeoning, "Kill is fucking confirmed!... Fucking stay down!... Yeah fuck you…" However, players do not just pass a portion of the game level, possibly look around at the destruction they caused, and forget. Rather, the characters in the game repeatedly remind and confront the player about what they do and seek to accomplish: "These people want us gone. We should get out of



Figure 3 - Screenshot from *Spec Ops: The Line* of Soldiers with Bags Over Heads, 2012, Steam. The image of Americans in the Middle East wearing bags on their heads amidst summary executions inverts the reality that was faced by Arabs and others suspected of being tied to terrorism, who the American military incarcerated and tortured at black site prisons.

[36] *Spec Ops: The Line*, designed by Cory Davis (2k Games, 2013). The word "barbaric" is used here because the use of such weaponry is often considered to be out of bounds in regard to internationally banned armaments, particularly when used in populated civilian areas. Such arms are considered uncivilized in the level of pain and devastation they produce. Nevertheless, the West uses them from time to time in conflicts such as the second US-Iraq War and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

here and leave these people to grieve. I think that's the least we can do."

Women do not appear in the game except as background elements. The local women are seen as corpses, a dead mother clutching a baby, and desperate and angry, screaming civilians in a crowd. While the game is sympathetic to these victims, who are obviously not American, the context of these images is an orientalized one in which they are peripheral or expendable others with various levels of rationality, particularly when crying out in Farsi. At the same time, a female Western reporter can be heard arguing with her male producer over false reporting and a cover-up. When she protests at having to give the false report, the producer tells her that she is a "pair of tits that can read a teleprompter," and that if she doesn't read it he will find someone who will. In this example, the female reporter ceased to be respected when she did not tow the official line, raising questions about the treatment of women in related circles as well as of the coercive nature of crafted imperial narratives. This game confronts players with ugly language and displays of power, as well as the effects that these have on people at both ends, whether those effects are rational or not. In contrast to the thankful locals of *Cold War Crisis*, players of *Spec Ops: The Line* encounter American faults and conceits that can be synthesized into the game's muttered civilian sentiment of "Fucking Americans…"

Conclusion

The games discussed in this article reveal themes of patriotism, modernity, race, female roles, and masculinity amid story lines that convey messages about the nature of American power and position in the global hierarchy of the mid-20th through early 21st centuries. Themes featured in mentioned games contribute to a generational transmission of values associated with the Cold War, Orientalism, and Modernization Theory, revealing underlying apprehensions and conceits about American Exceptionalism: a stand-in term for modern American global empire comprised partly of virtual space. In this context, examiners such as film students, sociologists, anthropologists, and other historians of various interests can better analyze the cultural and political significance of Shepard's verbal salvos from the American

perspective. Likewise, why and how America and its allies fight and justify battles can plainly be analyzed in these games, particularly in conjunction with other popular culture media and relevant secondary source materials.

Military shooting games showcase the American affinity for arms, conflict, and displays of strength and perceptions of victory. Put simply, some countries are militant to varying degrees and for various reasons, but most of these countries are relatively confined to their territory or zone of influence and select purposes outside those areas. These countries may display militarism through parades and nationalist holidays as do North Korea, Russia, and France. The United States does not emphasize military parades, though it does fly its expensive killing machines over crowds and events as a display of sleek technology, strength, and perhaps freedom. However, America's militarism is displayed in its normalized armed presence across international waters and most of the world's countries. No country, no matter how prepared to do combat with the United States, remotely approaches such a privileged position from which to operate militarily. This advantage, like any, is potentially mitigated by America's foes, but that does not detract from the fact that the United States is the most visible, numerous, and spread out force beyond its own borders on this planet. This is reflected in the post-WII games described above, as well as in the consideration that there are more popular titles pushing Western narratives and American nationalism than any other nation, with most nations having about as many nationalism-promoting titles as Guatemala or Mali. If one puts aside American ideological defenses of a self-serving American Exceptionalism, this hubris can still be conceived of as the intersection of American military dominance of the globe with the economic supremacy of the dollar, resulting in global political influence relatively greater than any other nation since the end of the Second World War. Barring particular stimuli that mitigate or override that influence, the United States is able to operate militarily, economically, and thus politically, in ways most other nations cannot.

The position of this article agrees with Andrew Bacevich's political assessment, supported by the analysis of a small number of video game titles mentioned. The prideful

position that military affairs hold in the American cultural psyche is readily visible in the game titles described here. Bacevich is right to point out the cultural sense of pride and righteousness that pervades American culture when concerning the moral image, relative invulnerability, and perceived significance of the US military in world affairs.[37] Game developers instinctively know this and cash in on the cultural capital, producing narratives that reinforce existing sentiments and contribute to the ideological indoctrination that promotes feelings of American Exceptionalism: that sense of being indispensable and having the right and imperative to do and undo on the world stage without equal or accountability. In this way, video games can contribute to and reflect the militarism of American society and politics at home and abroad.

Equally relevant is Melani McAlister's point that diverse groups have crafted meanings of the Middle East in manners that promote and sometimes challenge American designs on the area while posing America as generally benevolent or necessary.[38] The Middle East appears in games within the parameters of War on Terror imagery and concepts and within the purview of discussions on human rights as well as nuclear and environmental destruction. Notably, the Middle East appears as a site damaged by American imperialism, where criticism can be leveled and counterclaims about what America does versus what it thinks it does can be made. In all examples of American combat in the Middle East described above, orientalist themes of occidental energy and adventuristic spontaneity are visible as Western, mostly American heroes battle despotism and disorder to maintain post-WWII geopolitical dynamics as well as promote a post-Soviet new world order as understood by American politicians of the 1990s. All the war zones in the games described, including the Middle East, are places for the West to define itself and others. Additionally, orientalist concepts are visible in the contrasts between modern and primitive, professional and non-professional, and empowered versus circumscribed female agency. These orientalist values positing diametric oppositions between East and West manifest in plots that feature America improving or fixing

[37] Bacevich, *The New American Militarism.*
[38] McAlister, *Epic Encounters.*

world hot spots through its brand of social and technological modernity. In this way, such narratives carry over aspects of Modernization Theory, which was used to argue in favor of American activity around the world to shape social and commercial developments against the USSR during the Cold War.

Future research into the politics present in video games will have ample new gaming material to examine in search of social values, progressivism, and civic issues such as housing, the provision of health care, and the prison system. Game warfare will continue to develop more complicated plots that take from contemporary understandings of the world, with phrases like Global South entering usage in the *Call of Duty* series and anti-Russian propaganda playing an ever more virulent, acceptable role in video game stories. This is particularly the case as tensions between the United States and a no longer prostrated Russia begin to soar higher than at any point after the end of the Soviet Union. Finally, the proliferation of gaming communities, like those found on *Twitch*, is greatly contributing to the overlap of gaming and other aspects of culture. These *Twitch* channels, especially those made by older show hosts such as the friendly gaming channel run by CohhCarnage and on the politics and gaming channel run by HasanAbi, contain much in the way of social values and political commentary. The hope for this article is that the enclosed discussion regarding how video games reflect and promote sociopolitical and cultural perspectives can, in some small way, contribute to the advancement of the study of modern American empire.