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Thesis Affirmation

I hereby state that this master's thesis was written by me without the unauthorized assistance of a third party. Resources used are indicated and quoted in the references. I hereby also state that this thesis has not been submitted in any form to an examination board earlier.

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Abstract

English

Video games are a comparatively new phenomenon in society, yet they have taken a prominent role in our free time within few decades. The growth of this industry, however, has also caught the interest of sociopolitical groups which seek to use the participative nature of video games for their own aims. Violent video games, especially shooter games, are often influenced by real conflicts such as the “War on Terror” at the beginning of the 21st century. Video games can be used to openly recruit a large target group or modified and thus easily be abused for extremist propaganda. It is thus important to recognize the propagandistic, diverse potential of video games, and to reflect on how we consume war, violence, and sociopolitical messages through them. This thesis will analyze how violent video games depict contemporary conflicts in the Middle East and how video games can become a vehicle for propaganda on any side of conflict.

Deutsch

Videospiele sind ein vergleichsweise neues Phänomen unserer Gesellschaft, haben jedoch innerhalb von Jahrzehnten eine wichtige Rolle in unserer Freizeitgestaltung eingenommen. Durch die ansteigende Popularität haben auch soziopolitische Gruppen wachsendes Interesse, das Partizipative des digitalen Spielens für den eigenen Vorteil zu nutzen. Besonders Shooter-Spiele werden oft von realen Konflikten beeinflusst, wie etwa der “War on Terror” im Nahen Osten zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts. Videospiele können verwendet werden, um offen Zielgruppen zu rekrutieren, oder durch Modifikationen einen propagandistischen Effekt zu erzielen. Es ist daher wichtig zu erkennen, dass Videospiele ein propagandistisches Potential besitzen, und zu reflektieren, wie wir diese konsumieren. Die Masterarbeit wird analysieren, wie Videospiele Konflikte im Nahen Osten darstellen, und wie sie für propagandistische Zwecke von verschiedenen Seiten in Konflikten missbraucht werden.

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List of Abbreviations

AQI	Al-Quaeda in Iraq
CNN	Cable News Network, a U.S.A. news provider
F2P	Free to Play (A game which does not require the user to pay in order to play)
IS	Islamic State
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
OEMA	Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis (U.S. Army)
OPFOR	Opposing Forces
ROE	Rules of Engagement (in War)
SIMNET	Simulator Networking Project
U.S.	United States (Federal Government)

1. Introduction

Armed with AK-47 assault rifles, masked terrorists enter the plaza of a city which appears to be in the middle of a desert. The perpetrators shoot two counter-terrorists who guard the location and begin to set up the bomb at the designated place as no one is left to defend their aggression--for now. As they split up to watch the various entries of the location the explosive's timer starts to beep more rapidly over time, foreshadowing what will happen if there is no interference with the device. Half a minute later, the remaining three counter-terrorist forces arrive, but they are not successful: In a desperate attempt to reach and defuse the bomb with no regard to their own safety, they are shot down in quick succession by the expecting perpetrators as the bomb's timer runs out and activates the device. It explodes, and a voice which is familiar to players and viewers alike calmly announces the result of the catastrophic scene in game: "Terrorists win". The stadium in Paris, filled with thousands of fans, erupts in cheers as their favorite professional team just won the final round of the game's first half. The teams of well-known and popular players with various backgrounds will now switch sides. They will now defend the two potential bomb sites against their opponents, who now play the "T-Side", as they are called, rather than terrorist side, to euphemize and professionalize the actions of the respective role within the game.

Scenes like these are common in competitive violent video games like *Counterstrike: Global Offensive* (Valve, 2012), and regularly draw large live audiences to watch and cheer live across the globe, such as during the "Paris Major" competition at the Accor Arena of the game's global tournament in 2023. In this case, roles and actions are detached from what is really happening on screens; actions are distorted by the competitive aspect and sociopolitical views are unwelcome. I chose to describe this scene as the attack on Paris by terrorists in 2015 should create negative feelings about the events happening within the stadium. Yet, it did not: It is just a game. However, messages carried over by other video game titles can distort the player's view of war such as the conflicts in the Middle Eastern region and are thus susceptible to propaganda for either side of war. Video games, which are also often violent, have taken a prominent spot among other types of media, such as movies and newspapers. They are especially notable for their interactive and participative nature (Schulzke, *International Conflict* 1). Although fictive, they are powerful in their message. Over the last

decades, game studies have become an accepted topic of study, especially as popular culture has emerged as worthy field of research (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 8f.). Certainly, the rapid growth of the industry supported the emergence of this field. Still, its possible dangers in terms of propagandistic content appear to be underrepresented compared to other entertainment media such as Hollywood movies and can be problematic in their representation of conflict in the Middle East as focal point of conflict as depicted by the video game industry since the 21st century and mostly focuses on graphic violence rather than messages which especially single-player sequences convey in an often exaggeratingly cinematic fashion. Video games are a popular tool for entertainment, but, as other media, send messages which consciously or subconsciously influence our perspective of the world. The use of modern technology becomes increasingly interesting for sociopolitical interests when its availability and accessibility for the target group has reached a critical amount. Adolf Hitler's propaganda was, among other factors, so successful because the "Volksempfänger", a cheap radio device, found its way into most German households. Within the last decades, our rapidly improving computer technology revolutionized our lives and thus provides a similar impact for private households. Due to the open nature of the World Wide Web it becomes even more difficult to control, especially in regards to the younger generations where violent video games are available through the mere possession of a smartphone. The digital world is open and free, which is positive on the one hand but can also turn into an issue when it comes to potentially propagandistic content delivered via violent video games on the other hand.

The scene I described earlier is filled with stereotypes. The AK-47 assault rifles, character models and map visuals automatically assume a certain area of conflict are filled with stereotypes embedded within those who are familiar with the western entertainment industry even though *Counterstrike: Global Offensive*, now *Counterstrike 2* (Valve, 2023), focuses on gameplay and competitive environment and ignores sociopolitical influences; the context is still clear to the player. While most attention in public on violent video games focuses on the depictions of realism or violence, the general narrations and stereotypes which commonly occur in modern video games are often overlooked (Donald 368). How similar the Middle East and the enemies of the player are portrayed across various games and

developers, very much independently, is stunning and is highly stereotypical which “helps” the player to find a context for the current actions by repetitive depictions of ally and enemy. The concept of the “Mythical Muslim” (Mirrlees and Ibaid 35) is prevalent in video games that feature Middle East conflicts or terrorism. Tanner Mirrlees and Ibaid describe this “Mythical Muslim” as product of five misconceived stereotypes: The Muslim who is Arab, foreign (which mainly means non-American or non-white), violent, terroristic, and anti-American (35). Of course, this generalization does not hold true in reality but through political interests and messages paired with media representation, such as in video games, they become present and add to the issue of Islamophobia in the West. Digital war games foster the repertoire of Islamophobia in the West and “[...] contribute to the notion that the U.S. is an exceptional global military superpower that uses its immense masculine might for good, for defeating Muslim terrorists, and for saving civilians from evil” (Mirrlees and Ibaid 45). In the light of these stereotypes and the resulting perceived separation of “Us” and “Them”, Edward Said’s work “Orientalism” (1979) has been fundamentally important in post-colonial studies and still inspires the critical discourse on the Western representation in various fields such as media studies, literary studies, or political science. For Said, Orientalism is not a neutral term that describes the academic study of the East, but is rather a constructed discourse so to speak, used by the West to represent the East with emphasis on the differences between the “Orient” and Western “Occident”. This comparison alone indicates an ongoing fracture between people which is also a construct forcibly created. This dichotomy, Said argues continuously, serves the West to justify dominance and control over the Eastern world as this discourse constructs the Orient as exotic, inferior and irrational which thus allows the West to look at the area differently. With “Orientalism”, the author’s analysis engages with the biased representation in literature, art as well as scholarly texts. The western hegemonic idea of the Orient “[...] is not an airy European fantasy about the Orient, but a created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been a considerable material investment” (Said 6). Said challenges the assumptions of the West and calls for a more nuanced approach to understand the Orient. Through the video gaming industry, this practice of view is as alive as ever, and, arguably, even in worse state as the consumer is not merely witnessing events such as in a movie theatre for instance but becomes the active agent who is killing pixelated versions of the stereotype themselves for whichever reason.

This issue is not restricted to the Middle East only. The author Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan showcases these prevalent stereotypical sentiments in 2022 in a “The Guardian” newspaper comment by his example that “[...] mainstream news outlets have reported that Russia’s war in Ukraine is horrific because it is taking place somewhere that is ‘not like Iraq or Afghanistan’; he is thus suggesting that Ukrainian refugees deserve to be welcomed because they are “not from Syria” (Manzoor-Khan 2022). He criticizes in his article that Western society is treating violence differently, dehumanizing refugees of certain origins while asserting dominance over the Orient in doing so. Düriye İlkim Büke Okyar and Abdullayeva draw upon Manzoor-Khan’s remarkable comment on political injustice induced through Islamophobia (which also incorporates concepts of Orientalism) in their article that shows how closely the successful Call of Duty series is tied to the concept of the “Ultimate Muslim Enemy” (44ff.). Düriye İlkim Büke Okyar and Abdullayeva state that “In most Western societies, the perception of Muslim Arabs as ‘despised’ and ‘enemy’ legitimizes cultural racist leanings, while their negative image circulated by the media naturalizes a collective social criticism against them” (39). In terms of visual features in violent video games, this type of opposition shows as they often wear light and traditional clothing, the Thawb, rather than military clothing which would be more practical for engaging in combat. The other large type of the “Mythical Muslim” represented in western video games consists of a more militaristic, practical outfit and often features the Balaclava as headpiece which conceals most parts of the face. The Balaclava classically serves as means to achieve anonymity for its wearer and for that reason is worn by Western military or special police forces as well. However, it has become symptomatic for fighters to wear the piece in terroristic propaganda material as well as by criminals to achieve this effect. Through the constant repetition of these two base models of the “typical” Middle Eastern fighter in violent video games, expectations and thus stereotypes are fulfilled. Furthermore, when the opposing non-player characters speak Arabic in one of its various forms, it becomes very likely that the Western consumer is unable to understand what the characters are exclaiming, which creates distance to the enemy in form of a language barrier on an auditive level. A softened version of this auditive distance lets the characters speak English, but still with corresponding accent to make sure the player knows who is on their side, and who is fighting on the other even when out of the player’s sight.

While digital war games commonly use the Middle East as their setting of conflict, the enemy is not restricted to this area which includes Muslim fighters of course; the underlying ingredients to create and present an opposing force as the Other similarly work with any other cultural groups. In *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (Activision 2009), Russian forces as well as a fictive Russian terror organization serve as the enemy of the West, for instance, as only one mission is located in Afghanistan throughout the story of the game. In *Battlefield 4* (Electronic Arts, 2013) the Chinese “People’s Liberation Army” serves as the main U.S. opponent, including Russian forces as China’s allies. In the plot however, Uzbekistan and the Suez Canal are among the locations of conflict between the superpowers. *Homefront* (THQ, 2011) shows the defeated West under (North-) Korean occupancy after a global oil crisis as consequence of a conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Notably, it is the loss of military and sociopolitical control by Western forces in the Middle Eastern area, which enables Korea to defeat the West and lead to the main plot of the game, as the control over oil was lost diplomatically as well as through military means. Thus, by no means is the Middle East the only enemy force in virtual war games produced by Western video game developers. However, the appearance of the Middle East as place of interest and conflict is a constant factor for the modern war theatre of popular violent videogames. Although the main plot, as in these three examples, may not be about the Middle East, the region symptomatically appears as active armed force, political or extremist faction, or as a location where global and ideological interests clash to varying extent. It should be noted that during all these three plots, and most other fictional realistic video game shooters, the opposing forces of the West also commonly find defectors in conflict. These characters act either on opposing side for the Western (or “public”) interest or appear within the Western forces who betray them for personal reasons. These design choices of allies and perpetrators are popular among commercially successful Western shooters with the desire to provide cinematic, closely orchestrated single player experiences. However, this is only one approach to depict Middle Eastern Conflicts and Terrorism. In multiplayer focused games, which are also commonly set in Middle East scenarios such as *Counter Strike*, the plot is often reduced to negligence, and players may join local extremist forces or even have to in order to play the title “properly” with its competitive nature focused on fairness. Despite stereotypical audiovisual markers of player models and different goals, as in the *Counter Strike* series, competition against other players as main aspect removes the

aspect of storytelling as it is unnecessary. Still, this sub-genre of multiplayer shooters focused on competitiveness can be used for propagandistic intentions, as I will show in chapter 4. This thesis will discuss the representations of conflicts in the Middle East and Terrorism in violent video games in its various facets. The difficulty of analyzing this field of entertainment culture lies in its complex relationship to the consumer. Video games often offer a wide range of different activities with a high engagement level with the content as text itself, influencing it by their mechanical input (or lack thereof). Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. describe five major branches of analysis in regard to games: The game as textual analysis in terms of design choices and meaning, games as object of studies in sociological and cultural context, the player as object of studies in sociological and cultural context, an ontological approach of games as philosophical and cultural history, and metrics, research on game design using statistical data (11f.). Thus, game research is a versatile multidisciplinary field of study unless the aim of the work is highly specific, such as a close reading of a game purely as text. Egenfeldt-Nielsen and his colleagues are aware that in many cases, research cannot be restricted to a single approach, but requires multiple ones (11). For this work, multiple types of analysis will be necessary in order to understand the connection between explicit and implicit messages in violent video games and real-life propaganda.

Firstly, the game as analysis of text is necessary to describe the games' audiovisual outputs and gameplay design features. Secondly, cultural analysis provides possible explanations on the larger contexts of the game's representations as a text and the developers' design choices. Thirdly, by the analysis of non-game media I hope to show the potentially dangerous connection of everyday information and violent video games and their close connection to each other. Players, or consumers, are recipients of this ecosystem of influence. How can an idea become influential enough to change someone's mind? Instead of analysis of more "classic" manipulative communication strategies that occurred throughout history of mankind such as posters or speeches, this thesis focuses on the abuseable role of video games within the ecosystem of media. Generally, I would like to underline the fact that violent video games are not bad as such. In most cases, gaming is a harmless yet exciting form of entertainment with large, diverse communities and there appears to be no connection between players of violent video games and an increased risk of violent actions in the real

world. Following a 2008 empirical study on school shooting incidents, Christopher Ferguson concludes that “[...] the issue of video game exposure should be discarded as a facet of any such profiles” (School Shooting 34). Whitney DeCamp finds in a large-scale study in 2014 that such video games are no significant predictors for violent behavior among roughly 6,000 eight-graders, while social circumstances are more decisive factors rather than consumption of violent video games (Agencies 2014, 301ff.). Further studies on this topic by DeCamp and Ferguson confirmed that the use of violent video games by young adolescents in eight or eleven grade, regardless of gender or ethnicity, is not a significant factor in youth violence which confirms their initial findings (Exposure 2017, 393ff.). A recent 2019 longitudinal study of non-gamers also found that there were no significant changes in behavior after 2 months of exposure to digital violence (Kühn et al. 1232). Thus, it is the propagandistic potential of video games which needs to be discussed rather than the violence which may catch ones’ attention initially. In three examples, this thesis will show how violent video games may potentially influence their consumers and thus need to be thematized in their role as playable war entertainment.

The first chapter will focus on the video game industry after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and consecutive U.S. wars in the Middle East which influenced narrative motifs and visual representations over the course of years of the “War against Terror”. The second chapter will flip the perspective and show how video games are used for propaganda by the Islamic State and also serve as inspiration for further material used by the organization. The third chapter will focus on the video game title series *America’s Army* as professionally developed recruitment tool, representing the U.S. army in its fight against insurgent groups. The fourth chapter shows how video games can help players reflect on the common, problematic tropes of the Western gaming industry through the game *Spec Ops: The Line* (2K, 2012) which is set in a modern, dystopian Dubai. Through this thesis, I show in how far video games are problematic in their representations of the Middle East and Terrorism, and how its recurring motifs can serve as a vehicle for (sub-) conscious influence, and propaganda, on the consumer. I also show how violent video games can be educational, as long as the player is aware of these potential dangers. As someone who is also a consumer of violent and non-violent video games, a few disclaimers are necessary before I close the introduction and

discuss the issues, but also the chances of violent video games in regard to conflicts of the early 21st century which are still ongoing in 2024. Although violent video games can be enjoyable thanks to their dramatic staging, I assert that they should always be regarded as a very interactive text which is potentially filled with ideology and should thus be consumed by players who reflect on their actions on screen while playing in order to separate fiction from reality. When the player treats games as text and reflects on them as such, they often reveal their problematic tropes of violence which commonly serve as means to resolve any conflict. Furthermore, I have no affiliation to any parties or products mentioned in this thesis. From my point of view, video games, violent or not, are a part of entertainment and should not be abused for political interests and propaganda at all. I categorically condemn any form of glorification of violence, war, terrorism, and extremist groups. I advocate for efforts in- and outside of scholar context to address and dismantle the underlying causes of such phenomena, in order to create a better society. While this work focuses on Middle Eastern conflicts and terrorism, content which references events and motifs outside this region should have to be directly or indirectly included as well. When apparent, I take the liberty to decode the text playing in the video game if it is relevant, although it may not be audio visually related to the Middle East. Some popular Western-developed shooter games which I will discuss in my thesis, for example, avoid the direct confrontation with the aftermath of 9/11 by calling out the event and parties involved but change the fictional geopolitical situation to avoid public backlash but should still be discussed and not ignored in this context. Furthermore, the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Hamas group with released material remains difficult for an objective, scholarly evaluation during this period of writing. This limitation does not apply to material released prior to the recent escalation October 7th 2023. This also applies to the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. Finally, I did not undertake any search for original content of extremist and terroristic nature such as statements, photographs, videos, or game modifications during my work on this thesis. I conducted the analysis of these sources through secondary sources cited within the text.

2. Video Games and the “War on Terror” against Al-Qaeda

The terror attack on 11 September 2001, henceforth shortened to 9/11, not only provoked global reactions but also induced a substantial change within US society as it was the largest attack on U.S. ground to this date. To gain public support for a war, media coverage is critical, and without doubt, their coverage had strong impact: The narrative of the U.S. being under attack required retaliation and was fostered by the countries' media who transferred the idea of being at war with terrorism where revenge was not only an option, but a moral necessity (Monahan 64f.). That the attack would be considered as war crime by the public, as much as an act of terror, was important for the U.S. government under George W. Bush to justify the “War on Terror” and to frame al-Qaeda as organized army supported by the Taliban, who refused to extradite bin Laden to the USA. The perception of 9/11 as a war crime has been backed by lawyers such as Derek Jinks, who expressed their support for including “new forms of hostility” as war crime, such as “catastrophic terrorism”, into this “widely accepted, fully articulated normative framework” of the definition (Jinks 2). On October 7th, the military actions against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan began.

Whether one considers 9/11 as form of war crime or not: The country of Afghanistan was framed as a danger to the world for not delivering the suspected mastermind behind the attack, fostering the sentiment of “Us” and “Them”, creating a stereotypical image of the enemy through extensive media coverage while simultaneously dehumanizing them. The series of events led to sentiments against Muslim citizens (among other religious or ethnic groups), and racial targeting by authorities within the country (Panagopoulos 169f.). Although there is no link to Saddam Hussein and Iraq as a state being involved in the attack, widespread public false belief was that he, too, was complicit apart from Al-Qaeda, the group which claimed responsibility for the action (Prasad et al. 142f.). Public opinion opened further political; 9/11 and the measures introduced by the government through the “Patriot Act” served as justification to protect Americans, yet implemented laws which are questionable, such as providing the president with the power to declare an U.S. citizen an “enemy combatant”, or the introduction of military tribunals (Etzioni 34f.). Previously, measures like these would not have been accepted as willingly by the public (Etzioni 5). Following the 9/11

attack, the entertainment industry also increasingly included the motif of terror in video games, too. While the *Call of Duty* series features titles with more historic and accurate approach, such as *Call of Duty II* (Activision, 2005) which focuses on World War II, the following *Modern Warfare* series involves a similar grade of semi-realism, yet the storyline is embedded in contemporary, but fictional conflicts. *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* features a terrorist attack on an airport in Moscow in its mission called “No Russian” and resulted in resentments but also fascination as the player’s avatar actively supports the terrorist group in order to not lose his cover for the greater good. What first challenges the players’ perception of the scene is the fact that the terror attack is not conducted by a Middle Eastern, but a Russian organization. Arguably, after 9/11, and the terrorist attacks in Madrid 2004 and London 2005, any U.S. or European player in 2009 (which is when the game launched) would have expected Islamic fundamentalists to be the conductor of such an action instead. The players’ avatar, an American agent, joins the terrorists undercover and actively participates in the massacre to gain the trust of the leaders of the organization, so that the US can bring them to justice. Although the player is not forced to shoot civilians by the game, he may freely do so except for censored versions such as in Austria and Germany, where too many casualties through the player’s actions would result in defeat and abortion of the mission as punishment. Most non-player characters in the scene are helpless civilians rather than security guards trying to fight off the avatar and terroristic group, which increases the brutality of the scene even further. Only towards the end, when special police forces arrive, resistance becomes more noticeable, but until then, countless innocents are already dead. The mission briefing tries to justify the questionable action beforehand: “You don’t want to know what it’s cost already to put you next to him. It will cost you a piece of yourself. It will cost nothing compared to everything you’ll save.” In summary, the U.S. agent participates in the terrorist attack instead of trying to stop it to get closer to the head of the organization, while the justification is that too many other civilians or U.S. agents have already died to turn back now. In this regard, the mission briefing quickly, and regrettably superficially, discusses the moral question whether the sacrifice of innocent lives is worth the cost to save potentially many more lives in aa long run. What would have happened if that airport were in America, instead of Moscow? Surely, the plan would not have been supported in the same way by the player and the public, and this scene therefore becomes an object of American Exceptionalism as the U.S. military assumes that its chase after a threat for their country is more valuable

than foreign civilian lives, and that the Russian government does not need to be informed on the imminent danger as the U.S. leadership has a better plan. Towards the end of the mission however, moments before the group of perpetrators escapes, the game reveals that the attackers already knew about the infiltrator before the attack started. The player's character is executed as the terrorists escape and used by them to blame the U.S. for the attack as a scapegoat, which leads to a World War III between the superpowers: The hubris of American Exceptionalism turns against its country.

This mission caters to multiple potential fears in the player's life. Firstly, the general fear of a terrorist attack, or a mass shooting in a crowded public space evokes memories of school shootings, bomb attacks on public transport or other disturbing events we witness through media; no matter if reasonable or not, in context of the time where the game was released, the threat was prevalent and made visible through news reports, for example. Secondly, the fact that an airport serves as scenery automatically connects the action to the trauma of 9/11 due to the semantic field of public air transport in context of terror. Thirdly, the game revisits the cold war between the USA and Russia and caters to the general fear of human extinction by nuclear superpowers at war, where only a few wrong steps may pose the danger of setting the world on fire, intentionally or not. Setting-wise, the story plays in the year 2016, a few years ahead of the game's original release, and asks the consumer: What if? The scenario thus becomes rather relatable and more realistic. Finally, the fact that the fictional war begins due to the actions of a comparatively small number of individuals responsible plays detrimental a role. This fact results in a sense of powerlessness by the consumer as the dependency on few world leaders and their decisions is shown as potential danger as countless innocents may be dragged into a war both sides initially did not wish for. When we disregard the disturbing content and unnecessarily high grade of violence throughout the mission, the storyline that evolves around it in fact mirrors the events during and after 9/11 in the USA and their declaration of war. The character, after he was shot and is now dying, hears the terrorists say: "When they find that body...all of Russia will cry for war", which implies strong public support for a Russian retaliation strike. In the game, global support for Russia grows as U.S. agents who were involved in planning the operation state: "Now, in the eyes of the world, they're the victims. No one's gonna say a word when the Russians club every American they can

reach". Flipping the narrative of xenophobic sentiments against Muslims in the USA after September 11th, U.S. Americans are now perceived as the worldwide danger in-game while the Russian invasion is deemed as those who are at the right of self-defense through an offensive. Diplomacy fails as public opinion demands revenge and retaliation according to the storytelling. Shortly after, Russia invades the country, which leads to the main arc of the storyline with the U.S. not only military-wise, but also in terms of global public opinion on the backfoot caused by careless involvement in foreign affairs. Therefore, I read this games' mission as criticism on the swift declaration of war on al-Qaeda which reflects on sentiments after the 9/11 attack from a fictive perspective, and subsequently its sociopolitical effects not only on the U.S, but also on the rest of the world.

While false flag or undercover operations such as in this example are one option in the repertoire of Western violent video games, other titles choose a more direct approach as they enable, or rather "force", the player to act as terrorist themselves, or they bluntly depict terrorist attacks conducted by Middle Eastern terrorist groups. As openly taking the role of the terrorist is more prevalent in online focused games such as in the *Counter Strike* series, Western violent video games still offer such content in singleplayer experiences despite obvious moral questions. *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* (Electronic Arts 2012) features a tutorial mission in a Middle Eastern terrorist camp. In visual terms, the game is stereotypical in its depiction of the terrorists, as they wear traditional Middle Eastern garments, or headgear such as balaclavas. The way the enemy is depicted therefore adheres to the "Mythical Muslim", a combination of stereotypes which has been established in US cultural industries and which caters to Islamophobia (Mirrlees and Ibaid 35) as I discussed in this thesis' introduction. On an auditory level, the scene uses Arabic language, which forces players to read the subtitles and therefore creates distance and expands the sentiment of otherness; indirectly, the player is told that he does not belong here. Marcus Schulzke argues that simulating the world of a terrorist is, in fact, dangerous, as it may present the world and life of a terrorist in-game as comparable to their actual experiences (*Being terrorist* 208). I agree and would like to add that the mis- and overuse of visual elements such as clothing in games foster stereotypes against groups which, in fact, are themselves the victims of terrorism, and not the perpetrators. The dialogues use terms which create a connection to terrorist propaganda videos, such as "infidels" or "jihad", and calls masked allied fighters, who

remain characterless, “brothers”. As these “brothers” have no identity, the organization remains stereotypical and, apart from the instructor, are dehumanized as generic puppet-like characters. Their appearance and behavior thus fulfill all aspects of the “Mythical Muslim” proposed by Mirrlees and Ibaid (35).

Titles like the aforementioned *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* differ between another philosophy of war entertainment products like *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* as the developers seemingly do not even attempt to modify their inspirations for the plot. Later in *Medal of Honor: Warfighter*, the storyline includes a cutscene of a protagonist and avatar who heads to a train in Madrid, where he encounters a suicide bombing of a train. Clearly, this moment relates to the real Madrid 2004 Train Bombings. To soften the impact of what is shown by the game, the sequence is only a cutscene, which means the player does not possess any control over the avatar and, consequently, is not directly responsible for what happens on the screen, which increases distance to the event and reduces the intensity of agency. On the other hand, however, this gameplay technique makes sure that the player does not miss what the developers want to be shown on the screen as the avatar can not look away or alter the way the scene is represented at cost of the consumer’s immersion and agency. *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* does not depict graphic violence in this specific scene, the train explodes and the scene cuts to the character who wakes up in a hospital. Still, the similarities to the real event may disturb players who were affected by the terror attack. Arguably, U.S. developers and publishers have fewer moral issues to depict or interpret recognizable real terror attacks if they are not within their own country. The Gamification of the terror attack on the Twin Towers remains a taboo for popular commercial video games and remains a black spot within popular violent video games. Yet, without doubt, consciously the developer chose Madrid as stage for a train bombing to disturb the audience and create attention and shock with no regard to potentially personally affected consumers. I argue that these unwritten rules should either apply to everyone or to no one, which is why I consider the developers’ Gamification of the Madrid attacks a mistake and an example of American Exceptionalism, as, vice-versa, visually implying or even depicting the 9/11 attack in a commercially successful game would surely lead to a much larger public outcry comparatively. The obvious argument that the scene is not played but passively watched does only partially weakens the fact that the player is (supposed to be) fully immersed within the video game: Generally, the action of the scene

can still be identified as “playing the game” rather than “watching a very short movie”. Whether and in which case such scenes can or should be tolerated, should be discussed more within the video game entertainment industry but it is clear that rules differ depending on the location and target audience of a title’s publisher, developer, as well as the location of potentially traumatic scenes.

2.1 Gamification of Osama bin Laden’s Assassination

Beginning of May 2011, Osama bin Laden was killed by U.S. Navy SEALs in a compound in Pakistan. News of the successful mission was immediately picked up by media; a photograph which the White House shared to the world shows Obama and high command awaiting information on the operation by U.S. Navy SEALs in 2011. It is the most viewed photograph within a day in history by a large margin (Ritchie 243). The image is a shift away from, as Marnie Ritchie describes them, “boring war visuals” which the public grew used to (41), but orchestrated the focus, determination, and worry of the leaders of the USA. While the successful killing of Osama bin Laden sparked the sentiment of successful revenge, no less important was the impact of the images, and was consecutively included by the entertainment industry. The successful movie *Zero Dark Thirty* (Columbia Pictures 2012) stands out in its hyper-realistic depiction of this operation as it brought the advantages of Ego-Shooter games, the explicit closeness to the depicted actions as well as the audiovisual features, to movie theaters. The movies’ climax, the actual assassination of Osama bin Laden, is heavily inspired by shooter aesthetics, and thus creates an atmosphere which has even (re-) inspired one of the most popular and successful ego-shooters of our time, the *Call of Duty* series to create a longer scene which is heavily influenced by the audiovisual aesthetics and changing pace of one of the final scenes in *Zero Dark Thirty*. The movie narrates the search for Osama bin Laden and his death. The finale of the film depicts the Navy SEAL soldiers’ raid of the house which the USA suspects to be the hideout of the al-Qaeda leader.

Throughout the operation, the viewer repeatedly follows the team through claustrophobically narrow corridors from a first-person point of view, which means that just as in a first-person shooter, the viewer usually sees “their” weapon in front of the scene. While in this cinematic perspective, the movie suggests the soldiers’ vision through night-

vision goggles through the shades of green which dominate the scenes, and lets the viewer become a part of the operation. The lack of objective information of the operation poses a problem for analysis as there is a lack of reliable sources and the possibility of censorship. Hasian Marouf states in his work on Exceptionalism and the bin Laden Raid that

During the first few days of press coverage it was widely reported that some of the Navy SEALs had been wearing helmet cameras that recorded the action that took place during the storming of the main three-story building that housed bin Laden's family. Privileged insiders told interviewers that they had personally seen photos of bin Laden shortly after his death, but many of these interviewees also explained to reporters that White House advisors were divided on the question of restricting access to these images (Marouf 1809).

When the camera does not move in first-person point of view, movements, objects, or gestures become ambiguous in the darkness, as the green contrast is absent as visual effect. Ultimately, this results in the fact that the viewer feels more comfortable and in control what happens when they are among the soldiers in first-person, and becomes more immersed, comparable to the immersion and (at least partial) control a player has in a first-person shooter game.

Due to these audiovisual elements, clearly the movie drew inspiration of realistic military shooter games, and successfully lets its audience witness the operation by special forces through the lens of shooter games. While first-person shooter games certainly heavily influenced *Zero Dark Thirty*, the movie later became subject of Gamification itself, as in the mission "Cleanhouse" by *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (Activision 2019)¹. Before the mission takes place, a terrorist attack at Piccadilly Circus occurs, which the player witnesses from the perspective of a soldier, a sequence which should evoke the sentiments of a "British 9/11". Instead of al-Qaeda, the West chases the fictive "al-Qatala"-cell from the imaginary Middle Eastern country "Urziskstan", lexical correlations which automatically evoke not only a visual, but also an ideological expectation of the enemy for the player. The mission "Cleanhouse", however, takes place in in London after traces lead to a typical British brickhouse. Enemies and civilians inside the house speak English with slight British accent, wear modern clothes

¹ *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019) is the 4th title of the *Modern Warfare* series, but had the number reset to being another first title. It is not the predecessor of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (2009) for instance, but continues the *Modern Warfare* storyline, merely the number and title was reset.

and thus break with expectations when one hears of a group named “Al-Qatala”². The player realizes that involvement in a terror cell does not necessarily depend on markers such as location, clothing, or language. Therefore, the location and the terrorists which are culturally fully integrated in society represent an invisible threat within Western borders to the player and evoke the fear of terrorist sleeper cells within countries. Similar sentiments were evoked during the “War on Terror” during the era of George W. Bush, which resulted in mentioned mistrust and resentment against US citizens part of the Muslim communities (Panagopoulos 610f.). Apart from the enemy forces and the location, the game reproduces the *Zero Dark Thirty* scene blatantly similarly. Using night vision when inside, the player invades the house full of civilians and surprised soldiers follows the leaders’ orders as quickly and precisely as possible. Corridors and certain rooms in the house are claustrophobically narrow and produce the same tension as in the movie. A woman in a white nightdress, identical to a woman in *Zero Dark Thirty*, gets shot after she moves towards a weapon in panic. If the player does not act and kill her, the avatar will get shot instead, which leaves no choice to the scenes’ protagonist. In both depictions, the soldiers move on and show no emotional response to what just occurred, and in the end, at the top floor of the building, the soldier shoots the leader of the group. There are no significant musical auditory elements throughout the mission, which puts emphasis on the screams of the inhabitants and occasional explosions of breach charges, in a juxtapose to the whispered, calm speech acts of elite soldiers as in the movie. In terms of visuals, the players’ avatar and his team also use night-vision goggles to be able to navigate, which results in a similar greenish color tone including dark contrasts. Therefore, the mission “Cleanhouse” serves as strong reference to *Zero Dark Thirty*’s climax and thus evokes the sentiments of Osama bin Laden’s assassination. While the scenes are spectacular, problematic sentiments of American Militarism are fostered, and present moral issues, such as civilian casualties as necessary evil for the greater good, and thus support the sentiment of a righteous intervention. Kristine Jørgensen describes this as “the romantic story of the war hero”, which features “simplistic imagery of the enemy that creates a binary narrative (Jørgensen 2016). By depiction of discipline and calmness, both game and movie

² It should be noted that the British accent is used in the original English localization. In German localization, for instance, the terrorists cell speaks German with a strong Russian accent which puts emphasis on the origin of the characters instead.

hail the efficiency of elite combatants who “clear” the hostile household within minutes with professional and merciless efficiency.

2.2 Gamification of the last U.S. soldier leaving Afghanistan 2021

On a more recent occasion, it becomes apparent how impactful images of war influenced through video games became over the last years. When the last U.S. American soldier left Afghanistan on 30 August 2021, news reports immediately picked up the picture below. Shades of green dominate the scene as a result of night vision optics, and thus is immediately reminds its audience of representations of the operation where Osama bin Laden was killed.



Fig. 1. Burnett, Alexander. *The Last Soldier leaves Afghanistan*. Defense Visual Information Distribution Service 30 Aug. 2021. Photograph. 25 Apr 2024.
<www.dvidshub.net/image/6810419/last-american-soldier-leaves-afghanistan>.

Due to entertainment media such as *Zero Dark Thirty* or military shooter games which implemented night vision as feature of realism, the colors again evoke the sentiment of a professional, clean extraction, while the hero cinematically leaves the area after a successful mission. The soldier holds his weapon using the handguard and does not seem to be in a rush when he takes the first step onto the loading ramp which signals that he is feeling safe and unexcited: The U.S. operation in Afghanistan is over and there are no hostiles nearby to worry about. What makes this picture staggering, despite its apparent simplicity, is the fact that it reminds players of the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series of one of the most iconic characters in the series named Captain Price. The soldiers' posture and apparently calm, yet

controlled movement in combination with typical equipment, as well as shape of head and beard, are strong visual markers which create this correlation for consumers of the game. The soldier does not holster the weapon, but carries it, as if he would like to show that he is ready for the next attack. The visual resemblance to screenshots of videogames such as the *Call of Duty* series exists but is especially reinforced through the similarity to the mentioned character Captain Price. Price is a character who is iconic within the popular series for his stealthy, precise, and clean operations where one needs to closely follow his commands in order to survive and complete the mission. If the player follows his commands with appropriate timing and with sufficient grade of precision, large parts of the sequence will go well, creating inherent trust and sympathy regarding the player- character relationship. Consumers who recognize the resemblance between the real image and the fictional character may thus, potentially unconsciously, create a sense of trust and honesty through the implicit familiarity of the images' composition. It needs to be mentioned that the fictional character Captain Price is part of British special forces, and not a U.S. soldier, although he cooperates with them on regular basis. Nonetheless, the visual composition of color tone, emphasis on relaxed motion and visual similarity including carried equipment to a video game character leave me doubtless that this photograph is a nod to the gaming community which may be young, potential, recruits. The photograph implies the end of the Afghanistan War, and the end of an era in recent US history. To quote Susan Sontag, "Photography inevitably entails a certain patronizing of reality" (63). This image, which successfully tells its own story, makes the use of an explanatory text in newspapers almost obsolete as it works with tropes of, as perceived by many, successful operations. It subtly reminds the viewer of the assassination of Osama bin Laden through the typical use of night vision while the soldier while playing with elements and visuals of popular video games at the same time. Furthermore, due to the industry which keeps increasing its games' visual quality drastically, pictures of poorer quality under certain circumstances such as night-vision are becoming more and more difficult to be distinguished at first sight from virtual game screenshots.

Overall, the motif of terror became increasingly more prominent in shooter video games after 11 September 2001. Popularity-wise leading shooter series use terror as a storyline element as it also evokes personal sentiments which may adhere to the motif of "positive discomfort" (Jørgensen 2016) where horrific scenarios, as in horror movies, become painfully enjoyable.

While some games try to shock the player with gruesome massacres and the obligation to join the terrorists as in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* or use a cutscene to reduce agency and increase distance for a realistic terror attack which happened in a similar way in real life as in *Medal of Honor: Warfighter*, video games have shown influence on depictions of warfare such as the final scenes of *Zero Dark Thirty*. And, finally, I claim that similarities were used in real life for the well-known photograph of the last soldier leaving Afghanistan in 2021, where not only a piece of documentation, but ultimately reality became subject to the Gamification of a far-reaching decision. When we consider the continuous growth of the video game industry and its steadily growth of technological possibilities, one has to assume that the reciprocal influence of digital war games and real war will continue to be an important asset for both game industry and propaganda.

3. Digital Terrorism: IS Propaganda in Violent Video Games

ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) has its origins in 2004 when Sunni insurgents which fought against the US and Iraqi forces under the leadership of Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, joined al-Qaeda, and became the “al-Qaeda in Iraq” (AQI) (Smith, Brooke-Holland and Rob Page 86). After Al-Zarqawi died by an air strike of the US in 2006, the group became known as the “Islamic State of Iraq” and later the “Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham” when they merged with the “Al-Nusra Front” in Syria (Jabhat al-Nusra) (Smith 86). However, ISIS and al-Qaeda’s leaders distanced each other in February 2014 and ISIS began to fight with the Al-Nusra Front over control in Syria (Smith 86f.). In June 2014 the foundation of a caliphate, the Islamic State (IS) under Islamic law (Sharia) was announced after the group had occupied Mosul alongside other cities and areas (BBC 2015). At its peak end of 2014, ISIS controlled more than 100,000 square kilometers of territory (Jones et al., xi). At this time, local governmental resistance increased, and the USA engaged against ISIS via airstrikes together with allies such as Bahrain, Qatar, France, the United Kingdom, and others (Brooke-Holland and Mills 110), which led to IS’s continuous loss of territorial control (Jones et al. 14). Syrian forces which were also supported by the U.S. military officially declared victory over the Islamic State and its self-proclaimed caliphate as Baghouz, a village in eastern Syria, was retaken (Wedeman and Said-Moorhouse 2019). IS, however, is still active and also gained short-term control over areas in Africa for instance, such as 2020 the port town of Mocimboa da Praia in Mozambique

(Harding) which remained under control of the IS until the following year for instance. At its peak, extremist group used modern digital media in all its forms such as videos and photos extraordinarily efficiently, not only to share “information” to the public around the world, but also to attract new, young recruits by designing and spreading effective propaganda material. Multiple factors of the ISIS’ media machine led to their success in attracting not only supporters in Iraq and Syria, but also transnationally: The progress of digitalization and emergence of social media which are unable (or unwilling) to censor ISIS content, the consecutive loss of the information monopoly of news agencies and their involuntary support, accessible and wide-spread types of propaganda for individual target groups, and the constant implementation of signs such as the black flag of IS as trademark and seal of affiliation. With the rise of social networks, media dedicated to “making news” lost their previous monopoly on spreading information to the households: Anyone can start their own user account(s) on the internet and receive or share information which often cannot or will not be evaluated by the platform hosts due to the sheer mass of uploads. Commercial platforms like YouTube depend on a large, stable userbase and good reputation for increased ad revenue. Therefore, it is in their best interest that content adheres to ethical and legal guidelines: When Germany issued the rule that pornographic content must be locked behind age verification, Twitter reacted accordingly by issuing nationwide bans of accounts (Burgess). Also, both target audiences and corresponding advertisement contractors would move to another, safer, provider soon otherwise (while attracting other, but potentially less lucrative audiences). Generally, Twitter, renamed to “X” after Elon Musk bought the company in 2022, follows a lenient approach towards pornographic content compared to other “big players” in the social media branch, such as Facebook or YouTube. What they have in common, however, is a policy against hateful or violent conduct on their platforms. Hurtful behavior against others or calls for violence are not allowed and may result in temporary or permanent consequences, such as Twitter’s permanent ban of US-president Donald Trump in 2021 after the January 6 US capitol attack, “due to the risk of further incitement of violence” (Twitter). With the takeover of Musk, seem to be more flexible however as Trump was allowed to return to the platform.

Thus, such popular social media try to combat the distribution of potentially problematic material which adheres to the definition of “hurtful behavior” such as appraisal of terroristic acts or gore content in any form. According to Aaron Y. Zelin, ISIS themselves use a system of accounts which are still operational until the “lost” account is back online with an alternative username, which he describes as “centralized decentralization” strategy (86). Despite efforts of providers to shut down the availability and distribution of such material, the number of anonymous sympathizers who constantly re-upload propagandistic photographs, graphics and both unedited and edited video clips to popular sites is still difficult to combat (KhosraviNik and Amer 9). Other largely unmoderated platforms such as the infamous “4chan” forum board do not even attempt to remove propagandistic material, gore, or misinformation; the conspiracy theory of “QAnon” found its root there and is thus partially occupied by them due to lack of moderation. IS propaganda, for example by their media group “al-Hayat”, is still easy to find “with no more than a little light Googling” (Macnair and Frank 235) in theory. Footage such as the execution of the journalist James Foley for instance was quickly removed from popular video platforms, but users can still find its footage on alternative video providers or illegal download websites comparatively easily (Vujanović 18). Due to news reports, especially on themes such as executions of foreigners, the public knows that potentially disturbing photographs or videos such as the murder of James Foley for recruitment or advertisement purposes exist, which can therefore gain traction and viewership, may it be out of interest for ideologic motivation, uncensored gore, or plain curiosity. Thus, news agencies of the West such as the news station Fox News or the Cable News Network (CNN) become an important tool and an accidental accomplice for the spread of the group’s propagandistic content towards the public. The black flag of ISIS became a trademark sign for their agenda and actions as it continuously appeared in photographs, videos which were shared online, picked up by news agencies and thus shared to the world. The constant presence of a flag supports the identity and wish of ISIS to become a recognized caliphate.

The reason why ISIS was able to become so present on the internet relates to their success to deliver propaganda to various target audiences via different media channels at the same time. Factors such as topic, production, distribution, and grade of violence of these materials are

diverse (Macnair and Frank 236). The goal is to reach as many people in as many languages as possible through a network of media centers (Al-Rawi 5), such as the previously mentioned “al-Hayat” arm of ISIS. Certain material is meant to intimidate enemies by showing gore and executions, other content aims to motivate their own troops or potential recruits, or to raise general sympathy for them by videos using harmless, sympathetic scenes such as their combatants eating Snickers bars (Farwell 50). Hashtags on Twitter, such as “#CatsOfJihad”, are supposed to convey the image of a modern, “fun” group that engages with today’s internet culture with humor and light content (Vujanović 27). As ISIS realized according to Jovana Vujanović, this superficially harmless type of content provides better opportunities to gain followers, while the Western media reports usually focus on the cruel content in order to discredit them (29). Hashtags can also be used to hijack otherwise harmless, unrelated content. During the football world cup, the Hashtag #Brazil2014 was flooded with links to propaganda content such as videos to try to gain access to an otherwise unrelated community (Farwell 51). One aspect of this wide range which has gained far less attention in Western media than their violent propaganda content is the idea to address the gaming culture for their messages. In this chapter, I will discuss the role of gamified propagandistic content on social media in the case of the brutal execution of Muath al-Kasabeh, further gamified video material, and video games which can also be modified for ideological purposes.

3. 1 The Gamified Murder of Muath al-Kasabeh and Film Footage

In 2015, video footage that ISIS produced and shared online shows Muath al-Kasabeh, a pilot from the Jordanian Air Force, being burned to death after ISIS captured him when he was forced to land in ISIS territory during an air raid. In this case, ISIS used social media to “crowdsource” among their followers for ideas on what should happen to al-Kasabeh (Griffin). Through the perceived anonymity of the internet, the moral bar lowers: “The cloak of anonymity enables people to engage in harassment, threats, bullying, defamation, lying, reputational damage, misogyny, and provision of false information, and protects them from legal sanctions” (Moore 13). The group abused this encouragement of engagement in this specific case. Similar to the audience of a gladiator fight in ancient Roman times deciding over life or death of the defeated from their seating, ISIS used their communication platforms as

their own arena. It is, from my perspective, certain that feedback from online participants ultimately would not have changed the cruel form of execution or even the decision over life and death. Nevertheless, the execution was superficially Gamified, as they seemingly provided decisions as “gameshow” one could participate in by merely having access to the internet and an account. ISIS created a, very questionable, sense of community and inclusion for their followers and sympathizers who were involved as “judges” and would follow their actions potentially more closely.

The gruesome execution served the cause of creating attention and shock within the Western world due to the blatant violation of human rights and morals overall; this creation of anger against ISIS is a desired outcome by the group to create hostility between Western cultures and their ideology, and to separate foreign Muslims from society through Islamophobia in order to make them more susceptible for their own cause (Vujanović 36). To long for a “true” home for Muslims due to their discrimination in society is one of the common reasons for a citizen to become a member of ISIS according to interviewed members of the organization (Baugut and Neumann 1582). To summarize, the execution served two goals simultaneously: To involve and engage with potential recruits but also existing followers through the perceived anonymity of the internet, and to incite Islamophobia to estrange uninvolved foreign Muslims from their communities in the hope to potentially radicalize them. The video production of the murder of al-Kasabeh further shows how Western entertainment media are used and implemented in ISIS propaganda as it implements and subverts elements of the Hollywood movie “Kingdom of Heaven” in its footage. When al-Kasabeh was killed, ISIS released footage of the execution which should show why the group considers their actions and his death as justified. The video shows the Jordanian flag merging with the one of Israel, which should show that they are on the same side, and therefore also indirectly involves the USA as culprit (KhosraviNik and Amer 14). Civilian casualties and destruction of the country presents the pilot, and, in extension his nation and its allies as war criminal (KhosraviNik and Amer 13-15). A following section is reminiscent of video game or movie trailers which introduce a product through spectacular quick scenes.

As Majid KhosraviNik and Mohammedwesam Amer point out, a historical connection to the Christian Crusades against Muslims is created through a horse rider with a sword; the content is stolen and implemented from *Kingdom of Heaven* (20th Century Studios, 2005) among tanks which further creates the claim that they are defending their belief against perpetrators who commit war crimes such as those which occurred throughout the Middle Age, as well as the Muslim wars by Prophet Mohammad which implicate a threat and war which they fight again today (KhosraviNik and Amer 14-15). Through these motifs, ISIS deem their action as justified by showing the aftermath of attacks by the opposing alliance, which is depicted as controlled by Western civilization, as well as by reminding of a historical legacy through religious conflicts. The use of footage of *Kingdom of Heaven* which KhosraviNik and Amer recognized was not further discussed in their article. I, however, consider this remarkable observation by them as more than a simple implementation which was included out of necessity or more cinematic production. By using film material of Hollywood, ISIS stakes their claim on Western culture while also reminding of the plot of *Kingdom of Heaven* itself, which critically engages with the misdeeds and disillusion of Christian crusaders. In my reading, the producer uses the plot which makes a stand for Islamic culture and the historical figure Sultan Saladin who, towards the end of the movie, restores peace and ultimately is the better leader compared to the Christians who increasingly succumbed to cruel attacks and war crimes. Thus, for ISIS, this movie serves as a metaphor for the group's actions, as justification for the cruel execution, and discuss Western narratives of "good" and "bad", questioning the intentions of Christian cultures. The use of different eras that clash through an imaginary, alternative or allegorical reality is also a common motif in strategy games which let players guide a civilization through different eras such as *Age of Empires II* (Microsoft, 1999), or *Civilization VI* (2K, 2016). Indeed, at first glance this short sequence could be a video game trailer for these series and thus creates a point of reference for consumers. Re-use of material as in the case of *Kingdom of Heaven* for ideological propaganda is not a novelty, but also occurred throughout the "War on Terror" I discussed in the previous chapter. Although I doubt that the general audience of the material reads into this implementation as deeply, the case provides insight in how footage is created, and that Western movies such as *Kingdom of Heaven* also play a role and inspire propaganda creators to, without authorization, use them for their own purposes and interpretations. The idea to re-use existing material for ideological reasons is not new. The first-person shooter game *Quest for Bush* (Global Islamic Media Front, 2006) by

al-Qaeda simply salvaged the U.S. anti- Middle East game *Quest for Saddam* (Petrilla Entertainment, 2003) as template for their own game (Al-Rawi 389). *Quest for Saddam* turned the propagandistic content of the original game against itself through comparatively simple alterations.

ISIS further created videos which would “gamify” war actions by using textual or visual markers that create an immediate connection to first-person shooter games. In an extensive analysis, Cori E. Dauber, Robinson, Baslious and Blair show the implementation of the *Call of Duty* series in various ISIS propaganda material, for instance a picture reminiscent of a meme (18). The text uses the series’ iconic font and says: “This is our Call of Duty, and we respawn in Jannah.” To respawn, essentially means to be reborn after death in a video game with a different or identical avatar. This respawning or being reborn and finding purpose as well as adventure is the central statement of the image towards potential recruits from gamer communities while it, literally, plays down the possibility of death by referencing reincarnation. Further examples include the implementation of a “mini-map” which shows the location of an explosion, and text inserts which are typical for shooter games (Dauber, Robinson, Baslious and Blair 19-21). Also remarkable is the fact that the sequence of weaponry is presented following the concept of Gamification:

Only someone who plays versions of Call of Duty specifically would notice that the introduction of larger and more powerful weapons is sequenced and timed in a very specific way. [...] “players” are never shown with these “reward” weapons until after they are shown with AK-47s or RPGs for example—but the mortars and artillery pieces appear, proportionally speaking, at roughly the same point in the narrative action of the video as in the game (Dauber, Robinson, Baslious and Blair 21).

While they relate the propaganda content analyzed in their article to the “Call of Duty” series specifically, I would like to mention that these visual markers appear in almost every first-person shooter game or roleplay games, and therefore have become generally applicable for the gaming culture. To shoot a person in-game, or to die in in combat, has no impact on the subject which will respawn and be able to continue the game soon after. Memories of fun and exciting missions in shooter games are related to the real world and therefore imply a feeling of safety for the targeted audience as scenes of war are presented as a familiar environment that has been experienced countless times before. Also, it shows how

intensively first-person shooter games may be instrumentalized in a video by Sunni Islamist group called Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which shows the weapon throughout combat actions rather than the soldier himself, which creates the visuality of a shooter game (Dauber, Robinson, Baslious and Blair 19). Similar to the finale of the movie *Zero Dark Thirty* which I mentioned earlier where Navy SEALs kill Osama bin Laden, the internal perspective with focus on the gun gamifies the content to appear more familiar to a generic shooter game and to create a message: "This could be you". It is safe to say that political and militaristic parties recognize the potential of electronic entertainment as way of recruitment, be it by the US military which references shooter games as shown in the previous chapter, or adjusted versions of games for ISIS. Similar to *Kingdom of Heaven*, it is safe to say that released products are easily manipulated by parties or individual sympathizers for their own cause.

3.2 Game Modifications and Propaganda

Modifications for video games, commonly named "Mods", are often created by the community, and implement optional content for a game in form of usually small and freely downloadable programs. Some games, such as the military simulation shooter *ARMA 3* (Bohemia Interactive, 2013) come with a built-in editor, which trivializes the process to design fresh, easily shareable content such as new missions. Generally, a programmer can create such a mod and distribute it independently, and therefore often remains unchecked by developers and publishers themselves. An implemented editor-application as feature for a game promises ongoing content which the community creates and provides itself. Sometimes even a new, revolutionary genre is invented such as *Defense of the Ancients*, developed from *Warcraft 3* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2002), which can be called the first "Multiplayer Online Battle Arena" (MOBA) game of an entirely new genre which inspired further productions such as *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009). Virtually every game can be modified as long as the program either allows it or does not recognize the fact that files were changed.³ Problematically, mods therefore also offer a solution for effective production and distribution of propaganda material as well. As games are meant to be fun, the context of its content changes drastically and is positively reinforced, which provides an opportunity for

³ Cheats in Video Games usually involve the installation of such mods and are a good example for how simple it is to create types of content which are, if unintentional, not in the interest of its creators and other players.

propaganda to spread to a different audience (Lakomy 385). In such cases, this enables drastically direct contact with extremist ideologies. Not always do the creators of ideologically inspired content have affiliations or sympathies. In the warfare strategy game *Command & Conquer: Generals- Zero Hour* (EA Games, 2013) for instance, it was possible to play as a version of the Islamic State of Iraq as faction through an unofficial mod rather than the original, intended version of it (Prucha 177). The modified faction does not change gameplaywise. As in the original, it relies on guerrilla tactics and suicide bombings, but brings the fiction of *Command & Conquer: Generals* into the real world. Miron Lakomy, however, attests no promotion of jihadist ideology apart from the use of respective logos, which would separate it from other jihadist entertainment software (390). Regardless of the motivation to create such content, “enhancements” of the gameplay experience with self-explanatory titles such as the *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar Games, 2013) modification “HostagesV”, for instance, are an open invitation to radicals of all ideologies for power fantasies and can easily be misused. Examples from other games with IS motivated footage include the aforementioned military simulation game *Arma 3* with its public mod creator that can also depict suicide attacks with a jeep or ambushes on convoys (Lakomy 398-399). Due to the high grade of realism as is the nature of the game, the attacks are disturbingly close to reality when compared to *Grand Theft Auto V* footage. While publishers, or websites which provide a platform for the free upload and download of modifications would hardly support their misuse as distributor of extremist and problematic content, they face the same issue of continuous uploads of propagandistic videos, which I mentioned earlier in this chapter. Furthermore, they can be shared through private messaging, smaller websites or the darknet which makes it technically impossible to remove from the internet as a whole without strong censorship and violation of privacy targeting every digital citizen.

Grand Theft Auto V is an example of how through little effort one can change the context of gameplay in ways that were not intended by the original developers. In the popular open-world third person game the player follows a storyline centered around criminal activities but may interrupt following it at any given point to freely roam through the world. There is no mechanism that stops the player from killing civilians except for police forces who keep arriving at escalating intensity when they fail to stop the player. Although the game does not

particularly reward actions resembling terrorist attacks, the punishment for killing civilians and police forces until the avatar himself is shot or arrested is almost non-existent. Being killed or arrested results in a comparatively small monetary fee without heavy consequences. Moreover, the cities throughout the *Grand Theft Auto* series are not individually designed but mimic U.S. cities using lexical ambiguity and landmarks which are almost identical to reality, such as “Los Santos” in *Grand Theft Auto V*, which is in fact a loose copy of Los Angeles. Whether the avatar is visually changed or not: The gameplay possibilities of *Grand Theft Auto V* also mean that, no matter if players use a mod to change the game visually or not, they can easily immerse themselves in fantasies of conducting mass murders in the West. *Grand Theft Auto V*’s gameplay options and locational as well as temporal setting thus creates an ideal environment for ideologically motivated content. Terroristic acts within the game can be ideologically twisted for anti-western sentiments for sympathizers, although certainly this is not the intention of the series’ games whose storylines rather focus on a light crime stories and mocks tropes and stereotypes of U.S. society. As these actions are a classic feature of the series in which arguably every player at some point tries to find out “what happens if”, gameplay videos of consumers on media platforms are superficially unproblematic content. This makes propaganda material often only recognizable by inserts or the source itself; and dangerously well disguised. Moreover, due to the algorithm that content providers such as YouTube use to find suggestions for additional clips which thematically resemble each other, it also opens the possibility to reach consumers who would not have chosen to search for clips which are, in fact, implicitly or explicitly ideologically motivated. Lakomy extensively reviewed propaganda material of ISIS which was created through *Grand Theft Auto V* and *ARMA 3* in his 2019 article “Let’s Play a Video Game: *Jihadi* Propaganda in the World of Electronic Entertainment” in which he reviews the problematic content. In 2014, recorded *Grand Theft Auto V* gameplay created by ISIS sympathizers shows an avatar who commits terroristic acts on police and military forces including executions, and states that what the player does in the game, ISIS does the same in real life (Lakomy 391). A longer version which includes more, thematically similar scenes was still available in 2017 (Lakomy 391). Sometimes, content does not necessarily actually have to be played by consumers or exist to gain traction. Using such mentioned gameplay footage, ISIS sympathizers advertised a large-scale mod of *Grand Theft Auto V* called “Salil al-Sawareem” (The Clanging of Swords), whose origin and availability is unclear (Al-Rawi 7). Lakomy assumes that the distribution and suggestion of the trailer of the

modification may also only have been created to “draw media attention” as the footage is only slightly, if at all modified (391). Even if this allegedly extensive modification may not actually exist, this example proves that sometimes not even a real mod may be necessary for transferring a message towards consumers. How successful the Gamification of terror of content produced through *Grand Theft Auto V* in fact is remains uncertain. Al-Rawi’s study from 2016 shows that viewer response, which can only loosely be derived from “likes” and “dislikes” of 10 videos as object of research, was mostly negative, a total of 1944 dislikes, resulting in 68.3% in comparison to likes (10). While this indicator is as unreliable as his sample analysis of comments towards these productions, it shows that a certain number of users are certainly interested in such content; yet certainly the aim is not to convince the public, but to attract those who may be interested in the organization.

4. America’s Army: Entertainment as Recruitment Tool

Videogames can support or challenge public or personal views as I have shown; however, the chapters so far were concerned with entertainment material mainly produced by corporate or private motivation and supported or inspired by military interests. The foundation of these games was entertainment, rather than a serious attempt of recruitment. The shooter series *America’s Army* differs from these products as they are funded, developed, and distributed by the U.S. military itself (Li 11). The first title was released in 2002. As main organization in charge of the project served the Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis (OEMA) which is a Military Academy (Li 4). Especially Zhan Li conducted valuable interviews on players and serving soldiers in his work which will be mentioned later. The franchise consists of four parts so far, the latest being released in 2015. Soldiers should not only learn and train their skills, the recruitment of an “already militarized gaming population” for the U.S. army was the implied goal of the publisher (Allen 63). On no other platform the U.S. army spends as many funds as on recruitment games (Chou 10). In 2022, servers for the online functionality of the *America’s Army* games were shut down. However, the game can still be downloaded and played in singleplayer mode or via private servers in April 2024. For this chapter, I will use *America’s Army* as description for all 4 iterations that have been released over time, as the game concept and its depiction of U.S. warfare remained almost identical. Through the community and its various types of clans, it is comparatively easy to find social contacts within

light, or more dedicated clans. Some of the more dedicated groups, for instance, consist almost entirely of active or veteran soldiers, and many groups would not consider themselves as a clan but rather “battalion” or similar military definitions, in order to put emphasis on the serious background (Li 13f.). In cases like this, the entertainment of the game itself gets mixed with roleplay-like components, and thus intensifies the impact of how war is played and perceived.

While *America’s Army* should mainly serve as recruitment product, it is only one peak of the potential to use video game technology, as entertainment for any player interested. However, both U.S. military and video games have been sharing a connection as early as the 1960s as Tim Lenoir and Caldwell describe, with the “Simulator Networking Project” (SIMNET) as cost-effective, yet realistic training opportunity (50). Armored vehicle combat could be trained in machines which feature the same devices of maneuvering and fighting depending on the vehicle type, while connected to a network of other simulators operated by other units (Lenoir 50 f.). Within this environment, one could not only practice fictional scenarios, but also revise and study real combat situations such as the Battle of 73 Easting against the Iraqi force in 1991 (Lenoir 52 f.). The advantages simulators such as SIMNET are evident. Not only can unexperienced soldiers become familiar and thus more effective with the complex system of modern armored vehicles, but also do so in a cheaper and safer way without the need for regular maintenance on the vehicles in use. Furthermore, the option to augment past battles helps forces to adapt to new technological advances, either by friendly or enemy side. The 73 Easting battle, where Iraqi forces did not use infrared vision in contrast to the U.S. forces, could be programmed to give the Iraqi this visual advantage, and thus prepare soldiers for a different combat situation (Lenoir 55 f.). Although the video game technology, and thus the simulation, can not be compared to today’s technology, audiovisuals of combat simulations and its purposes kept evolving together with the entertainment industry, and U.S. sponsored entertainment games would eventually find their way into the common household. The timing when the first version of the first *America’s Army* game was released in 2002, means that the war in Afghanistan was a matter of public interest and present in media such as news reports. Interested gamers regardless of nationality or political stance could still mentally join the U.S. forces’ war as form of entertainment through *America’s Army* thanks to its free

access, even if no real copied locations of conflict appear in the game. The timing with the war during the game's release means that the U.S. army and the war would follow its citizens essentially throughout the day, from the newspaper in the morning, the ongoing news reports on television, and the official army game *America's Army* after work.

This is what Henry Jenkins describes as the "media convergence" in his 2006 book:

By convergence, I mean the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want. Convergence is a word that manages to describe technological, industrial, cultural, and social changes depending on who's speaking and what they think they are talking about. (Jenkins 2f.)

The game is part of said "flow of content across multiple media platforms" as Jenkins describes it (2f.). While the incentive to sign up for the U.S. army through a video game alone seems low, it is only a part of a larger, continuous stream of information which brings the conflict in the Middle East to the living rooms of players. *America's Army* is unique in the sense that the product is highly polished and, especially upon release, up to the standards of its time during the early 21st century while being a product of advertisement first and foremost. The game was maintained in visual quality and content to appease to the community, yet its blunt intentions are unusual for a popular title. The intention of the *Call of Duty* series, for instance, is, first and foremost, to entertain while keeping a real background focused on storytelling in favor of the U.S. Army. Community-based game modifications, as they can be implemented within the more recent *Grand Theft Auto* titles, may be hard and (rightfully) dangerous to find. *America's Army*, however, is produced and authorized by a globally acknowledged group, namely the U.S. military, which openly tries to recruit new soldiers from their target audience. Publicly available and free to download and play, the title automatically receives more credibility compared to modifications which users need to download and install separately. As *America's Army* is entirely legal to download through one of the largest and most important game-providers in the scene, *Steam* (Valve 2003), the title gains more legitimacy and initial trust by users thanks to the providers' size and reputation. *America's Army* is a game first and foremost, but also it is a form of "strategic communication" which is used to "(...) influence audiences in ways that advance organizations' strategic goals and promote their interests" (Schulzke 2). The gameplay itself is typical of semi-realistic first person shooter games and focuses on two teams of players competing against each other via

their avatars on multiplayer maps. Singleplayer missions have been added over time as well but mostly serve as tutorial rather than core aspect. Setting-wise, real, modern weaponry and realistic (yet fictive) locations indicate the realistic approach with no explicit relations to actual wars. A deeper connection between the activities does not exist, which sets the focus of *America's Army* on gameplay. Gore is reduced to minimal blood splashes that indicate a hit, and thus hides the true horrors of war. In order to whitewash the violence even further, parental control options allow to turn off blood effects entirely, limits the game to only training missions rather than the "actual" fights, and even disable the sniper class after the 2002 sniper murders in Washington (Li 50). Chris Chambers, who served in the U.S. army and was involved in the development of *America's Army*, states: "We want to reach young people to show them what the Army does, and we're obviously proud of that. We can't reach them if we are over the top with violence and other aspects of war that might not be appropriate. It's a choice we made to be able to reach the audience we want" (qtd. in Schiesel 3). This shows that violence, which would otherwise be "over the top" despite being the reality, was intentionally toned down by the developing team in order to adhere to the typical video game standard and to not disturb potential recruits who play the game by the depiction of the violent reality of war.

Hezbollah also developed shooter games similar to *America's Army* concerning its aim to create a somewhat realistic product of military entertainment including a background which strongly targets potential recruits. *Special Force* (Hezbollah Central Internet Bureau, 2003) and *Special Force 2* (Hezbollah Central Internet Bureau, 2007) have a similar aim, to present their soldiers by the reconstruction of real conflicts against the Israel Defense Force (Schulzke 2). "Most games being offered on the market are games in which, unfortunately, the hero is an American, and he is coming to kill the terrorist, who is an Arab", a manager of Hezbollah's Central Internet Bureau, Mahmoud Rayya said in an interview to the newspaper News Tribune (2006). Likely unintentionally, Said's concept "Mythical Muslim" becomes apparent in this statement. Not only Israeli military are being shot at; in the game's digital training center players can shoot at posters of real humans such as the former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon; furthermore, the game ends with an excerpt of Hezbollah militants who died in the fight against Israel, posing them as martyrs (News Tribune 2006). The *Special Force* series thus

serves as product for Hezbollah sympathizers and enables the target group to fight against the Israeli they are in conflict with. *America's Army* differs from this product in regard to its heavy focus on the multiplayer shooter scene with strong community involvement in- and outside the game which requires a stable online server system and its continuous maintenance which a single-player focused game does not need. Players should not only learn and connect to each other within the program, but also outside of it via forums. In this chapter, I will outline the features which should turn *America's Army* into a low-threshold recruitment device, how game communities and player identities can have impact on how a game is seen or played, and how serious gaming communities are both a danger and as well as an opportunity for online video games.

Opinions of scholars on whether *America's Army* should be considered as intense marketing project, or highly propagandistic, differ strongly. For Li, *America's Army* is more than just a marketing campaign, but designed with "[...] specific real-world moral and political effects in direct support of legitimate violence in the name of national security and defending democratic rights" (Li 29). *America's Army* has strong interest in "teaching" its communities the values and rules of the U.S. Army. This happens through the restriction of playable factions to one (the U.S. Army), and by enforcing the rules of "fair" warfare. In contrast to other popular online shooter games, the player's avatar will always play the game on the side of the U.S. Army, also during multiplayer games against another team of player-controlled soldiers. What players of opposing teams perceive thus is visually manipulated; both groups are, from personal perspective, U.S. army soldiers fighting against local insurgents. Only the player models and textual information, such as scoreboards, need to be swapped. This is highly unusual for violent video games in multiplayer, as it breaks the illusion of a canonical event witnessed in the same way by every participant. However, it obviously is in the interest of the sponsor and developer, the U.S. Army, to have players side with them exclusively and not switch sides during or after a round, as it is possible in other games. To injure the U.S. Army avatars of teammates through "friendly fire", is possible, however strictly penalized by the underlying honor system. Misconduct, such as the accidental or intentional killing of allies not only protects those who try to play as a team, but also mirrors consequences of misconduct in real army life. While the multiplayer matches are the main focus of *America's Army*, the

game differs from other titles in its more elaborate training processes which are technically tutorials the player needs to successfully conclude in order to move to multiplayer games overall. Furthermore, the avatar needs to conclude a certification process at a certain score in order to unlock specific roles which simulate other roles within the army such as the marksman. Once completed, the role can be chosen in multiplayer games, but are limited to few players per type. The selection process favors accounts with a higher rank, which means that a player of lower rank may not be able to pick the desired roll despite the certification. These imposed training sessions and restrictions show how *America's Army* values its "realistic" depiction of a soldier's career which can only be achieved through active training and consistent engagement within the U.S. Army. As players of higher rank and thus recognition would be favored to be able to play elite classes while lower ranks likely have to play more generic classes such as riflemen. The military chain of command which is simulated in *America's Army* thus reflects reality and distinguishes players gameplay wise. To quote Bogost, "The rules do not merely create the experience of the play – they also construct the meaning of the game" (2008: 121). The game series is unique in its rules how explicitly they influence this meaning of the game and should thus show the legitimacy of the U.S. Army through conduct and consequences if the player does not meet these expectations. *America's Army* features a progress system which is based on a rating system which constantly adjusts through gameplay and serves to communicate the values of the U.S. Army.

The program presents the qualities desired by the U.S. army in individual ratings: "Loyalty", "Duty", "Respect", "Selfless Service", "Honor", "Personal Courage". The rating of "Integrity" is volatile, as it can in- or decrease, and serves the game as behavior score to reward or punish the player. If the player's account gains enough points by adhering to what the developer deems as positive behavior, such as healing injured teammates, the character's rank increases and can improve certain specializations. Subsequently, the game penalizes undesirable actions such as the attack on an incapacitated enemy, or aforementioned "friendly fire" by a "time-out" in a prison cell, and further violations of the rules may result in the avatar being banned from the game. This is no innovation as such, as friendly fire usually results in negative consequences in other products as well. However, the difference of simply being removed from the server, or the avatar having to go to jail, is more immersive. When the player does not follow them, he gets stuck at the lower ranks, or is permanently banned. The other ratings

increase by specific in-game actions, such as when the player follows a certain order. These aspects aim to teach the consumer how a “good” U.S. soldier should behave in combat situations, are imposed in- and outside of the game. The player needs to follow these rules and requests and adjust gameplay accordingly in order to rise in ranks. As U.S. recruitment tool that almost religiously imposes the “Rules of Engagement” (ROE) within the game as dogma of the real U.S. Army, the game therefore teaches and advertises these values as aggressively as no other popular multiplayer shooter as a prominent button in the menu leads to the sign-up website for the actual U.S. Army. Thanks to its funding, *America’s Army* can use strategies which would not be profitable or sustainable for a product focused on entertainment, and thus gains a strong advantage to its competitors. Which advantages they are, I will show in the next section.

4.1 How New Recruits are Attracted

The most popular online games share a set of common features, and apart from being a good product its consumers deem worthy enough to spend time on. Recent successful online titles such as *League of Legends*, *Clash of Clans* (Supercell 2012), *Fortnite* (Epic Games 2017), or *Counter Strike 2* are free to download and play, although those who pay may gain advantages, cosmetical adjustments or additional content. All of these titles spawned communities with focus on competition, to the point where the titles even incorporated professional leagues. In the current era of online video games, many of the most popular competitive online games share a similar formula to achieve popularity, user influx and thus financial success independent of their various genres:

1. “Free to Play” (F2P) Model
2. Playability on Low-End Devices
3. (Recurring) Gameplay Mechanics
4. Invasion of Further Areas in Life

In contrast to other titles on which I mainly focus on in this thesis, *America’s Army* is free to download and play. The product includes no micro-transactions; the profit of the game consists entirely of the promotion and potential recruitment for the U.S. forces. It is thus not directly related to the economy of the entertainment as such; it is a product with a purpose

on its own. While atypical for games which are free to download and play, this absence of income by the producer removes the chance for players to receive advantages, or to visually stand out among other players by spending money and thus is attractive to a player base which does not have the financial options to do so. This creates a parity of opportunities among all players regardless of their financial situation in real life and further implies the same principle for the U.S. Army. Playability on low-end devices increases the number of potential players, especially in combination with the mentioned free-to-play business model. Apart from specific terms of agreement within the game, the “Code of Honor”, gameplay is not much different from other games such as *Battlefield* where one can contribute as position of a medic only. However, the serious background remains as part to be discussed as it shows that one can be a soldier without killing after all. For obvious reasons, this hegemonization is detrimental to the background of intent. This game warrants its own chapter since it is rare for other products to include their consumers this much. In terms of incentives included in gameplay for returning or regularly playing consumers, *America’s Army* does not possess any such features. This is largely connected its philosophy to lack microtransactions such as cosmetics, as other products on the market include them in F2P-titles. However, the gameplay itself is subjectively qualitatively on par with popular competitive shooters which require money to be owned or played with additional features. Finally, although *America’s Army* does not provide extensive content outside of the game itself, its strong labeling as “the” official game of the U.S. Army, the game feels more connected to the real world and media such as official news reports, and thus appears to be more serious regarding the actions on screen, be it on TV or on the computer. The connection of both video games and other forms of media such as photographs or advertisements merged into real life are effective in this case and positively influence a consumers’ choice to sign up for the U.S. Army in real life. The following graphic shows how influenced a player or consumer of a video game is by support of other media. The sociopolitical topic, idea, or goal influences media such as news reports as well as the content of video games within this sphere due to their combined connection to the respective culture and way of life.

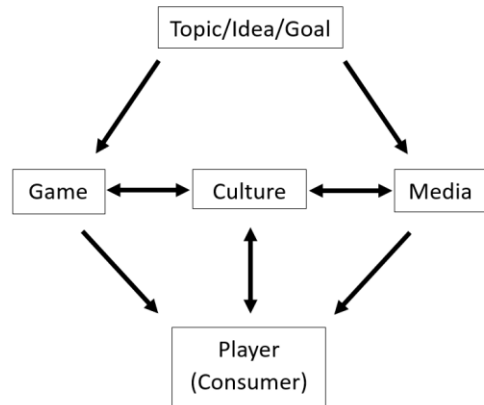


Fig. 2. Wieser, Lukas. Influence of Game, Culture, and Media on the Video Game Player, 2024.

Through *America's Army*, players who are fond of the game, yet not necessarily for its stance in favor of the U.S. Army, the game still serves as part of indoctrination as now not only news in whichever form and general public opinions are feeding a topic, idea or goal but also is influenced in their free time while playing a video game as break from real life. How successful this combination can be is shown in the following interview. When Li conducted interviews for his thesis on *America's Army*, he met a participant who is a prime example of how the game and real life merged together until the final decision to join the army in real life was made (Li 69). Also, sentiments against allied countries of the U.S., such as France, were mentioned when the player interviewed says:

[The war] has only affected me in the way that I want to play more. [I] guess it's an adrenaline thing... watching the war and then playing AA⁴. Yeah. I feel better every time I kill the OPFOR⁵ in [the desert] Insurgent Camp [level] now... it also made me wish I was shooting at the French [since they had opposed the war].... [with the current war,] in a sadistic sort of way there is an irony about the desert scenarios. I'm sure that is unintentional with the current situation in Iraq (Li 69).

In this case, the interviewee not only wants to join for the military to join the fight against the Middle East but also shares hostile sentiments to forces who he feels are not contributing enough--despite being allies in the conflict. He ignores more complex questions of moral or geopolitical nature. For him, watching the war unfold on TV and then playing *America's Army* as leisure made his decision clear, to join the army and be part of the conflict. Both video game and media, in this case news, supported him in finding this decision. While it is difficult

⁴ *America's Army*

⁵ Opposing Forces

to change a culture due to a topic, idea, or goal, possessing a form of hegemony over various media types and video games combined will change forms of culture and how a certain topic is being regarded by the public. By continuing this initiative through video games with a shift in culture due to media, we can assume that the player is continuously indoctrinated by certain agendas if they are not reflected on properly. Successfully or not, this is the main topic of this thesis as the public focus commonly lies on violent actions and scenes rather than the messages games convey inside. How culture is constructed and perceived personally is a very individual, continuous process. Repression or support of certain sociopolitical views can do only so much as long as media including video games and a cultural force influence the consumer throughout their day.

While media such as news reports about U.S. army actions are one way of strengthening the position of *America's Army* as its official product, the connection between its players is also provided through the use of an extensive forum. Here, the community can discuss the game and, in extension, other subjects which are more off-topic and do not have to be directly related to the software as long as it is posted within the correct forum section and adheres to a set of general rules which are imposed and moderated as in most other online forums. In doing so, a more permanent discussion can be achieved, as it is the nature of shooter multiplayer games to not offer enough time to have deeper conversations. Furthermore, as each forum account is connected to rank and progress within the game, *America's Army* awards, as in other online titles with comparable forums, experienced and committed players. Especially those who own a link as soldier of the U.S. Army in real life and thus carry the responding title may receive more recognition than other players due to their occupation by the player base which targets players who wish to experience a more serious background compared to faster, less realistic games such as the Call of Duty series. Li describes in his work the internal conflict between the product and expectations of the U.S. Army Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis (OEMA) and the developer's point of view:

In interview, Major Bret Wilson (the *America's Army* deputy director in charge of community management) noted that from his perspective, the most significant institutional "fight" in developing the game project was in defending the OEMA preference for a very open free speech standard for the forums – as this technically violates Army regulations on website design, content, and speech. Wilson argued that

it was important to demonstrate that the Army was tolerant and democratic, rather than authoritarian (Li 55).

Especially in the face of the freedom of the internet that its users became used to, Wilson understood the importance of the game's forum environment which can not adhere to the rigid demands which apply within the army but may deter potential recruits online. In this case, the public, which is accustomed to less restrictive environments, as video games are, was preferred over the authoritative structure of the military. This also leads to a more approachable image of the military. The strategic flexibility in this decision, to keep forums more open, also helps to attract a target audience that values a grade of personal agenda which video games, within a certain frame, provide. After the official servers of the game were shut down, the game's popularity has been shrinking since with only roughly a dozen servers are available still during April 2024; they are powered by the remainder of the community. Regardless, *America's Army* remains the most prominent shooter game developed by a military force.

Although online games, especially as politically influenced as *America's Army* is, seem to be a potent platform for anti-war protest, such actions seem rare or non-existent. For one of the more popular actions within the product, Joseph DeLappe, who used the username "dead-in-iraq" in-game, typed name, function and date of death of various U.S. soldiers into the public chat, while he had his weapon dropped, not participating within the game (DeLappe 2f.). He kept sending messages of soldier's names without deeper explanation including their date of death until he was eventually voted off the server by players; overall DeLappe created a few intrigued, but generally mostly hostile reactions (DeLappe 3). On the one hand, the game's setting seems ideal to protest and remind its players of the serious context. On the other hand, however, it is not in the nature of shooter games to provide enough time or tools to engage in meaningful discussions. Through constant messages unrelated to the match itself, potentially important information may be lost and thus agitates players; the game was more important than the underlying message of DeLappe and the element of "playing" is more prevalent than its context within the real world. The reason why DeLappe's strategy was not perceived well, is that it did not accommodate to the players enough, who want to play for entertainment and not be distracted via chat, which may otherwise provide them information which is substantial to win. Still, clearly the comments were intrusive enough to force a

reaction by other players apart from the fact that the avatar was actively sabotaging the team. Generally, *America's Army* stands out in its strict rule enforcement and how actions within the game, but also single-player training is awarded, which creates a strong connection to be part of a group such as the U.S. Army which reinforces the idea to join and be ready by doing single player tasks. The motif of a soldier who is always practicing and, in the end, gets rewarded and promoted is kept present and becomes a playable experience. However, the highest ranks are not achievable by playing the game alone but require personal engagement within the U.S. Army. The prominent button which leads to the sign-up area of the U.S. Army as well as the support of other media such as news reports reinforce the purpose of the game and thus are more capable of being serious. The special credit which is given to active soldiers or veterans in game and outside automatically produces a sense of respect regardless of their experiences and skill inside the game. For players who strive to be the best and want to be well-regarded among the community of their favorite game, getting the highest score online would still mean less compared to those who signed up for the army or are already part of it, which creates a sense of pressure and duty if one truly wants to be at the top of the game lobby. The problem here is clear. Since early games such as *Pong* launched, the race for the high score and being on top of others was a goal which is implemented within the gaming society. By locking the best recognitions and reasonable progress behind the recruitment wall, players are incentivized to think about this action at the very least. Overall, it is safe to say that *America's Army* is not only a good video game, but also a game which does well in reminding players that the option to join the U.S. Army is there for them. As the game is free to play and runs on most computers especially during that period of the beginning of the 21st century, it does well in catching a target audience which has experienced more or less realistic situations before as well as those who play free games rather than those which charge upfront such as the main *Call of Duty* series.

5. *Spec Ops: The Line* as Criticism of Entertainment Culture

How a player perceives their actions also relates to the experience and skill of the consumer, as a study by Patrick J. Ewell, Hamilton and Guadagno shows; the more experienced the player is, the more abstractly the player identifies them (195). Thus, the results suggest that more frequent exposure to violent video games leads to a distanced perception of what is seen on

the screen. Where, after countless rounds in a multiplayer shooter, planting a bomb as terrorist becomes almost as abstract as the position of the attacking forward player in football. People may play violent video games and enjoy them but do them to enjoy; the background gets lost and is hidden by the developers who cushion the cruelty of war into a cinematic, fun experience. This is problematic because the true nature of violence gets lost and is adjusted to the desirable limit between realism and discomfort without interfering with the actions on screen. This style of popular video games seems to be dominating still, however, there are games which not only take a stand against the pointlessness of war, but also work with the players and their previous video game experiences to have them reflect on their consumption and the industry itself. The following game presented in this chapter stands out as anti-war game as it not only criticizes the shooter game industry but also stabs itself for being such as game at certain points while takes the player with them. In the following chapter I will discuss the third-person shooter *Spec Ops: The Line* by the German studio Yager Development. *Spec Ops: The Line* is a Gamification of the well-known novel *Heart of Darkness* (1899) by Joseph Conrad and its movie adaption *Apocalypse Now* (Paramount Pictures 1979) directed by Francis Ford Coppola. While many shooters serve as “simplistic, romantic, and jingoistic depictions” (Keogh 2) of warfare, *The Line* stands out among other shooter games in its presentation of war crimes and the growing distress of the player’s avatar.

In order to understand the gravity of intensity and how the game works, it is appropriate to describe the plot and its forefathers more closely. As in Joseph Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness* or Coppola’s movie *Apocalypse Now*, the main character of *Spec Ops: The Line* embarks on a mission through uncharted hostile territory with only a handful of allies on his side to find a leader, yet every adaption possesses their individual temporal and locational setting. The mission and idea seem rightful. In the novel, the protagonist Marlow ventures up the Congo River during the time of Colonialism to find Kurtz. The protagonist Willard’s search for Kurtz in the movie *Apocalypse Now* takes place in the Vietnam War. The shooter *The Line* uses a modern yet postapocalyptic Dubai which has been ravaged by natural disasters and conflict as setting which makes the theme not only more plausible and realistic, but also more experienceable as the player can relate to this environment more compared to Vietnam, due to previous video game experiences that take place in the Middle East at least partially. *Spec Ops: The Line* does not only consistently reference *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now*

plot-wise, but also through the game's character names which altogether creates a gamification that combines the novel's imperialistic topic with the movie's motif of American intervention. The primary mission of the small squad is to locate the deserted colonel John Konrad, a nod towards the original novel's author Joseph Conrad. The player's avatar, Delta soldier Martin Walker, references both *Apocalypse Now* main actor Martin Sheen and, phonetically, his role as Willard. In the introduction to her book "Docu-Fictions of War: His Surname, Walker, already plays with Johnny Cash and his related movie biography *Walk The Line* (20th Century Studios 2005); Martin walks the line, and the player needs to ultimately cross it to finish the game. Literature, movie, and game blend together as one which provides the game a strong position. In "U.S. Interventionism in Film and Literature" from 2019, Tatiana Konrad states:

Film and literature together constitute a full and intricate platform that can provide a cultural representation and interpretation of such a pivotal yet involute issue as U.S. interventionism" and that "these bits can together form a solid cultural portrayal of U.S. interventions, uncovering the reasons for American involvement in conflicts, as well as their follies, successes, losses, traumas triumphs, and truths (Konrad 27).

I wholeheartedly agree and would like to add the medium of video games to this collective of "representation and interpretation", too, as *Spec Ops: The Line* uses the trope of U.S. interventionism as starting point of the plot to subvert the mission to find Konrad into a psychosomatic horror trip of constant failure. *Spec Ops: The Line*, furthermore, and especially, serves as criticism towards the lack of reflection in the video game industry of military entertainment and transfers the responsibility to the player for what happens on the screen by repeatedly breaking the 3rd wall towards them.

Before I discuss the game's reinterpretation of *Heart of Darkness*, it is necessary to briefly summarize the plot of *The Line*. Over the course of the early 21st century, Dubai is largely destroyed by catastrophic sandstorms and has been left by its leaders. The 33rd battalion of U.S. soldiers under the command of John Konrad enters Dubai to evacuate the remaining locals. However, Konrad's final distress call signals that the evacuation has failed and that there has been a high death toll. Due to a constant, catastrophic sandstorm encircling Dubai, the area is declared as no-man's land; communication is no longer possible. The main character of *The Line*, Delta soldier Martin Walker, receives the task to find John Konrad and

his lost 33rd US Battalion. With his group members Lugo and Adams, they first fight against local insurgent groups. It becomes apparent that Konrad returned to Dubai after his failed evacuation task, declared martial law, and has become a dictator over the city that violently rules over the remaining locals with his soldiers. As Konrad saved Walker during an earlier mission, however, Walker is biased and is certain that there is an explanation for the committed atrocities.

Gradually, the situation spins out of control. As Walker continuously faces the atrocities of war, his mental state steadily deters. Walker crosses the thin moral line he walked until then as he uses white phosphorus explosives against a large force of 33rd soldiers that stands between them and Konrad. As they walk through their caused carnage, Walker needs to accept that the drone footage fooled him; most of the victims were not soldiers guarding the path, but refugees who fled from Walker's squad and were, in fact, helped by the 33rd. When Walker sees what he has done, he shows no regret but blames Konrad instead and is committed to find and kill him as an act of self-justice. Walker's mental state is rapidly deteriorating. When the team helps a CIA agent to reclaim control over Dubai's last water supplies to help locals, they first succeed, but the agent, in fact, purposely destroys the entire remaining water reserves: This condemns the entire city to die but would hide the crimes of the U.S. army and keep the illusion of a rightful, but failed intervention in Dubai. Disturbed, the squad moves on as internal conflicts keep emerging as well. The initial aim of the intervention gets lost in escapades of pointless violence. The team cannot find the third squad member Lugo in time before he is lynched by a desperate civilian mob. Shortly before Walker and Adams reach Konrad's tower, the last squad member who remains dies to U.S. soldiers in order to buy enough time for Walker. Alone, succumbed to madness and talking to a hallucination of Konrad, the main character finds him in his chair. He committed suicide a long time ago as the state of his corpse and the gun in his hand suggests.

5.1 Choices: Rewriting *Heart of Darkness*

The finale of *Spec Ops: The Line* offers the player a choice over four possible endings for Walker. The ending finally entirely disjoints both avatar and player from reality and brings them into the chaos of Walker's dissociative disorder caused by the committed war crimes

which the player is responsible and blamed for. Before the player becomes the judge over Walker's actions, the game reminds them of the moral *line* they crossed as they find a hallucination of Konrad, who is finishing a renaissance-style painting. It depicts the civilians who died during the players' white phosphorus attack, which is in its composition reminiscent of Pablo Picasso's 1937 painting *Guernica* which depicts the attack on civilians by Hitler's forces. Konrad questions the characters' sanity and holds him accountable while he also addresses the player to make clear that this scale of violence is not unusual in reality: "*I assure you, this is no game*". Walker finds Konrad dead in his chair with a gun; by the state of the corpse, it becomes evident that he committed suicide a long time ago. All three main characters in either novel, movie, or game face inherent madness towards the end. While *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now* are linear plot-wise in text, meaning that the consumer does not have influence on the content, *Spec Ops: The Line* gives its player a choice which results in different endings, and thus the possibility to judge individually while there is no positive outcome possible. In the final gameplay scene, the player sees a recapitulation of various atrocities which Walker committed combined with key decisions the player made for him which are individually adjusted depending on them, narrated, and commented by Konrad. The projections of Konrad and Walker target each other with their guns. It is now entirely clear that the player's avatar is the true villain who is responsible for the deeds, and that his mind imagined the radio messages by Konrad to transfer the blame to someone else. The players become the judge of the avatar, and, in extent, themselves through Walker, as:

[...][E]very horrific event that happened throughout the game happened explicitly because they kept playing, and gives them a single binary choice to respond with: kill (sic!) Walker for the crimes the player committed in order to progress through the game, or shoot at a hallucination of Konrad, and deny that this was their fault (Keogh 1f.).

In a way, the decisions all come down to Walker being or becoming Konrad or Kurtz in one way or another. If Walker waits for too long or shoots his own reflection, he implicitly judges himself as guilty and chooses the same fate of Konrad, suicide, as he acknowledges that he made the same mistakes as the Colonel did. When Konrad is shot in time instead, it is implied that Walker blames Konrad (and the player the game) rather than himself, deeming his actions as justified or forced by external factors. In this case, the epilogue sequence begins where U.S. soldiers find Walker outside of Dubai, only a shell of his former self, with a weapon in his hand. If the player attacks the soldiers and dies in the process, a cutscene implies that

Walker finds peace in death after he crossed the moral line which would make it impossible for him to return to the USA. Similar to the suicide ending, the character acknowledges his crimes in death which he committed during his intervention. Should the player attack and manage to kill all U.S. soldiers instead, the character is entirely lost in madness, becomes the person he initially wanted to bring to justice and walks back towards a burning Dubai after sending the same “welcome message” by a radio transmission Konrad greeted the squad with when they first arrived. Walker becomes the new Konrad, or rather Kurtz, of the city. Arguably, there are similarities to Willard from *Apocalypse Now* who also rejects any further messages from the USA while he departs, but since Walker moves back to the burning city, while Willard moves away from it at the end of the movie, this ending is not entirely congruent to *Apocalypse Now* but merely uses it as a reference to ask: “What if?”. Finally, the player has the option to lay down his arms and go home, taking the inexcusable actions to them as well. Due to the communication blackout by sandstorms in Dubai, no one would be able to find out what really happened. As the Congo in colonialism, Dubai is a “Blackbox” to the outside world due to the apocalyptic sandstorm which blocks all communication in the story. When a U.S. soldier finally asks him how he managed to survive on his way out, Walker, broken, merely answers: “Who said I did?”. His comment on survival references the foreshadowing prologue scene where the squad crashes in the helicopter before Lugo is lynched by the civilian mob. When he reaches the scene again, Walker asks his confused squad members why he is there again, which signals that all the time the player was playing through final memories and visions of a dying Walker reminiscing the horror and what might have happened if he survived the helicopter crash. This ending is closest to the game’s literary blueprint *Heart of Darkness* and interprets Kurtz’ final words in the novel: “*The horror! The horror!*” with Walker being Kurtz and dying, disjointed from reality by trauma.

Similar to his non-gamified counterparts, the main character becomes increasingly consumed by his task to the point of obsession. The team never finds true success, but only increasing distress as any attempt to save civilians ends in a catastrophe. The actions the squad commits under Walker’s command in order to “save” civilians from the 33rd result in the characters’ increasing mental deterioration. In the face of constant distress, Walker starts to hallucinate to the point where players cannot be certain anymore that what they see or hear really

occurs, or if it is just part of Walker's imagination. The avatar turns into the player's unreliable, overt homodiegetic first-person narrator and is the "madman" archetype whose psychosis is reinforced through loneliness and desolation (Frisch 52). Brendan Keogh fittingly describes the descent into madness over time:

This leads Walker—and the player—from killing faceless Middle Eastern insurgents, to killing American soldiers in self-defense, to killing American soldiers for no clear reason at all. [...] The point (or lack thereof) of anything Walker and the player do in the game is increasingly scrutinised. [...] By the end, it is clear that most of the disasters that happen throughout Walker's journey only happen because Walker and the player continue their blind, uncritical march forward (Keogh 8).

It becomes apparent that Walker believes that only a successful mission, to find Konrad, may bring salvation for the countless pointless deaths he is responsible for while his mental state increasingly deters. And, in the very same craze, the player keeps playing, commits digital war crimes, and hopes for that justification through a satisfying ending just as much. The path to madness is reflected in Walker's speech acts. In combat, the character uses utterances as feedback to inform his squad members and, in extension, the player on specific actions or occasions. Within a video game context, this is a usual event which happens to approve of the player's success. At the beginning of the game, they follow the shooter game genre's stereotype of tense, but professional communication which is quick and informative. However, over time as Walker becomes increasingly desperate and insane due to his constant distress and guilt, these speech acts change significantly in tone and content. While a kill may be confirmed by a neutral, impersonal "Target down" at the beginning of the plot, later the character comments the same situation unnecessarily visceral and elaborates on his killing, for instance: "Got this son of a bitch", or "Kill is fucking confirmed!". As long as the operation progresses unsuccessfully with unnecessary losses on allied, enemy, and civilian groups, the more brutal and pointless the character's comments become.

Visually, the game shows these signs of growing distress in the face of war through both model and animation. As in *Apocalypse Now's* Willard, the model of the avatar mirrors his descent into mental disorder. Injuries, blood stains and dirt on him increase over the course of the story and represent the countless killings and crimes Walker is responsible for. They are, however, never directly addressed by him but rather neglected, just as his continuous mental deterioration and distress is never admitted towards his team and thus the player.

Walker's animations also congruently reflect this: If an opponent is on the ground but still alive, the player can get near and kill them in close range, resulting in a short cutscene. They start "reasonable" and effective. However, with further progression, they turn into sickeningly cruel and extensive execution scenes which show his loss of control. These degradations of an enemy on the ground in combination with all the other war crimes add to the uneasiness for the player that through personal failures caused through the mission's original motif, U.S. interventionism, Walker has become the true villain of the story.

5.2 Stereotypes in The Line and the Player as War Criminal

Spec Ops: The line begins as generic shooter, as the gameplay itself is best described as a stereotypical, violent third-person shooter which offers the player only few tactical options and a narrowly pathed level design. The game initially fulfills the expectations of a "hyper-macho military shooter" (Murray 39). At the beginning of the story, the player mainly fights local insurgents on his path towards Konrad. These enemies fulfill the established stereotype of the hostile "Mythical Muslim" discussed earlier (Mirrlees and Ibaid 35). Similar to the natives in *Heart of Darkness*, they objectively serve as factor of the exotic, the others, but yet remain a familiar enemy for experienced shooter players within the Middle East as familiar setting. Steven Holmes says that in this sense, *Spec Ops: The Line* falls into the same critique as Conrad's novel, as it presents Dubai's Emirati as the cultural Other which merely serves as the "backdrop to the story" as they are not Western (162-163). This becomes especially problematic when we consider the fact that indeed, the game purposely uses the "Mythical Muslim" as initial enemy to the storyline to disguise itself towards the consumer as generic westernized shooter set in the Middle East before the main plot unfolds.

As the squad gradually begins to kill U.S. soldiers, the story begins to pick up its pace and focuses on U.S. soldiers as the enemy, while locals henceforth mainly serve as victims rather than enemies. There is no clear agenda or background for the local fighters except for being the resistance against the U.S. intervention which drives them into meaninglessness for the plot and only leaves the fighting Western factions and Dubai's victimized civilians as groups which evoke emotions. Holmes' comment on a depicted society as "backdrop" thus stands

strong and is an important comment on the game's development (162-163). Contrary to the Western factions, civilians receive no character which would serve as spokesperson to provide background or depth. This reinforces the aspect of imperialism that focuses on the occupants rather than the occupied who are shown as victims only. Similar to the main character the player is supposed to go on: As we experience the plot through the perception of Walker, he is blind towards his own mistakes and can only see those who were caused by the others, namely Konrad and his soldier rather than reflecting on his own actions which cause harm despite good intentions. As the lack of a voice or agenda for local groups, the location of the plot also adheres to the same issue. Dubai serves as "exotic locale in a way that reinforces a facile view of the Middle East" (Holmes 172). The destroyed Dubai of *Spec Ops: The Line* is only a symbol for Western intervention in previous conflicts such as the war in Afghanistan. The game shows no real locations in relation to Dubai, although resemblances occur such as a skyscraper which implies the landmark Burj Khalifa, yet merely through its sheer height and similar shape. When Chinua Achebe discusses *Heart of Darkness*, he expresses his rightful dismay that Africa is implied as "metaphysical battlefield" (21). Congruently, Dubai serves as familiar, yet exotic postapocalyptic stage that uses the location as narrative vehicle to slowly turn Walker against his own nation but neglects further reflection or acceptance of responsibility for neither his victims or his squad. The same one-dimensionality in terms of stereotypes occurs on gender distribution which favors the earlier mentioned male "hyper-macho" type while it implements the female gender as victim only. Soraya Murray, who considers the game's goal as anti-war game, assesses that "[...] *The Line* is startlingly devoid of criticality around representations of gender and race" (39). Similarly, Fruszina Pittner and Donald state that Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* criticizes imperialism but does not fully incorporate all its injustice (10). The developers of *Spec Ops: The Line* seemingly fell into the same trap as *Heart of Darkness*. Indeed, *Spec Ops: The Line* and its criticism on U.S. interventionism only superficially includes other parties than the West as notable nation. If locals appear, they are either faceless enemies, civilians who suffer consequences, or angry mobs which at the same time are still powerless when weaponized soldiers arrive. The player may want to interact with the locals and help, but frustratingly never gets the chance to do so. The civilians in the game who may be regarded as "implicated subjects" affected by war through (Rothberg 19f.) U.S. actions do not provide any validation for the player, but they are either agitated, scared, dead or soon to be killed through Walker's and the player's decisions.

This creates a binary view of the situation for the main character who only thinks in these two shades, black or white, while he devolves from a heroic soldier on a rescue mission to a war criminal who condemns the city to die through his self-righteous actions as he believes in possessing the moral high ground. However, while scholars such as Murray, Holmes, Pittner and Donald criticize the lack of depth and respect of the occupied locals in *Spec Ops: The Line*, I believe that this proves how faithfully Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* has been gamified, in fact. The game shows similar flaws in this regard, possibly on purpose even so. As within the native population in Conrad's novel, there is a lack of voice and representation in *Spec Ops: The Line* which is filled through faceless stereotypes and thus successfully reincites the very same scholarly discussions on these issues as *Heart of Darkness* and the issue of representation- perhaps even to new audiences. Users need to follow the script and have no possibility of intervention against Walker, his ignorance and increasing madness, which ultimately dooms everyone is encoded and premeditated as long as the player tries to finish the game. *Spec Ops: The Line* does not only criticize U.S. interventionism and assumed moral high ground in foreign countries but also the entertainment industry where violence and unethical warfare in shooter games are being normalized. Matthew Thomas Payne in his 2014 article "War Bytes: The Critique of Militainment in *Spec Ops: The Line*" excellently discusses *Spec Ops: The Line*'s criticism of what he considers as "Militainment", the presentation of military actions and the corresponding violence as light entertainment. The *Call of Duty* series, for instance, is featuring U.S. interventions across the world for the greater good: The player fulfills the mission, yet what happens to civilians and the country afterwards rarely matters. Potentially unethical attacks, for example by airplanes, are highly stylized. The invincibility and distance to enemies who become mere targets when shot from a realistically pixelated screen by plane or drone has been increasingly included in video games to add "authenticity" to depictions of warfare (Keogh 5). Keogh compares a scene from *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* to real footage published by Wikileaks in 2010 which shows a U.S. military helicopter attacking journalists; in both game and real video footage cynical dehumanizing comments are made by the crews (6). The aftermath of the attack in *Call of Duty* remains largely hidden for the perpetrators. Were all *targets* the player killed really enemies? It is highly problematic that such realistic actions are often Gamified without appropriate comments or discussions on what can euphemistically, and cynically, be named as "collateral damage". However, the fates

of civilian victims of war regarding have rarely been depicted as brutally honest as in *Spec Ops: The Line* which has the players question heroic (and naïve) narratives of played games in hindsight as I will show in the following example.

The main breaking point for Walker and the certainly most disturbing scene in the game makes the player experience the aftermath of the character's decision to use an unethical chemical weapon, white phosphorus, against alleged enemies in order to progress. The player directs the mortar explosives via a pixelated drone interface, and only sees thermal markers of "targets" that occasionally attack. Gameplay like this is not innovative but a common feature in shooter games; experienced players thus find a strong sense of familiarity in this scene (Payne 276). Hence, the shock and alienation that follows this short sequence becomes immensely impactful when the players have to slowly walk through the toxic field, past burnt corpses and dying soldiers, and finally realizes that most of the "army" which allegedly protected the gate were in fact innocent refugees of all ages, including newborn, in hiding. Insight in how developers tried to connect both player and avatar during this scene can also be gained from an interview with lead writer and narrative designer Richard Pearsey:

A lot of [players] at that point - they can't watch what they're seeing[...]which puts [the player] and [Walker] in an identical psychological state[...]because that's what you're doing and that's what the player is dealing with to a degree. The city is burning and you're the ones who burned it (qtd. in Pitts).

Pearsey considers Walker as the player's Alter Ego and as equally guilty of his actions. Before the white phosphorus attack one squad member begs Walker, and thus the player, to stop; yet both cannot, unless the player quits the program. The choice to not use white phosphorus but to fight conventionally by using conventional weaponry is merely a frustrating illusion; the sequence is programmed to be impossibly hard to finish without crossing this moral line. The players can only accept to commit the actions which the developers forcibly impose; a typical element of shooter games with linear level design such as the *Call of Duty* series. After the player crosses this line, the meaning of the title becomes apparent. The genre of the narrative structure changes drastically from military entertainment towards tropes and visuals of the Gothic (Holmes 161). The fact that *Spec Ops: The Line* disguises itself as such linear, basic military shooter game before breaking the euphemistic illusion of the genre by showing the real consequences, which usually remain hidden from the player, are what

evolves this scene into a very powerful anti-war statement which urges the player to reflect on previous gaming experiences.

A similarly tragic situation occurs later where the player follows a CIA agent to rescue the final water reserves for the city's inhabitants. With good intentions, the player captures the water tanks and tries to evacuate them from the mob. Ultimately, the player and the avatar have to witness that the agent lied and purposely destroys them to kill the city and hide the actions of the U.S. military. Following a car accident, the player may choose to leave the CIA agent to die under a burning vehicle or execute him for treason. Both options bring neither Walker nor the player satisfaction anymore as the city is now doomed. Such scenes of lack of control and failure become symptomatic in *Spec Ops: The Line* and reflect on the pointlessness of war, the powerlessness of the victim and the euphemistic shooter game industry. Kristine Jørgensen describes these scenes of violence, failure, and pain for the player as "positive discomfort" in her 2016 article; the game is an unpleasant experience, yet a masochistically enjoyable one according to her work. While video games usually provide a sense of gratification or validation for finishing a mission, *Spec Ops: The Line* relentlessly punishes the player for moving on. As is customary in video games, loading screens show basic hints such as commands and gameplay ideas. At the beginning, *Spec Ops: The Line* adheres to this unwritten rule of gameplay to disguise its true intention. However, with progress, this helpful developer's voice changes drastically. The game encourages the player's self-reflection on war and violent video games by breaking the wall of immersion to taunt the consumer through increasingly cynical comments in loading screens, such as: "Do you feel like a hero yet?", "This is all your fault", or "The US military does not condone the killing of unarmed combatants. But this isn't real, so why should you care?". Another comment which is directed at the player rather the character himself after an unnecessarily violent yet unavoidable kill through a voice message by an antagonist: "Aw, jeez... where's all this violence coming from, man? Is it the video games? I bet it's the video games". Combined with the main character as unreliable narrator and antagonist, the "conventional shooter's power fantasy" (Holmes 171) is shattered as the players receive nothing by the game but discomfort and scorn for their deeds. Ultimately, *Spec Ops: The Line* tries to critically engage with other shooters and especially its consumers by forcing them towards cruel actions and consecutively taunting those players who oblige to

their tasks in order to question common tropes of the industry and euphemized yet questionable in-game actions.

5.3 *Spec Ops: The Line* as Gamification of *Apocalypse Now*

Two scenes of *Spec Ops: The Line* stand out in their nod towards Coppola's movie adaption *Apocalypse Now* which further show that not only *Heart of Darkness* served as inspiration. The game draws a notable reference to *Apocalypse Now* during a surreal fight against a heavily armored hallucination. Alone in a room, Walker combats the reflection while facing severe blackouts. After every blackout, white marble statues which have their hands tied to represent killed innocents in the room change their position, with the hallucination having teleported somewhere else as well. Due to the fact that the screen of the game goes entirely black and also removes any interface features, players may first assume a problem with the program or even their computer itself. This makes this scene particularly confusing initially, as it, once again, breaks the 4th wall towards the players who now fully doubt their *own* perception of what they experience and not only Walker's. Similarly, during the scene at "Do Lung Bridge" of *Apocalypse Now*, the main character Willard visually suffers the same series of blackouts as sign of mental distress together with the consumer. As the bridge in the movie is perpetually destroyed by the Viet Cong and rebuilt by the U.S the following day, the scene stands for "Conrad's Sisyphean vision of the futility of Company labor" (Norris 217). Following this interpretation, *Spec Ops: The Line* subtly uses the sequence to signal the perpetuality of war and its victims. Both scenes break the immersion of temporal plausibility in the exact same way for the consumers; they cannot witness what happens during the blackouts with a changed situation after they occur. This surreal sequence, thus, is the Do Lung Bridge scene of the movie, gamified.

In another scene, a reference which stands out is the use of weaponry and music. During the mission "The Pit", the character needs to escape a helicopter that is attacking the squad from a AH-6J "Little Bird" helicopter its pilot nicknamed "Free Bird", a nod to the song by Lynyrd Skynyrd released in 1973 during the sociopolitical era of the Vietnam war. In War and as depicted in *Apocalypse Now*, the helicopter and its sounds serve as "agents of trauma, of war

and of chaos” (Greer 315). During the chase and in his violent craze, with the orchestral piece as background music for the sequence, the pilot sings Giuseppe Verdi’s Requiem “Dies Irae, Libera Me” along in Walker’s radio. This scene references to the movie scene where the US soldiers attack a village while loudly playing Richard Wagner’s “Ritt der Walküren” from their aircraft as motivation for themselves, and intimidation against the locals. Here, however, Walker *himself* is chased through the remains of the skyscraper. Not only for the Viet Cong, but also the Americans such as the movie character Willard, the helicopter and its sound are a sign of trauma (Greer 315). Walker as figure of Americanism becomes the hunted here, as the victims in the movie, and thus a victim of this trauma himself. Similar to the mission of “No Russian” in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* which was discussed in the earlier chapter of the “War on Terror”, Gamification becomes a tool to switch the role of perpetrator and victim within a known setting, namely in this case the use of iconic use of music and an armored aircraft vehicle which the consumer can easily relate to the Vietnam war. In this “trial and error” section, the players are meant to die several times until they memorize the fastest way and necessary movements. Thus, they themselves become victims through frustration by the apparently unfair situation which the gameplay imposes on them. Not only a war against technically superior enemies such as the conflict in Vietnam is mirrored, but also the fact that players have, at this point, killed hundreds of non-player characters, which are meant to be chanceless in the end, is held against them.

To conclude, *The Line* has achieved to facilitate reflections on practices of war which are depicted euphemistically in other “realistic” shooters. And while *Spec Ops: The Line* is not a realistic shooter in its gameplay features, it feels more honest than “true” military simulations in its depiction of the psychosomatic madness and loss of control that is miserable reality. *The Line* is not only cruel plot-wise, but also towards the players it considers as responsible for their countless victims including Walker’s downfall. Upon second playthrough, aware of Walker’s fragile state of mind and being paranoid themselves, players may realize that there is an obvious warning the soldier walks past at the very beginning of the game: A red “STOP” sign. Is it really just a sign, or in fact Walker’s subconscious premonition trying to make the player stop before he walks into this catastrophic sequence of events? It is up to the player to decide.

6. Conclusion

Undeniably, the power of explicit or implicit messages, whatever their nature, cannot be underestimated and has been a powerful tool to create or gain influence since the emergence of the human race. However, the pace at which these messages change increases drastically; consider the duration between influential landmarks such as the Pyramids of Gizeh built during ancient Egypt and the first mass-prints of pamphlets and posters. Between the access of every household to right-extremist motivated radio messages in the 3rd Reich of Germany during the 20th century and open internet platforms lies an almost meaninglessly small amount of time compared to propaganda methods of, for example, the antique period. The comparatively short time it took from experiencing a audiovisual material in a theater up to the constant access by Smartphones is symptomatic and comparable to the rapid development of video games, too. While the Aristotelian mimesis, “art imitates life”, holds true to many accounts, the anti-mimesis, for example stated by Oscar Wilde’s “The Decay of Lying”, life could also imitate art. Especially propaganda as form of deceitful “art” hopes to create this very effect on its consumers. The increasing technological advances within the industry of video games provide an exceptional playing ground with political interests under the shroud of entertainment. On the other hand, influences on recent propaganda campaigns are often explicitly designed to cater to the gaming community in order to evoke the desired sentiments of familiarity, adventure, and entertainment.

The rapid technological advance in computer technology poses not only chances from a scientific perspective to achieve progress in research at increasing rate, or to simulate virtual environments for harmless entertainment, but also poses dangers in the quality and precision at which war has become a playful experience worldwide. Additionally, the recent progress in Artificial Intelligence will likely change our world in significant and unpredictable ways. When one considers its current abilities, it seems only a matter of time until it may also design scenarios for video games with minimal input, as well as models of ally and enemy alike. Video games are primarily designed to entertain. And while violent games are generally played by their communities for this reason, disregarding the grade of fiction or reality of the content, these products can play an important, and dangerous role in how war and conflict can be

presented, regardless of area and involved parties. “When people take media into their own hands, the results can be wonderfully creative; they can also be bad news for all involved” (Jenkins 17). This sums up the duality of (violent) video games as part of our lives with their potentially fascinating, perhaps even educational potential, but also the inherent danger of malicious use for propaganda of any sort. To summarize, these are the main findings and recurring themes which seem prevalent throughout potentially or openly propagandistic content.

Firstly, due to the nature of video games which requires direct input the consumer is directly involved and is the active agent of events; in contrast to movies, players do not only witness the actions on the screen, but they also consciously act as active agent themselves. This provides an ideal ground to communicate and internalize problematic motifs, fears, and sentiments towards the user. Especially in the field of stereotypes such as the “Mythical Muslim” as popular digital enemy of the West, or terroristic propaganda which extends to sentiments in the real world as consequence. Directly or indirectly, prevalent fears of a society, such as the depictions of terror in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* series, can foster dangerous stereotypes on people and thus potentially change behavior towards others in the real world. The power of agency in video games makes violent video games more compelling and thus need to be observed more closely. Secondly, as I have shown during the chapter on ISIS propaganda, simple modifications can easily alter the context and become a vehicle for content which was not intended by developers while being difficult to shut down without removing the mostly positive, productive aspects of game modifications by the player community. As the terror organization ISIS shows, propagandistic material such as videos, photographs and images are difficult to shut down within the World Wide Web due to strategies which circumvent content being shut down permanently as Zelin explains in his work (86). The same method works for dangerous video game modifications as well, which can turn a satirical (and violent) soap opera as *Grand Theft Auto V* into a vehicle for Jihadist propaganda among a myriad of other games which are more open towards them; the good intentions behind content created by the community can thus be used as loophole for political or extremist messages. While shutting down video games open for modifications may seem like the obvious solution, with effort software can still be modified to a certain extent,

especially in situations where no anti- cheat software is active, and thus would only partly help in fighting extremist propaganda through game modifications. However, the progress of artificial intelligence may help developers and forums in the future to filter or alert potentially politically relevant or extremist content in the future to gatekeep abuse of the system which is not about additional content, but political and propagandistic messages. This would reduce the group of recipients to niche forums and communication channels which cannot be found easily by the common player looking for casual extensions in gameplay. Without strict censorship of the internet as a whole, eradication of this content is impossible and not a desirable solution in terms of freedom of speech. Thirdly, there are no clear rules within the video game industry sector in terms of content. Apart from obvious restrictions such as child pornography, for instance, blockbuster games are able to publish sequences from real terrorist attacks such as in *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* or torture sequences such as in the *Call of Duty* series. This leads to a very liberal market with only few restrictions as each country decides on the release or ban of a game separately which can be circumvented through options such as piracy by the consumer.

Thus, provided enough funding is available, anyone can actively attempt to recruit video game players as target group, as the U.S. army did by their self-developed title *America's Army* in a high-quality manner. While *America's Army* was officially shut down, it will be interesting to see whether there will be a re-emergence of a similarly ambitious video game product sponsored by a political power in the future which seems like a possibility. However, it is also worth the thought that the cost of such a project does not warrant the outcome anymore nowadays. Hollywood movies such as *Zero Dark Thirty* have use visual effects similar to virtual shooter games in order to increase not only intensity of their climax scene during the killing of Osama bin Laden, but also create a sense of familiarity for players who are used to the first person perspective. Extremist groups such as sympathizers or followers of the IS were quick in their propaganda videos to adapt these features even more so by visual markers typical for violent video games, which on the one hand increases the distance to the reality but on the other hand also reproduces the important thought within the player that this has been seen and experienced before digitally. Harmless fun where the death of the avatar means nothing is mirrored to real combat, evoking the sense of safety and adventure. Even photographs such

as the last U.S. soldier leaving Afghanistan in 2021 can evoke a feeling of familiarity and perceived heroism of realistic video games to a large target group. Essentially, the video game entertainment industry already defines the perceived triviality of violence, killing and death which produces an expectation which merely needs to be re-composed to create a strong propagandistic effect with serious (and potentially dangerous) intentions.

As silver lining, anti-war games such as *Spec Ops: The Line* show that digital games can incentivize its player's reflection on the consumption of war within their living room. While the influence of violent video games on conflicts in the real world is still underrepresented in cultural studies, this sector of entertainment should be closely observed in the future. Certainly, at some point in the future, popular video games will take on conflicts such as the conflict between Israel and the Hamas, as well as the war in Ukraine- both of which are still ongoing at this point of time. The gaming community has grown, especially with the advances of technology regarding mobile phones shooter games, both realistic and comic-based, are played in schools during breaks. Except for very few, no one wishes their games to become a tool of propaganda and head wash, although it is already happening. It is up to the community, but also scholars, to stay aware of current developments. Violent video games are a tool for entertainment which is usually used how and where it is supposed to be, but one needs to be aware of its potential dangers. Its user, the video gaming community, should enjoy the show and entertainment but also reflect on what is happening on the screen. Especially in realistic settings, violent video games are rarely objective and need to be reflected well by the player. Scholars of media and cultural studies should pay attention to this sub-genre of entertainment and not forget about this vast area of cultural studies but keep observing and researching and stay awake. Otherwise, this tool for entertainment can easily become weaponized even further and would turn into a dangerous weapon rather than something which is a part of our everyday lives as it already has been since its early invention.

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