

**RULES OF ENGAGEMENT:
HOW VIDEO GAMES JUSTIFY STATE VIOLENCE**

Kevin Michalson
Computer Science and Systems
March, 2026

Faculty Adviser: Joanne Clarke Dillman, Ph.D.

Essay completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Global Honors,
University of Washington, Tacoma

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Introduction

As we enter an era defined by ease of access to digital entertainment, the primary representation of global conflict for American youth has transitioned from the history book to the video game. According to the Entertainment Software Association, more than two-hundred million Americans play video games. Notably, a massive portion of young people are actively playing video games, with 84% of children playing at least one hour per week, propelling an industry that generates over \$50 billion annually. This market is often dominated by interactive warfare video games. The military-themed *Call of Duty: Black Ops 6* and *Modern Warfare III* ranked as the #1 and #7 top-grossing games in 2024, showing the dominance of the genre (Entertainment Software Association, 2025). This commercial dominance reflects a broader cultural shift; as Andrew J. Bacevich notes, Americans have fallen prey to a "new American militarism," increasingly defining the nation's well-being "in terms of military preparedness, military action, and the fostering of (or nostalgia for) military ideals" (Bacevich, 2005, p. 2).

In particular, military history is increasingly represented by video games (Griban et al., 2020), and this trend is the product of a deepening collaboration between the Department of Defense and the commercial gaming industry, a partnership recognized by scholars as the Military-Entertainment Complex, or MIME-NET, a cooperation of the defense sector and commercial entertainment industries. This relationship serves two primary purposes: it provides a source of revenue for entertainment companies who utilize real-world military aesthetics to sell their game through authenticity and 'cool factor', and it functions as a recruitment tool for the armed forces, glamorizing the military through ease of access and digital bravado. However, these titles also work to export a specific ideology, one in which the military is morally righteous

and justified, and that the actions it takes are calculated, precise and most of all, consequence free.

Players are being prescribed a worldview where military intervention is presented as a necessary action. Through the specific gameplay of Procedural Rhetoric—the use of game rules and systems to persuade players, specifically through the mechanisms of Sanitization, Distancing, and Glorification, military video games work to justify state violence.

Literature Review

The connections of the genre with direct military interests are rooted in a decades-long historical overlap between military technology and commercial products. Before the modern video game scene, the hardware of commercial gaming was born directly from the defense sector. The basis of digital entertainment was pioneered by the defense sector because computers themselves were built for combat. It was “military funding that allowed for the development of the first computers. Moreover, the first video game is generally considered to be Spacewar!, which was developed on mainframes at MIT in the 1960s, a by-product of “strategic” R&D (research and development)” (Wolf, 2001, p. 166). We’ve seen this partnership go from analog to digital, and we now see direct partnerships between state defense agencies and entertainment companies. This production of military video games has largely been defined by the framework of the MIME-NET, which James Der Derian describes as the convergence of Hollywood, Silicon Valley, and the Pentagon. He argues that this triad has coalesced to produce a culture of Virtuous War, a projection of conflict that is designed to keep the populace politically disengaged while maintaining high approval ratings for military action (Der Derian, 2009). Through the portrayal

of war as a technological spectacle of immensely high-budget military action, the MIME-NET ensures that the messy, political reality of violence is obscured by a narrative of technological supremacy.

Dr. Timothy Lenoir expands, noting that the MIME-NET is a proactive exchange of hardware technology (Lenoir, 2000). The simulation technology used to train a tank driver at a US fort training ground is often built on the same software used to construct the worlds that players indulge in at home. This hybrid use of military technology blurs the line between the tool of war and the toy of leisure, creating a culture whose blockbuster entertainment is likened to tools of violence and the simulation of killing is a normal, even competitively encouraged recreational activity.

Dr. Nick Turse has analyzed games in the past that showcase the military's intent within the MIME-NET. In his analysis of games such as Full Spectrum Warrior, he details how these video game projects are very often funded directly by the Army with the explicit goal of making warfare appear exciting and fun (Turse, 2008). These games would go on to be commercial hits, encouraging the wider video game entertainment industry to accept that pro-military propaganda was profitable and a sound business strategy. This financial success encouraged private developers to mimic the formula, propagating the military's preferred aesthetic without the need for direct government funding.

Ian Bogost writes on how the military actively works to convince players to assume its worldview with his theory of Procedural Rhetoric (Bogost, 2007). Bogost argues that unlike typical media like film and novels, which persuade through their narratives and dialogues which captivate their audience through a telling story, video games persuade through rules-based action. The game is built on a set of hard-enforced rules, which a player has to abide by if they

wish to “win”. If a game punishes a player for shooting a civilian by ending the level, it is making a procedural argument that soldiers do not kill civilians. The player adapts to this logic to maximize their enjoyment, recognizing that they as a US soldier cannot kill civilians or they fail the game. They learn that US soldiers do not kill civilians.

Dr. Roger Stahl as well as Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter formally categorize this direct relationship between video games and the military as Militainment (Stahl, 2010; Dyer-Witthford & de Peuter, 2009). They argue that games offer players an illusion of control and initiative, the idea that they are making relevant decisions in gameplay. Through the use of the Heads-Up Display (HUD), omnipresent in video games, the game translates the violence of war into ammo counters, health bars, and mini-maps, detaching the player from the chaotic reality of combat. This digital separation is representative of modern combat, which Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter note "is today itself digitally mediated through computerized targeting, mapping, surveillance, and communication systems" (Dyer-Witthford & de Peuter, 2009, p. 98). This pre-digests the violence for the player, actively inoculating them from the consequences of their actions.

One of the most prevalent examples of this distancing is the mini-map, a staple in modern shooters that reduces combatants to uniform red dots. When a player navigates a level, they learn to scan the periphery of their screen for abstract, pixelated blips to eliminate. According to Matthew Thomas Payne, this enables the player "to internalize the hostile environments as a cybernetic weapons system," where the player's survival relies on trusting the digital interface over human instinct (Payne, 2016, p. 104). This interface works to dehumanize and abstract the opposition before the player even makes the effort to confront them.

The genre's widespread reliance on regenerating health acts as a crucial element of sanitization. Realistically, getting shot would be a significant injury, often resulting in life-long

disabilities or death. In military shooters, the edges of the screen briefly flash red before fading away as the player hides behind cover, waiting to get back in the fight as their health rapidly improves. This gameplay mechanic procedurally argues that getting shot is a trifling inconvenience, maintaining the player's power fantasy. Stahl expands on this sanitization, arguing that the interactive war captures a 'virtual reality' ethos of the techno-war: perfect visual identification with the weapon, perfect precision, and a perfectly clean and invisible result" (Stahl, 2010, p. 44). When digital combatants are shot, the game finds equilibrium in a sanitized vision; bodies tend to disappear "as if raptured up to heaven," ensuring that the player does not have to witness the visceral trauma (Stahl, 2010, as cited in Graham, 2010, p. 204).

This sanitization reaches its peak in the implementation of the "drone stare" popularized by aerial bombardment mechanics. In these sequences, players view the battlefield through thermal optics, abstracting targets from their "political, cultural, and geographical contexts" (Payne, 2016, p. 133). Through this lens, "bodies below become things to track, monitor, apprehend, and kill" (Payne, 2016, p. 134). The visual interface perfectly mirrors the clean, cross-hairs camera footage released by the Pentagon for news broadcasts, blurring the line between leisure and state-sanctioned violence. Ultimately, Stahl categorizes this as the "weaponization of the civic gaze," noting that the interface is not a tool for the citizen to play the war, but "a sophisticated means through which the military-entertainment complex 'plays the citizen'" (Stahl, 2010, pp. 44, 47).

In regards to glorification, nearly every blockbuster shooter incentivizes the player's participation through the gamification of violence. This is accomplished through a positive feedback loop that rewards the player for doing well in the video game, which in most every case involves gratuitous amounts of violence. In addition to a score counter going up and the

fulfillment a player gets for completing a level, the game is specifically designed to feel good to play: the satisfying ‘thip’ of a hit-marker confirming that a bullet hit someone, a pop-up whenever you unlock a new weapon or attachment, a symphony of congratulations and chimes whenever you’re on a killing streak. The human life in these games is reduced to a resource to develop one’s rewards, and the player is encouraged to replace the inherent moral weight of violence with a compulsion to play well through killing.

Dave Grossman argues that these mechanics serve as a form of operant conditioning. The typical detractors of war, the viscera, bloodshed and terrible casualties, are replaced by medals, ranks—encouragement that what the player is doing is ‘good’. “Violent video games hardwire young people for shooting at humans” (Grossman, 1996, p. 293), creating a player base that is content with conflict and conditioned to view it as another facet of life as opposed to the tragedy it often results in, where the “inflicting of pain and suffering has become a source of entertainment: vicarious pleasure rather than revulsion” (Grossman, 1996, p. 280). While critics often question if this operant conditioning in video games produces generic, real-world hostility or domestic violence, this misunderstands the fundamental function of the Military-Entertainment Complex. As Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter argue, these games do not “prompt atrocities of gothic delinquency but [rather] displays of loyal support for ‘staying the course’” (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p. 118). Ultimately, the goal of militainment is not to encourage violence among the citizenry; rather, it is designed to redefine the player as a “virtual citizen-soldier” who is “increasingly acquiescent towards the state” (Robinson, 2012, p. 511) thereby encouraging compliance with state-sanctioned violence.

Corey Mead additionally notes that the MIME-NET relationship is built on reciprocal financial dependency, where the military gains "access to proprietary technology, while game

makers receive the military's money and occasionally its official stamp of approval" (Mead, 2013, p. 6). This financial support has developed modern military videogames to become a showroom for arms manufacturers. This has been the case since the beginning of military video games, with foundational military games directly scanning "real-world images... of weapons such as the M16(a1) rifle" into their software to maximize authenticity (Lenoir, 2000, p. 323). With the intent of making the digital representations of these licensed firearms to feel satisfying and powerful, developers attract massive player bases, creating a "cost benefit of unusually large volume sales" for these commercial military simulators (Turse, 2008, p. 134). This positive exposure and commercial success normalizes gun culture and encourages these players to develop a real-world weapon affinity tied to their personal enjoyment with those exact weapons from video games.

This normalization serves a critical function for modern state defense. The US military utilizes these games as a "soft power" strategy that "cleverly mixes educational, ludic, marketing, and propaganda elements that fits comfortably into the FPS genre" (Nieborg, 2010, p. 54). The military targets youth audiences through initiatives like military-sponsored Twitch streaming teams and the expansion of digital JROTC programs, utilizing the entertainment value of gaming to lower the psychological reservations of their audience. Nick Turse describes this as a "digital cradle-to-grave concept," where multimedia environments intentionally "downplay danger and offer bloodless scenarios filled with adventure and heroism" (Turse, 2008, pp. 116, 165). The military encourages sanitized, highly engaging formats of violence which bypass the critical filters of its audience, acting as a preliminary recruitment tool.

Methodology

This paper utilizes a comparative analysis of the procedural rhetoric found in blockbuster military simulations. This analysis contrasts the American consensus found in titles like *Call of Duty* against the emerging counter-narratives found in non-Western titles like Russian-developed *Syrian Warfare* and Chinese-developed *Glorious Mission*. The objective is to identify the specific gameplay loops that encourage national ideology.

Industry procedural rhetoric is primarily based on three distinct elements:

- **Distancing:** The use of technology to dehumanize the enemy. This includes mechanics that force players to view conflict through tech that creates visual and physical distance with the enemy, often turning human targets into abstract points on screen for protection or elimination.
- **Sanitization:** The construction of a myth of precision. This involves procedurally enforced ethics, where the game's code makes war crimes impossible (via fail states) or erases the presence of civilian casualties (or civilians altogether), portraying Western militaries as morally infallible.
- **Glorification:** The gamification of violence. Audio-visual cues, ranking systems, and killstreaks work to reward the player for virtual killing and encourage them to keep playing and get better at killing.

Game Selection and Scope

The video games chosen for the American perspective were selected for their distinct roles within Militainment, as they are individually excellent at representing each. Call of Duty:

Modern Warfare (2019) was chosen due to its massive cultural footprint and pro-Western framing. The game is designed to support the US-aligned worldview, and it works to present American intervention as a justified measure. Further than pro-Western bias is America's Army, which functions as a dedicated, state-funded recruitment tool designed to target impressionable populations. To maintain a focused analysis on curated, state-sponsored storytelling, the scope of this study is strictly limited to analysis of the single-player narrative campaigns. Multiplayer modes have been excluded to focus purely on the developer's intended narrative.

Procedural Analysis

The paper analyzes the curated narrative arcs of the single-player campaigns that the player is forced to engage with. By examining the core mechanics alongside the established literature of the MIME-NET, the underlying ideological ruleset of these digital environments can be effectively criticized. The games are approached from the perspective of a first-time player of these specific campaigns. They will be experienced with minimal prior knowledge and as close to the developer's original intention as possible. However, a high preexisting literacy in the mechanical languages of video games ensures that despite the lack of inherent information on the games, suitable notes will still be taken regarding specific ideological and behavioral intents.

The Western Narrative

Early military video games often focused on unilateral American heroism, but the genre has evolved to establish a broader Western moral high ground. Modern simulations legitimize

intervention by framing the United States and its allies as the leaders of a righteous global coalition of professional militaries fighting alongside "acceptable" local resistance fighters. This narrative of coalition-building cooperation extends beyond a single franchise and is typically a genre-wide standard to mask unilateral intervention as collaborative liberation. In *Medal of Honor* (2010), the player's perspective rotates between elite US tier-one operators who are embedded with the allied Afghan Northern Alliance, following the narrative that the United States is working with local factions to liberate the region from insurgency. Likewise, *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Wildlands* (2017) deploys a squad of US Special Forces to Bolivia, but justifies this incursion into foreign territory by directing the player to partner with the Kataris 26, a US-approved rebel group fighting a corrupt narco-state. This trend continues into contemporary releases like *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II* (2022), where the Western-aligned Task Force 141 teams up with Los Vaqueros, a unit of Mexican Special Forces. In these stories, the player is forced to fight alongside trusted local actors that have historically been western-funded and aligned. In doing this, the games use procedural rhetoric to validate Western military operations on foreign soil, demonstrating to the player that they are part of a globally supported team effort rather than an occupying force.

American military simulations rarely operate as direct propaganda; instead, they function to provide a forced narrative of professionalism to players over the messy reality of urban combat. A game cannot afford to be too overt with its embellishment lest it lose any credibility and its players see it for propaganda. One of the most notorious examples of American embellishment is *America's Army* (United States Army, 2002). While the game is explicitly a recruitment tool distributed to potential recruits, it does not directly espouse Army virtues, rather working to convince the player of the Army's righteousness through its simulation of

bureaucracy. David Nieborg argues that the game operates a "soft power" strategy that "imbues common gameplay actions and FPS combat scenarios with political and ideological content whereby its institutional rhetoric and values are made explicit" (Nieborg, 2010, p. 60). The game teaches players that the U.S. Army is a professional and ethical organization by strictly enforcing the Rules of Engagement (ROE) and very often reinforcing core Army tenets such as loyalty and selfless service with the standard gameplay loops (Nieborg, 2010, p. 61).

Through this procedural enforcement, the game defines the U.S. military as an institution of infallible discipline. It shows the player that actions like unwarranted casualties are forbidden by forcing the player to face immediate consequences. Nick Turse highlights this procedural discipline, noting that a player who intentionally breaks the rules or "frags (assassinates) his drill sergeant instantly materializes inside a jail cell" (Turse, 2008, p. 119). By procedurally making war crimes or unapproved violence impossible to commit without immediate fail-states, the game presents a sanitized reality where the military always achieves its objectives "with the least loss of life" and strictly "doesn't reward abhorrent behavior, it rewards teamwork" (Turse, 2008, p. 119). This implies to the player that in the actual army, these accidents are simply incompatible with the institution.

However, this mock adherence to simulated ethics masks the core ideological thrust of the game. This bureaucratic distancing ultimately strips the simulated conflict of any complex political reality, with Ian Bogost pointing out that in these simulations, the "reward comes not from service completed in the conscious interest of a conflict, but from service completed in the absence of political circumstance" (Bogost, 2007, p. 77). The game forces players to always view themselves as the righteous American soldier and the enemy as generic, interchangeable threats ready to be swapped at a moment's notice. This "perceptual equivalence" rules out the

possibility of any legitimate grievance or historical context on the part of the opposition (Bogost, 2007, p. 78). The procedural rhetoric of the game effectively argues a singular truth: that the American military is flawlessly regulated, and as Turse observes, "killing non-U.S. personnel... is perfectly acceptable as long as it's done the army way" (Turse, 2008, p. 119).

This washing of the narrative turns to historical revisionism in titles like *Conflict: Desert Storm* (2002). Released preceding the anticipated invasion of Iraq, the game retroactively applies the political justifications of 2003; specifically the threat of Weapons of Mass Destruction, to the conflict of 1991. By tasking a Western special forces squad with disarming nuclear ICBMs (a threat that did not exist in the Gulf War), the game effectively allows the player to pre-enact the Bush administration's justification for the 2003 invasion. For a player base largely too young to effectively deduce the difference between the two wars, the game gives the justification for American interventionism through the blurring of historical truth.

The coalition-building narrative reaches its peak a generation later. The narrative eventually outgrows unilateral American heroics, shifting to present a united international front. Perhaps the most brazen example of narrative revisionism appears in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019). In this campaign, the player does not solely control American forces. Instead, perspective is split between an American CIA operative, a British SAS Sergeant, and a Middle Eastern rebel leader. The inclusion of British special forces and a local freedom fighter works to implicitly argue that Western presence in the Middle East is an internationally supported alliance helping locals fight rogue states and terrorists, rather than an occupation. To protect this fragile moral high ground, the game actively rewrites history. The game depicts a 'Highway of Death', a direct reference to the controversial 1991 American bombing of retreating Iraqi forces which resulted in hundreds of unwarranted casualties. However, the game dodges the morally dubious

actions of the US military by reassigning this atrocity to the Russian military. This is a simple swapping-of-hats which results in the American worldview being maintained. It could have simply not mentioned the event or minimized attention to it, but it instead put it in the spotlight specifically to vilify their opposition.

This vilification is additionally made procedurally possible through the distancing of the AC-130 gunship missions made iconic in the *Call of Duty* series. During these sequences, the player is placed miles above the battlefield where enemies are represented not as threats or obstacles, but as pixels moving across a grainy thermal screen. This extreme visual distancing is paired with an equally detached audio design; the visceral sounds of combat are replaced by the calm radio chatter of the crew flatly confirming "good kill", "over there", "got one", as the player destroys the enemy (Raven Software, 2016). This user interface is an intentional rhetorical choice as well; it is designed to perfectly mirror the real-world drone strike footage frequently broadcast on Western news networks. By making the gameplay interface identical to what we've become accustomed to seeing our military use through trusted news sources, the game blurs the line between the entertainment of killing enemies on a screen and the acts taken by our own military internationally. It furthers the procedural argument that Western violence is precise and fundamentally detached from the humanity of the dots on the screen.

Six Days in Fallujah demonstrates how sanitization works through omission. The game markets itself as a documentary experience, a realistic gameplay simulation of the US armed forces' experience in Fallujah, yet it strictly limits the player's perspective to the story surrounding a group of marines. The game entirely focuses on the soldiers trying to navigate the city to complete their mission, and it shies away from any actions the US took that would be difficult to justify. The destruction of the city and civilian deaths are framed as unfortunate

environmental hazards rather than the results of the actions the player takes on behalf of the US military. The city as a whole ends up being little more than a backdrop to display American military heroism, and it minimizes the brutality of the actions they took through a cherrypicked storytelling of a squad.

Six Days in Fallujah in particular serves as real-world validation of why militainment relies so heavily on sanitization. Originally announced in April 2009 by developer Atomic Games, the game was intended to be a realistic shooter depicting the Second Battle of Fallujah, which had occurred just five years prior. However, within just weeks of its announcement, publisher Konami completely dropped the project due to massive, widespread public outcry. British military veterans' families, anti-war organizations, and advocates for Iraqi civilians all universally condemned the project, arguing that the battle was far too gruesome and traumatic to be so readily converted into an entertainment product (Clements, 2009). The public completely rejected the game because the reality of the Iraq War was too messy and traumatic to consume as leisure. When the game was eventually resurrected a decade later by publisher Victura, it was forced to heavily sanitize its perspective to survive the conditions of the market. Rather than portraying the harsh political conditions or the piecemeal destruction of the city, the game strictly limits the player's focus to squad-level, room-to-room tactical navigation. The developers of the game shied away from the atrocities of the real battle, and the game ended up being a commercial success, selling over half of a million copies (Gamalytic, n.d.). This sanitization gave it immense commercial success compared to the more realistic and honest depiction the first iteration of the game had attempted.

Foreign Approaches

As the effectiveness of the American Militainment model became evident, non-Western actors began to develop their own counter-narratives. They appropriate the Western language of heroism and liberation to validate opposing geopolitical goals.

Syrian Warfare, a Russian Real-Time Strategy game, serves as a direct mirror to titles like *Call of Duty*. While American games depict US intervention in the Middle East as a justified fight against terrorism and tyranny, *Syrian Warfare* depicts Russian intervention as a heroic fight against Western-funded terrorism. The game features a mission where players must fight the White Helmets, a group celebrated in the West as humanitarian heroes. The game frames them as organ traffickers and terrorists, forcing the player to kill them to succeed. The game wraps this ideology into the structure of a top-down strategy game; killing enemies restores vision and stability to the in-game map, which the player uses to move units around and fight effectively. Through this, the game makes the Kremlin's foreign policy justified and makes the now-defunct Assad regime appear legitimate.

China's *Glorious Mission* was developed by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) as a direct response to *America's Army*. It serves the same training and recruitment purposes but focuses on the protection of sovereignty of China from Western invaders. The game allows players to defend the Diaoyu Islands, a territory disputed between China and Japan. By allowing millions of Chinese youths to virtually occupy and defend these islands, the game effectively annexes the territory in the minds of the players. When these youths grow up and potentially see news about the Chinese occupation of an island, they won't think anything of it because in their mind, that territory would have always been annexed by China; it's a historical fact that they learned through playing video games.

Modern Critique

While mainstream titles consistently reinforce the sanitized worldview of the MIMENET, a subset of games actively subverts these procedural norms to offer an ethical critique of violence. Some games actively subvert this by using their mechanics to enforce powerlessness, punishing combat instead of rewarding it. Ian Bogost highlights the independent game *September 12th*, where using missiles to root out terrorists only destroys innocent lives, intentionally depicting "the impossibility of achieving a goal given the tools provided" (Bogost, 2007, p. 88). Miguel Sicart adds that by punishing action rather than rewarding it, the game "makes a powerful ethical statement: the only way of surviving this game is not playing it" (Sicart, 2009, p. 43). This subversion is also present in popular commercial titles; Sicart points out that *Metal Gear Solid 3* incorporates "a clear ethical affordance in the design" that actively punishes players for lethal violence, forcing them to confront "the tortured ghosts of all those she has killed" (Sicart, 2009, p. 108). The game's anti-war message is "reflected in terms of gameplay, which rewards players who use stealth to avoid conflict" rather than relying on lethal force (Robinson, 2012, p. 515). Paired with games like *This War of Mine*, a game which strips away the typical power fantasy entirely by forcing players to survive scarcity and make morally gray decisions to survive from a civilian perspective, these titles work to challenge the dominant military consensus, designed to demonstrate consequence rather than glorification.

As a specific example, *Spec Ops: The Line* stands as a unique critique of the genre, attempting to show the reality that other games hide through rhetoric (Sicart, 2009). The game initially disguises itself in the general aesthetics of a military shooter; it lures the player in before deconstructing the principles of militainment using the very methods it uses to advocate to

players. It attempts to lay out the tragedy of war plainly in front of the player, making it impossible for them to ignore or play off as a “fault in the system”.

The game’s most infamous scene involves the use of White Phosphorus. The player utilizes a component they are familiar with to distance themselves from the conflict; a laptop with a grainy, black-and-white aerial camera that deliberately mimics the AC-130 scene popularized by *Call of Duty*. The player strikes a myriad of enemy heat signatures, feeling the satisfaction of killing that has been ingrained in them via similar games in the genre. The game rewards them with sound cues, positive feedback, everything the player expects. However, the game then forces the player to walk through the smoke to witness the reality of their “clean sweep”. The heat signatures are revealed to be refugees, and the targets are scorched bodies. Crucially, the game does not treat this as a failstate or a mistake. There is no ‘game over’ screen allowing the player to reload and try again. The game forces the player to accept that they committed a war crime simply because the game told them to.

As the narrative progresses, the "Militainment" mask slips entirely. There is no ‘game over’ for the atrocity; the atrocity is the point. The game denies the player the sanitization and complete lack of consequences typically afforded to them. It forces the player to live with the consequences of their actions, stripping away the glamor of the HUD and the medals that would normally adorn the player’s screen. As the protagonist’s mental state deteriorates, more elements of the MIME-NET are stripped away. The player character becomes increasingly erratic, increasingly harsh to his squadmates and increasingly cruel to his enemies. The player has to face the enemies head on, who are audibly terrified of facing the player, the line between enemy forces and unwilling combatant is blurred, and there is nothing glorious about the actions the player takes throughout the game. By the end, the game ends up leaving the player with the

uncomfortable realization that the heroism they sought was merely a hallucination induced by the game's mechanics.

The commercial reception of these titles shows the innate consumer demand for this procedural rhetoric and why games are encouraged to follow it. *Spec Ops: The Line*, despite its narrative independence and initiative, was a notorious commercial failure upon its release in 2012, contributing to a \$110 million quarterly loss for its publisher, Take-Two Interactive (Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc., 2012). In stark contrast, *Call of Duty: Black Ops II*, released the same year, grossed over \$500 million in its first 24 hours alone (Activision Publishing, Inc., 2012). This immense financial disparity shows a potentially unexpected truth about the genre's playerbase: that being that Western consumers actively demand the glorification of violence. The players have been conditioned to expect a clean, fun and gamified depiction of warfare, and when they don't get it, they don't buy it. This encourages games in the genre to mimic the gameplay and rhetoric of Western-favored games like *Call of Duty* as it's essential to making a financially successful video game.

Conclusion

Modern video game simulations have worked within the constraints of procedural rhetoric to effectively overwrite the reality of war with the curated experiences produced by state-sponsored entertainment. A citizen consuming news about a foreign conflict is far less likely to view military intervention negatively if they have spent hundreds of hours virtually enacting that intervention in a sanitized, glorified environment that has been specially produced to encourage that intervention.

We are currently witnessing a soft power arms race in the form of a memory war where major world powers are competing to code their version of history into the mechanics of interactive media, hoping that generations of impressionable players will consume them and take them for granted (Thomson, 2008). This is leading to a fracture in the historical truth that we commonly understand. A teenager in the West and a teenager in the East are growing up with two irreconcilable histories of the War on Terror or the Syrian Civil War, based entirely on whether the games they play were developed in Los Angeles or Moscow. Through the consumption of these interactive narratives, we are participating in a global rehearsal for state violence in which our interpretation of history is determined not by what actually happened, but by who developed the media we learned it from.

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