

The Call of Higher Duty: How the Economy of Patriotism Extends from Real Civilians to

Virtual Soldiers

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Fading up from black, a declaration: *Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare*. A melancholy orchestral theme interlaced with ominous and distorted runs of technological noises paired with a rippling hexagonal background of shifting lines and symbols elicit the feeling that you are about to embark on a honorable mission of the highest importance. All you have to do is press a button to start. Off you go.

A quote professes the wisdom of the ages: “The sun, the moon and the stars would have disappeared long ago... had they happened to be in the reach of predatory human hands”. – Havelock Ellis.’ Suddenly you are pulled into the story by a voice, new yet familiar- distinctly prophetic and American- a man named Reyes. As you are told of a betrayal of humanity, shadowed ships rise from the ember-like networks of light of an opponent civilization on the hellish Mars. You are given reason upon reason in swift succession for how this enemy force is antagonistic to every earthly human value and basic survival. After multiplication of one warship to dozens, your vision is cut to black.

What follows is a mission in which you are tasked with undermining the enemy civilization that has launched an attack on your weapons facility. After jumping from your aircraft, you land on the ethereal icy surface of an extraterrestrial planet. Approaching a rift in the ice, you are guided to jump down, engage your boosters, and melee your first enemy soldier with a surprise attack from above. A jet of blood spews as you thrust your knife into his neck. You and your team combat enemies and make way to a base of operations to find bodies of former friendly inhabitants lying strewn across the floors and tables. You keep driving forward. Reaching the weapon room, you find the goal of your mission, what your enemy is after, a giant photon ray. You’re told that a massive horde of enemies is inbound. Your comrades hand you a smaller version of the ray to use. You defeat the enemy waves quickly as they burst into a bloody

mist. Suddenly, the base begins to self-destruct while several large enemy mechanoids block your path forward. You are commanded to charge up the giant ray. Upon activating it you annihilate the forces but also rip open the structure to the outside. The pressure difference sucks everything out onto the void of the planet, including you. You blackout.

You awake to find your team scattered across the ground, miraculously alive. However, a group of enemy brutes come up and violently beat your colleagues. The main antagonist, Admiral Kotch, fires a pistol shot into the air, commanding his men to stop. He approaches and begins questioning you. You attempt to negotiate your men's lives with him. He responds by aiming his weapon at one of your comrades. But he redirects his gun and fires, killing one of his own soldiers- he's a monster. He taunts, "Care clouds judgment. This is why you cannot win. This place... isn't yours anymore." He tears out your oxygen supply. In your last moments as this throw-away character you watch robot enemies stomp your comrades' heads into pulp, you fall over and see the enemy stake a flag on your turf, and you are repeatedly punched in the face by a human soldier until your vision pixelates and freezes.

That was just the first mission of the game- less than fifteen minutes of gameplay. Yet already, the player has experienced violence, the invocation of a cultural Other, ultimate sacrifice, and has died performing a patriotic duty to protect his country (or in this case, the Earth). Though this game takes place in the future, it is familiar with its use of patriotic tropes. But what makes this significant? What can we learn from such virtual stories about our real social reality?

This project aims to examine the ways in which *Call of Duty* militaristic first-person shooter (FPS) videogames serve as cultural artifacts<sup>1</sup> of the civilian framing of soldierly

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<sup>1</sup> Given that videogames are manufactured products involving decisions by game designers who tailor gameplay to a mass audience, that the content of these games are influenced by their socio-cultural context and the demands of

experience within the economy of patriotism. In these crafted realities, it is normalized to casually accept grandiose patriotic narratives as reflective of the values and experiences of soldiers. Though there are degrees to which players recognize the gameness of these videogames, the experiences of real soldiers are often flattened with virtual portrayals in manners that aren't commonly recognized. Focusing on the single-player modes within three recent *Call of Duty* titles, this research will explore how gameplay and dramatic devices interact to produce a narrative about soldiers that can be read as texts<sup>2</sup>. I combine qualitative analysis of these narrative simulations/simulated narratives along with theories of the economy of patriotism/war and the real experiences of soldiers to elucidate how these *Call of Duty* videogames are situated within and expand these exchanges of nationalistic values and idealisms. Ultimately, I bring attention to how these games may contribute to the civilian-military divide.

The economy of patriotism is defined by Zoe Wool as “a moral, material, and affective field of exchange between soldiers and others that draws on the iconic figure of the soldier” (2015: 104). It essentially entails the societal trend of hyper-focus upon the perceived patriotic sacrifice of the soldier. As soldiers are conceptualized as nationalistic, patriotic ideals, their service which entails violence and death by necessity is made to be a sacred gift that is unpayable via its unparalleled value. Civilians, in turn, consistently reify and display their indebtedness (MacLeish 2013: 186-188). This places upon the soldier “the burden of graciously accepting this repayment and conforming to the expectations of the indebted, even when it is not

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gamers, and that people engage with these games via physical manipulation, videogames may be considered cultural artifacts that offer a snapshot of a particular point in time that are able to be studied and interpreted. This means that videogames have a potential to offer unique perspectives on contemporary happenings as a media form in which scenarios are imagined and values are communicated.

<sup>2</sup> Though videogames are a unique media form, their narrative storylines and gameplay may still be interpreted as a limited set of outcomes and parameters. Experiences vary more than traditional texts; however, these products contain the same template that is accessible to all users, even if user decisions alter outcomes. Therefore, they may be read for their consistent content and boundaries that frame interaction logically like a text.

consonant with soldiers' own notion of what they are owed" (MacLeish: 190). This means that in this exchange, the soldier has their autonomy removed. As Wool elaborates and clarifies, "In making these sacrificial claims on and about soldiers' bodies and intentions, civilians produce national virtues and debts and route the meaning of Americanness through the body of the injured soldier" (2015: 107). Not only is the soldier made an object of sacrificial narrative, but they are exploited by a civilian narrative. Therefore, we may view the economy of patriotism as the system of exchange in which civilians are attempting to repay patriotic indebtedness that is enabled by perceptions of soldierly sacrifice, that forces conformity to and propagates an idealized patriotic narrative of sacrifice that is at odds with the real experiences of soldiers.

In an era where political tensions are fever-pitched and ethno-centric nationalism is making a comeback, this work illuminates the strategies by which we continue to value and propagate our own stories of militaristic superiority, valor, and sacrifice and the need for scholarship to consider the cultural significance of soldierly portrayals in massively popularized videogames. Given that the popularity of videogames is reaching new heights and games are now experienced by millions of people throughout our society, the realm of gaming studies is relatively small for such an extensive presence of socio-cultural artifacts and interactions. My intent is to draw attention back to the academic field of game research and to demonstrate that military first-person shooter videogames remain rich sources of cultural information and often serve to reaffirm social values and national identity across large populations, making them worthy of focus and study.

I utilize an anthropological perspective to best integrate analysis of a man-made item attached to specific values (an artifact) within the larger workings of civilian-military relations. Essentially I am offering a new approach to artifact interpretation within a broader culture of

attitudes and behavior; anthropology is undoubtedly well-suited for the task. In order to observe several *Call of Duty* games as cultural artifacts, I evaluate the selected first-person shooter video games as narrative dramatic texts. Not only do games lend themselves well to intertextuality given their roots in other media forms, but many of the most extensive frameworks for video game analysis are based around the idea of games as texts, such as those set forth by Mia Consalvo and Nathan Dutton (2006). However, within the realm of game studies this position of analysis is not without strong challenge.

In this early to mid-2000s- a period that could be considered as a heightened moment of rapid game studies scholarship- a movement called ludology caused great controversy within the field. Though ludology simply means ‘the study of games,’ ludologists began to distinguish themselves from colleagues within game studies by denouncing typical forms of media analysis; particularly theories of narratology that were prominent throughout broader media studies. Ludologists set forth the argument that games could not and should not be read as narratives. Instead, they argued, video games were unique in their interactive natures, their construction via entirely new computerized languages of coding, and their qualities of granting players agency to define their own outcomes (Frasca 2003; Herbst 2008).

Ludology proposed the idea of simulation theory: games didn’t provide a straightforward narrative; rather, players’ decisions, framed by the parameters set by game designers, determined the direction of games. Connected directly to this theory was the idea that video games weren’t akin to traditional media; narratives weren’t important to the experience of gameplay and games couldn’t be textually interpreted because user input made outcomes and interactions unpredictable. As Gonzalo Frasca, a prominent ludologist, concluded at the end of his essay, *Simulation versus narrative*, “simulation is the [media] form of the future. It does not deal with

what happened or is happening, but with what may happen. Unlike narrative and drama, its essence lays on a basic assumption: change is possible” (2003). Though Frasca and similar scholars didn’t intend to disregard storytelling, they discredited its importance within this media form and framed video games as a distinctive and more flexible form of media.

While the ludologists did help revolutionize how we study gaming, their initial rejection of narratology wasn’t well-received or adopted and sparked fierce academic debate. In a thorough rebuttal to prominent ludologists, Jan Simons (2007) outlines many of the inherent assumptions made within these theories and why they are problematic.

Firstly, as she suggests, these arguments failed to offer innovations in any sort of concrete methodology for studying games. Essentially, they presented strong critiques of past analytical methods along with new ideas about the nature of video games whilst lacking standardized practices to replace narratological ones. Secondly, they nearly entirely rejected any connections to previous media studies methods but for little cause other than the separation of the game studies fields from other areas. Many of the arguments made sweeping simplifications of what narratives are and can entail. Thirdly, narratives were debased as descriptions or fixed sequences of events and simulations were hailed as real-time interactivity. Not only did these definitions of narratives and simulations fail to apply consistently across examples, but also they failed to account for the cognitive flexibilities in engaging with narratives or how players change their actions to suit a narrative within a simulation. Ultimately, what was supposed to be a movement of an entirely new approach was just a shift in perspective; another example of the ‘gameness’ of academia in which “categories and definitions are set up strategically in an attempt to re-model the playground of the humanities.” Many of these views could be harmonized with existing

media theories. While there are inherent differences between media forms, there also exist great similarities that other academics have accounted for (Simons 2007).

More recent scholarship recognizes gaming as a having unique qualities as a media form while also having much in common with known narrative structures, combining the approaches of ludologists and existing textual theories. This has balanced the field by recognizing gaming as a unique medium with interactive elements while accounting for its shared qualities with other media forms. For my own purposes I will approach games as narrative simulations or simulated narratives. I believe that both terms are important because there are certainly aspects of a game that are more simulational<sup>3</sup> and others that are more narrative<sup>4</sup> and that gameplay between modes or entire games themselves shifts along this spectrum as well. In regarding games in this manner, the possibility of intertextuality is granted while there remains an active recognition of the interactivity of the user within these scenarios that distinguishes games from more traditional forms of media.

Though I will be building upon previous scholarship, it is important to acknowledge that the larger body of existing works does not generally account for the newest generation of games. The video game industry and medium is intrinsically linked with the rapid succession of technological development, meaning that that content, structure, and gameplay experience are constantly in flux and that the video game landscape shifts easily. As such, it becomes a difficult task to actively generate bodies of research that keep pace with the ever-evolving video game realm. Therefore, part of my intent to study three of the four most recent *Call of Duty* entries (released over the past four years) is to showcase the evolution of these titles as a representation

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<sup>3</sup> Simulational as in offering a personalized experience with extensive decision-making and outcome alteration

<sup>4</sup> Narrative as in having a structured storyline that remains more consistent across user experiences



of the quick changes within the larger gaming world as well as to provide anthropological approaches to gaming studies with more contemporary material to build upon. Though the militaristic FPS genre has a well-established history and is the subject of much existing research, modern scholarly works rely too much upon gaming research produced in earlier periods. This is problematic because past games and their contexts were quite different than those of today.

For example, many studies that discuss militaristic shooting games point to a particular text called *America's Army*. Released in 2002, this game was a simulation shooter featuring realistic, yet ethnically sterilized maps and enemies with little excessive violence (e.g. gore, blood, etc.). Developed by the U.S. Army, this game is often pointed to as an example of militarization of the American public in the post-9/11 era and is often heralded as a sampling of the future of gaming- highly simulational, lacking stereotypes, featuring realistic scenarios, possessing a strong online community, and focusing on tactic and achievement rather than emotional devices and narrative. While this game was popular during its time, generated subsequent sequels, and was certainly unique compared to its contemporary counterparts, it is not a good representation of the broader history of first-person shooters due to both its relation to the actual U.S. military and its lack of violent and trope-filled elements of gameplay.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, to return to the idea of the evolution of gaming, *America's Army* and its contemporary counterparts analyzed in past game studies research have been eclipsed via the growing emphasis placed on the narratives of modern video games. I chose the *Call of Duty* franchise as the focus of my research not only because their games are massively popular and influential within the genre but also because the game designers behind these products have been influential in reshaping the FPS landscape with their increasing emphasis on the quality of

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<sup>5</sup> In short, it bears little resemblance to any of the other popular shooters produced during the last decade.

storylines. Beginning with *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* in 2008, the narrative styling of FPSs saw a massive shift. This shift has been articulated as a move away from idealized gameplay that privileges (or at least is somewhat bound by) historical accuracy to a more narratively engaged gameplay that draws upon current notions of worldly conflict to imagine what warfare may resemble in the future (Payne 2016). Essentially, game designers began to create what war can be in alternate worlds or what it is today rather than what it was- denoting a dramatic, recent shift in the purpose and function of narratives. Clearly this means that these games have the added importance of being based upon current interpretations of current or future conflicts rather than having a strong historical basis where there also exists a history of scholarship meant to rectify inaccurate representations. Therefore, FPS games significantly morph with socio-cultural context, making them ideal artifacts for study of contemporary norms and values.

The channeling of nationalistic values is demonstrated by a historical pattern within game design: the use of cultural stereotypes and the propagation of Western conceptions of outgroups. This is exemplified by the scholarship of Reichmuth and Werning (2006) in which they discuss how Orientalism has been wielded in gaming over decades to reduce costs by reusing ideas and existing products, to maintain player familiarity with game mechanics and rules, and to promote marketability to mass audiences. Their work is significant in that it demonstrates tangible cultural interactions with and reasoning for the use of a Westernized Other across gaming tradition. In addition, Vit Sisler's essay, *Digital Arabs: Representation in Video Games*, discusses Othering and Orientalism within gaming in the context of stereotypes of the Middle East and also explores the cultural consequences of these tropes, especially with regards to the first-person shooter genre that is saturated with negative, simplistic, and inaccurate portrayals of

Arabs and Muslims. These depictions are clearly linked to U.S. campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq and engagements against terrorist groups. Furthermore, they flatten the diversity of the many different cultural and ethnic groups present within the Middle East into singular, one-sided portrayals of an antagonistic enemy force (2008). Nationalistic depictions like these are shown to be reiterated across games as they gain common cultural acceptance and familiarity.

Building upon the trope of use of ethnocentric portrayals, there has been scholarly work that examines in-game depictions of enemies in order to reveal direct insights about contemporary U.S. socio-cultural attitudes. In his essay, *Repelling the Invasion of the "Other": Post-Apocalyptic Alien Shooter Videogames Addressing Contemporary Cultural Attitudes*, Ryan Lizardi discusses the shared qualities of conceptions of enemy aliens in gaming with traditional conceptions of outgroups. Lizardi details both the cultural historical contexts of these games along with how their Otherness mirrors U.S. anxieties about wartime and cultures seen as threatening American legitimacy. He interprets these games as symbolic representations of current ideological issues in U.S. society, where anyone who challenges American doctrine is instantly cast as an enemy (2009). While this work is ground-breaking, it only lightly touches upon the narratives of the video games it studies by referencing generic characteristics of the enemies and a few plot elements, meaning that much of the profound symbolism and attitudes prevalent within the greater stories are ignored. Furthermore, it discusses more general cultural attitudes of Otherness instead of analyzing how gaming texts mirror and account for broader patriotic narratives. Lizardi's work is a fantastic reference point for realizing that videogames often relay contemporary socio-cultural attitudes, but I am more interested in the crafting of soldierly narratives than narratives of the Other (though I will certainly discuss the importance of the Other in the narratives I studied later).

In my research, I did succeed in finding one piece of scholarship that explores militaristic videogame narrative in-depth to shed light on contemporary approaches to wartime. Matthew Payne, in one of the most recent and perhaps important contributions to the field, *Playing War: Military Video Games After 9/11*, thoroughly details how post 9/11 shooters began incorporating personalized narratives (stories and character arcs) that resonated with U.S. values of counterinsurgency doctrine. He discusses how the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* franchise's narratives are used to reframe expectations of patriotism and of the duties of soldiers and civilians under these new militaristic values and strategies. While doing this, he explicitly acknowledges that these games craft the reality of war from a specific perspective based upon what gamers' expectations of what war looks like (2016). Though he briefly notes how the games referenced are based upon civilian ideas of combat, his general work is much more focused on how these narratives propagate U.S. counterinsurgency and how players are actively shaped by these militaristic values and depictions. What I am interested in is how militaristic FPSs represent our society's civilian approach to wartime experience, not their specific politics or how they affect players.

It is important to note that with the current commitment to the campaign (narrative) modes of these games and the recent phenomenon of placing storylines within settings of the near future, more creative intent is being placed upon the player's experience of narrative than ever before. Stories of valor, sacrifice, and perseverance in the face of a brutish enemy are becoming more popular with the emotional stakes being raised for each installment, constructing narrative simulations/simulated narratives that reaffirm cultural values. Though moral ambiguity and choices are rising up as the latest trend in gaming (see games such as *Until Dawn*, *Dragon Age*, *Bioshock*, *Dishonored*, even elements of *Grand Theft Auto V*), the militaristic first-person

shooter has been stubbornly set against this trend with very few notable exceptions (such as *Spec Ops: The Line*). Given that the *Call of Duty* franchise is the most emblematic of the genre, grosses some of the highest profits in the industry, pumps out new content frequently, and has crafted a following of millions of players, I intend to study the wealth of information about current societal conceptions of Otherness and wartime that is present in these cultural icons.

In order to help guide my research into selected *Call of Duty* games as potentially related to the economy of patriotism, I asked the following questions: Given that the economy of patriotism currently governs societal interactions with and perceptions of the military, how do the militaristic *Call of Duty* narratives, as civilian cultural artifacts, fit within or defy the attitudes and behaviors present within this economy? Are they part of these exchanges?

I study the three most recent entries within the *Call of Duty* franchise: *Call of Duty: Ghosts*, *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare*, and *Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare*. I have chosen these games for three reasons. Firstly, because they take place in the future- from 2017 in *Ghosts* to some estimated two/three hundred years later in *Infinite Warfare*, allowing for more creative agency of game designers and players. These games and the experiences of them are products of the contemporary social imaginary. Secondly, these titles aren't necessarily within the same universe of continuity. This is in contrast to the Modern Warfare sub-franchise where a continuous narrative is woven across its three games. By being somewhat independent from each other's storylines, these video games are allowed to explore different themes and contemporary concerns (e.g. militaristic privatization or warfare in space) via their separate narratives. And lastly, these games have significance in their contemporary nature. Considering the rapid evolution of the gaming industry and gaming narratives, this choice of entries will provide a

snapshot of current cultural attitudes of soldiers and wartime from the civilian perspective and will build upon the most recent game studies scholarship and anthropological.

Since my research focuses on analyzing these games as narrative simulations or simulated narratives, I focus on the single-player modes within these games called ‘campaign modes.’ I limit myself to single-player modes not only for the study of the storytelling it offers but also because it would be too logistically challenging and theoretically far-reaching to also incorporate multi-player modes, especially since those modes would require studies of gaming communities, chat logs, player group dynamics, etc. Multi-player modes are centered on competition and gameplay, making them poor subjects for a study about narrative representations of society. Simply, I am observing single-player modes to analyze these games as direct, manufactured artifacts made by and for people- as products of social behaviors rather than catalysts or creators.

I studied several methodologies for dissecting video games for analysis<sup>6 7</sup>. However, in studying these games as narratives that craft virtual worlds, I found it best to treat these simulated narratives/narrative simulations as a cross between virtual field and artifact. Therefore, I primarily resorted to recording jottings of phenomena related to my research question, then later expanding these into full field notes. For additional data collection concerning the player experience, I captured screenshots of gameplay to refer to the phenomena I came across. I coded my field notes and phenomena based upon the narrative devices being employed and values

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<sup>6</sup> A toolkit proposed by Consalvo and Dutton (2006) that divides games into four key areas of study (Object Inventory, Interface Study, Interaction Mapping, and Gameplay Logging) was useful in learning to recognize the many components of a game and how even the most basic gaming infrastructures result from meaningful choices.

<sup>7</sup> The Moral Management Theory proposed by Klimmt et al. (2008) discusses and provides a framework for moral navigation strategies in the context of videogames. These include moral justification, euphemistic labelling, advantageous comparison, displacement or diffusion of responsibility, disregard or distortion of consequences, dehumanization, and attribution of blame.

being communicated; essentially, I discovered rather clear patterns in these narrative components and categorized them accordingly. From there I situated the groups of data back against my question to elucidate the most important content and what they were accomplishing in terms of the economy of patriotism. What follows are my findings and theorizations.

**I argue that the *Call of Duty* cultural artifacts I studied are grounded within the economy of patriotism due to their crafted narratives' mirroring of real civilian perception of soldierly duty that relegates the war experience to ideals of sacrifice and higher nationalistic duty, not only serving as part of these economic exchanges but extending them into virtual worlds.** To demonstrate this, I utilized a two-pronged approach. Firstly, I discuss how these narrative simulations/simulated narratives invoke the sacrificial mythology of soldiers of the civilian public by highlighting three key areas of comparison: the positioning of soldiers against a wholly immoral enemy, the elevation of servicemen over the statuses of others, and the focuses of storylines around martyrdom. Secondly, I detail how *Call of Duty* videogames expand experiences of the economy of patriotism. It is here that I qualify traditional conceptions of militarization of players by contrasting these narratives with the real experiences of soldiers, carving a space for these narratives as largely disconnected from military reality and as more evocative of civilian imaginary within this economy.

I begin my argument by tying sacrificial mythology to *Call of Duty* games. To offer an interesting starting point on the concept of sacrifice, I note Zoe Wool's comment on the nature of the sacrificial exchange between civilians and soldiers. She states that "the sacrificial value of the injured soldier's body is insisted upon and then heaped back on him, often to disorienting effect" (2015: 104). But what exactly is being invoked here? How does the injured soldier's experience relate to the virtual soldiers of *Call of Duty*? And how is this exchange experienced in

these games? In order to answer these questions, I discuss the comparison between protagonist soldiers and enemies, how soldiers are granted superiority over others, and the presences of intense narratives of sacrifice.

Concerning the distinction between comrades and opponents, dehumanized portrayals of in-game enemies, via their physical representations and their inherent antagonistic foreign qualities, craft them as a sub-human Other antithetical to the U.S. values the protagonists champion. Dehumanization in these games is not as obvious as it is in Lizardi's alien shooters where aliens, despite their complexities, are still entirely different species. Therefore, I build upon his theories of creation of the enemy "Other" to extend to the contexts of *Call of Duty* videogames. I argue that enemies are still regarded as human but are distinguished as untrustworthy or have their humanness blurred through their characteristics.

One of the most common trends within the *Call of Duty* series and the militaristic first-person shooter drama used to dehumanize is through use of contemporary notions of foreignness. Previous *Call of Duty* titles that take place in modern-day or near-future have used representations of stereotypical Russians, Middle-Eastern terrorists, African militants, etc. (Payne 2016).<sup>8</sup> Payne argues that for the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* franchise (which follows this pattern) that this "scenario is politically satisfying because it recasts the Manichean political dynamics of World War II (Allies vs. Axis powers) and the Cold War (the United States versus the Soviet Unions) in the post-9/11 era when such divisions are rarely that clear" (78). Not only do I agree with this position, I found it to still be a primary narrative tactic within the recent titles I studied. In *Ghosts*, the enemy is shown to have originated as a coalition of corrupt Latin and South American countries often associated in reality with violent revolutionaries and civil

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<sup>8</sup> This is also verified by my own experiences having played many *Call of Duty* titles over the years.



warfare. In *Advanced Warfare*, the enemies of the first level are the North Koreans who have attempted to invade South Korea. Later, the enemies are of a terrorist organization sprouted from violent Chechnyan separatists. And in *Infinite Warfare*, many of enemy leaders you are tasked with killing have names of foreign semantic origin, with several clearly of Russian and Korean inspiration. In addition, since the enemy forces of this particular game are from an authoritarian regime on Mars, they could be considered even more foreign via distance and cultural space than those of other games. What all of these examples convey is that contemporary or past militaristic tensions are morphed to fit a fictional scenario in which the enemy has historically threatened our society in reality as well as in-game. This means that these narrative simulations play into our current socio-political biases in order to craft an idealistically antagonized enemy whose wartime motives aren't questioned- he is merely killable.

Dehumanization is also accomplished in these narrative simulations/simulated narratives through use of a foreign-tongue or vocal distortion. I relate this to Lizardi's (2009) concept of 'garbled' English use by alien enemies, in which he asserts that the "language spoken by [enemies] is related to English but foreign at the same time. All of this points to the aliens being coded as human-like enough to understand, but as being racial and culturally different enough to repel" (299). Though *Call of Duty*'s enemies are generally human<sup>9</sup>, they follow this same trend. At the beginning of *Advanced Warfare*, your first encounter with enemies, in the form of North Korean soldiers, comes after you hear their voices echoing down hallway. In *Ghosts*, the enemy Federation forces are distinguished throughout the entirety of the game via their rapid use of the Spanish language. Given that foreign languages stand in contrast to the English speech of protagonist forces and that this strategy has been historically employed in shooters, the sound of

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<sup>9</sup> The primary exception being enemy robots present in *Infinite Warfare*.

another language immediately prompts the player into an awareness that malicious forces are nearby. I contend that the same holds true regarding the use of mechanized voices, and it is in *Infinite Warfare* where this phenomenon is more common-place.<sup>10</sup> Not only do enemy robots make weird mechanized vocalizations (especially in stark contrast to your robot comrade, Ethan, who is heavily humanized through colloquial American speech), but also human enemy soldier voices are often distorted via technological intercoms. Furthermore, the primary antagonist constantly has his voice mechanized via his helmet or via his menacing electronic transmissions that challenge and degrade the player's forces.

Foreign language use and vocal mechanization are associated with the threat and evil intent of enemy forces. Lizardi states later in his essay that "In these alien invasion videogames, the ingroup is established as the normal Western human beings and the outgroup established as the "Other" aliens, which stand in for the broader cultural "Other"" (300). Therefore, as I have demonstrated, given the English-speaking, natural-toned norms of speech of the Western protagonist forces throughout these narrative simulations/simulated narratives, any speech other than clear English is antagonistic. Across and within individual militaristic FPSs, language distinction and foreignness are used to construct mistrust of a cultural Other.

Moving beyond political, cultural, and linguistic affiliations, enemies in the texts I studied were subject to a dehumanizing phenomenon I labeled 'distortion' which entails morphing or portrayal into a less-than-human state via facial obstruction (e.g. a facial mask) or via bodily profiles (e.g. a hazmat suit that balloons the outline of an enemy's physique. Though Lizardi (2009) lightly discusses the bodily distinctions between humans and enemies, he doesn't

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<sup>10</sup> Though I can only speculate, this seems notable given that this game doesn't employ foreign language yet does often use vocal alteration.

provide much material. Here I am only theorizing about the gravity of effects that distortion may have, but I will say that distortion is certainly marked between the antagonists and protagonists. While the antagonists are often subject to this phenomenon, the protagonists remain humanized, often with visible faces and normalized combat gear. While I wish to call upon gaming studies scholars to investigate this more thoroughly and I am unable to better situate distortion within the academic context, this phenomenon does lend itself to Lizardi's assertion that there are narrative portrayals of enemies that allows for a "connection of the alien forces to humanity and yet "Others" them so as to make them easily killable" (300). Indeed, if we equate the labels of 'foreigner' and 'alien,' then the distance between his alien shooters and the militaristic shooters I'm discussing becomes uncomfortably small.



Figure 1: An enemy has his face obstructed in *Infinite Warfare*

In short, the Western soldier protagonists are contrasted with an antagonistic Other, constructed through bodily distortion, tropes of historical rivalry, and foreignness of the voice. These enemies are inherently demonized and deemed killable, postured against the soldier as prey and enacting their disposability. This contributes not only to the historical framing in which

Americans define cultural rivalry (as discussed by Payne), but also to the civilian narrative of soldiers as nationalistic warriors against a threatening cultural Other.

However, though these enemies are dehumanized and perhaps demonized via relations to particular ideologies, there is another way in which they are contrasted with our protagonist soldiers: through the immorality of their actions. Though there are many manners in which enemies are made immoral, I focus specifically on their carrying out of civilian death.

Civilian death performed by the enemy is consistently referenced and witnessed throughout these games. Not only does the player encounter the bodies of genocidal massacres, but they also are guaranteed at some point to see civilians being killed. To connect foreignness with these acts, antagonist forces are often created with narratives of radical ideologies (authoritarian regimes, terrorists) that encourage elimination of civilians. This elevates their Otherness to higher levels of threat via a malicious disregard for innocent life. These acts are contrasted with the rectitude of the US military, rendering the enemy highly immoral and deserving of death, a point I will return to shortly.

Civilian death takes on several different forms across all the narrative simulations/simulated narratives researched. I will walk through some of the differing types quickly:

- There are instances in which the player is informed of civilian death, such as in *Advanced Warfare* when you view newscasts of various terrorist bombings around the world and then immediately witness black-and-white stills of civilians suffering after the attacks.
- There are occurrences where the protagonists discover bodies of civilians, witnessing the evidence of a brutal massacre. This is well-demonstrated in *Infinite Warfare* where upon

entering the Moon spaceport, you find the bodies of civilians corralled and executed by gunfire in-line by enemy forces.

- Active executions are found within each game as well. This is when the player comes across a scene where civilians are being deliberately and actively killed. An example can be found at the beginning of *Ghosts* where the enemy shoots at least three civilians kneeling on the ground before you can save them.
- Lastly, there is also home destruction, in which the enemy attacks the protagonist's home or an iconic place that symbolizes a broader citizenship (e.g. Hollywood/Santa Monica in *Ghosts*, The Golden Gate Bridge and Seattle in *Advanced Warfare*, and Earth/Geneva in *Infinite Warfare*). This relates well to Lizardi's discussions about alien games using real or fictionalized Western spaces to invoke values of protection and further create insider/outsider distinctions (301-303: 2009).



**Figure 2:** Civilians are about to be executed in *Ghosts*. Unfortunately, the player witnesses their deaths.

But how does this relate to the comparison of righteousness between protagonist soldiers and enemies? I believe that it is through advantageous comparison that antagonists are made more immoral and soldiers are made more just.

In Klimmt et al.'s Moral Management Theory (2008), they list several tactics through which gamers morally justify violent actions within videogames, one of which is 'advantageous comparison.' Advantageous comparison is the process of believing one's own actions are righteous when contrasted with the more evil actions of others. Given the insult of civilian death due to Western humanistic values and wartime ethics of preserving civilian life, the enemies' blatant violation of these basic values, the player's inability to attack civilians<sup>11</sup>, and the in-game absence of civilians from the enemy population<sup>12</sup>, the player/game protagonists are distinguished from the antagonists via advantageous comparison. As a result, the player's/protagonists' violence against these enemies are justified.

Though I do not wish to delve into wartime ethics, player morality, and just war theory, I invoke the idea of advantageous comparison in relation to these narrative simulations/simulated narratives to demonstrate that in-game phenomena often serve the civilian, nationalist perspective. Not only is civilian death playing into a strong moral reaction on behalf of the player and characters, but it is also meant to normalize and justify the violence of the soldiers present within the game as necessary. The civilian narrative of soldierly experience positions 'good' soldiers against 'evil' enemies.

With the creation of an antagonistic, immoral Other that the protagonist virtual soldiers fight against, and these soldiers' elevation to a just state, the civilian wartime narrative divorces the

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<sup>11</sup> The game will respawn the player and tell them that attacking civilians will not be tolerated.

<sup>12</sup> This also relates to Klimmt et al.'s concept of 'distortion of consequences.'

soldier from the death and violence he commits. This is a demonstrated component of the economy of patriotism (MacLeish 2013). MacLeish discusses just how stories of war typically are disjointed from soldierly experience of violence. Firstly, he relays a conversation he had with a veteran, in which the veteran exclaimed about the extreme violence of his acts that would cause others to think he should be in jail. MacLeish then describes in his book how with such revelations, to the civilian, “the soldier’s labor resembles a crime... where the only aim is to hurt and kill” (198). He then goes on to assert the divorce between civilian war narratives and soldierly experience:

On the field of battle, the soldier is allowed to engage in all sorts of acts that would otherwise be illegal... and likewise while deployed is subject to levels of indifferent physical danger that he would not otherwise be expected to endure. War has no framework of judgment or evaluation tacked on. In soldiers’ talk, this space was thick with lived intensity, but in its subjective immediacy, it was divorced from all those things that make a coherent story of war: politics, symbolic elaboration, or even ego—all of which hover at its periphery as the recording angels that will later translate things into an intelligible narrative (199).

While MacLeish is discussing the soldiers forming their own wartime stories, he is bringing attention to the struggle that they have in doing so. This is meant to bring traditional conceptions of war experience into question. Often, violence is the underlying motive, defying civilian ideals of patriotism and clashing directly with war stories who frame soldierly struggle around a larger, nationalistic narrative filled with ideals of duty and sacrifice. And when carried out, this violence is often brutish in a way that doesn’t adhere to the sanitized justifiability that most civilians believe in.

These games do not follow the observations of MacLeish, instead positioning righteous soldiers against evil Others. These narrative simulations/simulated narratives wield clear justness over proven immorality, following the ideals of the civilian narrative and not the wartime messiness of violence.<sup>13</sup> In addition to comparing soldiers to an immoral enemy, this just violence also elevates the virtual soldier over an immoral enemy- he is given status and power over the Other in this way. This brings me to discuss the other ways in which virtual soldier statuses are raised over others, including civilians.

In addition to having moral superiority over the enemy, soldiers in these *Call of Duty* games also conform to the civilian perspective in the economy of patriotism by being granted supercitizenry. Supercitizenry of soldiers here entails a distinct separation from civilians, a higher nationalistic value, and the value of soldiers against the devaluation of civilian life.

Soldiers are made to occupy a relationship with civilians as righteous defenders that sets them as inherently different from civilians. MacLeish argues that soldiers are set up as an “opposite” category to civilians, writing, “While civilians are “free” to do as they please, the soldier pursues a transcendent, higher purpose... He is made righteous by threat and injury, and stands stoically In the face of trauma” (188). MacLeish uses this to connect to values of the unpayable debt present within the economy of patriotism; by pursuing such a laudable, unique path, the soldier is incomparable to civilians who simply continue in their freedom, enjoying the fruit of the soldier’s labors. As MacLeish then points out, soldiers themselves often would say that they didn’t know the feelings or thoughts of civilians since they weren’t ones themselves. Furthermore, the military often is framed and frames itself as distinct from the public (188). This

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<sup>13</sup> Though one may argue that these games put the player in the virtual shoes of soldiers, require enacting violence, and enact visuals of death, as I’ve shown above and as I contend later, these virtual experiences aren’t congruent with the real experiences of soldiers.



is echoed in the article, *Professor Carnage*, by Steve Featherstone. In this article, Featherstone attends a seminar led by and later talks to, Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, an ex-Army Ranger, founder of killology, and a controversial voice in the gaming field for his bold degradations of violent media. Grossman describes three types of people to his audience: the malicious wolves, the ungrateful meandering sheep, and the warrior sheepdogs. The sheepdogs are the guardians of the sheep against the evil wolves, yet they are more powerful than the sheep and often have to ignore the naïve cries of them (Featherstone 2017). To many who agree with Grossman, civilians are separate. The civilians in the games I studied were two-dimensional (figuratively) and flat; they lacked personality or story. This stands in direct contrast to the soldiers that the player is put in the perspective in. Especially with the increasing focus on character development and rich narrative within the *Call of Duty* franchise, virtual soldiers, via their rich complexities that keep evolving, are becoming more distinct from the in-game civilians. Simply, soldiers both real and virtual are made to occupy a separate citizenry than that of the civilian.

In addition, this citizenry is heightened to supercitizenry given the soldier's higher duty within the patriotic narrative. MacLeish describes how a soldier's work is often discussed as his 'service.' In discussing what jobs are considered 'services' and what 'service' entails, he points out that a trend within 'service' is a lower amount of money given than is thought of as deserved or asked for. Essentially, monetary value alone is not reason enough to perform a service, so those who pursue such jobs often have "loftier motives" (190). These motives set apart practitioners of service from others and elevate them via a greater moral purpose. MacLeish then builds upon service with 'sacrifice' as the ultimate consumption of life: "Sacrifice ups the ante even higher than service does, and entails yet another kind of balance sheet—one laden with unpayable debts. Soldiers die not merely so that we live but also so that life is ordered by law

and reason is even possible” (190). This perspective is definitely one shared by the *Call of Duty* games. Not only are there many invocations of sacrifice throughout the games, but the storylines of these narrative simulations/simulated narratives almost wholly revolve around this concept (this will be discussed in detail shortly). These sacrifices are justified in game by continuing the way of life of your society, invoking a higher purpose while also making this higher purpose the central focus and motivations of the protagonists. These virtual soldiers are portrayed and elevated as the ultimate followers of the patriotic narrative. This grants them supercitizenry via their distinction from civilians and their nobler purposes.

Soldiers are also granted supercitizenry via the devaluation of the civilian. Returning to the Featherstone piece featuring Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, the Sheep pale in comparison to the power of the Sheepdog (2017). Sheep are helpless, nearly mindless prey that can be easily picked off by the supposed Wolves of the world. It is not by mere happenstance that the term ‘sheeple’ is so prominent amongst conspiracy theorists. As Catherine Lutz contends in her *Homefront: A Military City and the American Twentieth Century*, the soldier is “emotionally disciplined, vigorous, and hardworking. By definition, then, the civilian is weak, cowardly, self-centered, materialistic, and wealthy. The civilian is soft, lacking experience with both the physical discipline that hardens muscles and with the hard facts of death and evil that the soldier faces down” (2001: 228-229). Not only is the soldier stratified over the civilian, but the civilian fails to meet the high nationalistic values that the soldier represents. This also enables a second side to the unpayable debt, one in which the civilian is too patriotically poor to compensate the soldier. Furthermore, this relegates civilians as “subcitizens” (Lutz 2001: 237), while heightening the soldier through his superior adherence to nationalistic values. As MacLeish states, “Soldiers are excluded from the category of “regular” citizen at the same time as they exemplify it to an

extreme by their mortal exposure on behalf of the nation” (189). It is clear that soldiers are given more value, especially in terms of their country.

If this is the case, then I believe that paradoxically, it is civilians who are more disposable. In discussing several missions across the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series in which civilians are briefly controlled (and later die by some attack) or are killed by the player (such as the infamous “No Russian” mission), Payne argues that “these civilian losses become regrettable but necessary sacrifices—narratively and ideologically speaking—in the modern counterinsurgency effort. They are the human resources needed for maintaining and fueling the United States’s perpetual War on Terror” (2016: 84). Instead of these civilians being sacrificial heroes, they instead are victims by necessity. This holds true within the *Call of Duty* games I have studied. Particularly of note are several levels within *Advanced Warfare* in which some battles take place amongst the public on streets of cities. In one such instance, a terrorist sniper attempts to take you and your comrade out as you run through some Grecian town. What proceeds are massive amounts of civilians being obliterated by this sniper. Though this instance is placed within a foreign country, the civilians are still made to have real agony and terror, and the primary characters still operate under norms of protecting civilian life. Of course, it becomes easy to accidentally shoot a civilian or two in the level. Once again, especially in comparison to your larger mission of taking down the terrorist leader in this level, they are necessary sacrifices that are promptly forgotten. If a death is memorable, it is one of your fellow soldiers, not civilians. The soldier above all protects his own in battle first.

The last way in which soldiers are stratified over others is via superhumanness. Throughout these games, the player is given better weapons and more extensive powers than the enemy. Especially within *Advanced Warfare* and *Infinite Warfare*, soldiers are given booster

packs and other technological devices that allow them to do what was previously impossible. You can jump meters high and far, wall-run, grapple long distances, etc. You are essentially given superpowers based on the notion of futuristic technology. Furthermore, it is worth noting the basic game mechanics of each of these games. The player is made to be a one-man army, with only recent computerized comrades being of any use. Yet still the player is able to take many hits at once, they regenerate health, they respawn when they die, and they are made to defeat impossible hordes of enemies- sometimes with the same basic equipment.<sup>14</sup> Certainly, the player may adjust the level difficulty to be slightly more realistic<sup>15</sup>, however they are still allowed to perform feats that the enemy cannot. Because the game prefers the player to the enemy, there exists a certain destiny of succeeding that is always attained so long as the player keeps trying and improving. I believe that the technological advantages of the real U.S. military over its opponents mirrors this superhumanness effect, and that the way civilians view U.S. military action as destined to prevail also mimics this virtual reality in an abstract way. Payne discusses how these games create an equal and opposite enemy to the player's forces, contrary to the reality of war which is often lop-sided (2016: 78). Just as the civilian public tends to view military practice based upon outdated notions of conventional warfare, these games create conventional warfare scenarios in which the enemy is more 'equal,' yet the player arises as superior in tactics, technology, and ability- as a superhuman. This further embeds the *Call of Duty* narrative simulations/simulated narratives within the economy of patriotism.

Finally, storylines of martyrdom are what ground these games within the civilian perspective, focusing on the sacrificial mythology of soldiers most directly. This is accomplished

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<sup>14</sup> There's an interesting moment in *Advanced Warfare* where the player uses a mechanized suit to slash through an enemy base, just to later defeat four enemies wearing the exact same suit simultaneously.

<sup>15</sup> A recent mode in *Infinite Warfare* called YOLO mode combines the challenges of a special survival mode, in which the player has to find items to heal himself and conserve supplies, with the challenge of not being allowed to die once during the game or else facing a total restart.

via the personal loss of figures of wisdom, allusions to a higher purpose, protagonists' preparations to sacrifice, and the concept that links them all, the ascription of sacrificial value onto soldier's bodies.

The largest personal losses throughout the game all are accentuated with those character's understandings of the higher purpose of duty- to complete the mission. As the protagonists' move through each narrative, they lose comrades who enlightened them and embolden them with the necessity of sacrifice. *Ghosts* exemplifies this with the father's death which motivates you and your brother to risk it all; *Advanced Warfare* with Cormack (your leader and the man who saved you) who also convinces your team to embark on a mission against the odds; and *Infinite Warfare* with Omar (who sacrificed himself attempting to save another soldier), MaCallum (who prevents you from being killed by an explosion by willfully dying), and others who all make it obvious that sacrifice is part of duty and worth engaging to achieve warfare success. The losses of these characters are immortalized via protagonist suffering in cutscenes, within a narration that discusses death and ritual, or through invocation of their wishes against the odds of facing the enemy. Wisdom is provided in the most crucial narrative pivots of the game, granting revelation to the protagonists, and is a common element in character narrations of cutscenes in general. If a cutscene isn't revolving around the characters talking about the next mission, it features a character somberly talking about the reality of warfare.



**Figure 3: One of the primary characters of *Advanced Warfare*, Cormack, bleeds out while telling the player to continue the mission.**

Furthermore, the protagonists always inevitably prepare themselves to be sacrificed. In *Ghosts*, you and your brother are prepared to sacrifice your lives to kill the primary antagonist, ordering a missile strike on your location (that you barely manage to survive). In *Advanced Warfare*, you nearly die trying to disarm a rocket with a biological weapon, bearing the flames of its exhaust, and later you sacrifice your prosthesis<sup>16</sup> to allow the antagonist to fall to his death. Concerning *Infinite Warfare*, the whole story is essentially one sacrifice after another, with you losing comrades left and right, and it culminates in the player's ultimate death and his memorialization. Via the wisdom of being dedicated to a greater cause of protecting others than one's own mortality, sacrifice is elevated to martyrdom, and these games achieve an even greater sense of religiosity and mythology. The sacrificed become sacred. And their values become goals of a near-divine aspiration of the protagonists.

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<sup>16</sup> Part of the plot revolves around the protagonist losing his arm at the beginning of the game, getting a new robotic arm from the primary antagonist who is assumed to be good until shown otherwise, then the game culminating in cutting off your robot arm to kill the antagonist, ridding yourself of him and forgoing his gift/your arm to benefit the rest of the world.

These sacrificial narratives and mythologies play directly off of the ascription of sacrificial value to soldier's experiences and bodies by the civilian perspective in the economy of patriotism. As Wool asserts in her *After war: The weight of life at Walter Reed*, "In making these sacrificial claims on and about soldiers' bodies and intentions, civilians produce national virtues and debts and route the meaning of Americanness through the body of the injured soldier" (2015: 107). Just like Wool's injured soldier, I believe that civilians route nationalist values through the body and experiences of the virtual soldier. I find Matthew Payne's discussion of 'sacrificial citizenship' to be of use here. Payne defines sacrificial citizenship as "a core element of American political identity that demands that the rights of citizenship be affirmed and that the political health of the U.S. body politic be reinvigorated through periodic and voluntary self-sacrifice." He employs this shortly after, arguing that "sacrificial citizenship is enacted when the gamer plays through the characters' sacrifices" (2016: 79). Given that videogames offer a virtual interactivity through the perspective of virtual soldier's, players not only wield patriotic mythology through virtual soldier bodies, but they also do so through the very experiences of the game, immersing themselves within these sacrificial narratives. In this way, players are allowed closer proximity to the sacred martyrdom of soldiers as seen from the civilian perspective.

However, these narrative experiences do not match the real experiences of soldiers. Moving on to the second crucial component of my research, I detail how *Call of Duty* videogames expand experiences of the economy of patriotism. I accomplish this by qualifying ideas of player militarization by contrasting virtual narratives with real soldierly experiences, and I contend that these simulated narratives/narrative simulations are more evocative of the civilian imaginary within the economy of patriotism than they are with any sort of military reality.

Concerning real soldierly experience versus virtual narratives of patriotism and militarization, it is necessary to consider that many soldiers qualify their service as merely a ‘job’ or at least offer more motives than patriotism for their enlisting. Contrary to what many civilians might expect, many real soldiers often insist upon the “extra/ordinariness” of their work (Wool 2015: 110 ). Though their jobs enable their killability, remove bodily autonomy, require violence, and demand intent to hurt or destroy, soldiers don’t view themselves as the sacrificial martyrs that our society is quick to paint them as. As Wool observed,

Despite what others might say, despite the heroism and sacrifice that others might attach even to “a job,” soldiers were adamant that their jobs were not about the nation or sacrifice or heroism. But crucially there were also times when this insistence on war as ordinary work rubbed up against something else, addressed more to virtue than the pragmatism of employment, but did not cede to it.

A second reason sacrifice seemed to injured soldiers a poor characterization of what they had done was that there was no thing, no singular sacrificial act in which they decided to surrender their bodies for a greater good (2015: 108).

Ultimately, it is civilians and the economy of patriotism that ascribe such lofty sacrificial value onto soldiers’ work.<sup>17</sup> While it is certainly important to recognize that a sense of greater patriotic/nationalistic duty can be and often is invoked in the reasoning by soldiers for enlisting, the narratives soldiers craft of their work, from intent to performance, revolve around mere carrying out of responsibilities amongst a number of individual motivations (Wool 2015; MacLeish 2013). Their stories and squaring of selves within the normalcy of the extra/ordinariness of their work are remarkably human, devoid of the mythology that civilians assume are part of their lived experiences. As Wool remarks, “The soldier is rendered a

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<sup>17</sup> This is also reified by MacLeish (2013: 193).



sacrificial victim not because of some essential quality he has or because of the circumstances through which his body has been dismembered. He is rendered sacrificial because others claim his pain, his death, his loss in their own name. He is their sacrificial victim; there is little he can do to be otherwise” (2015: 114). This is made quite apparent in the *Call of Duty* franchise. In these simulated narratives/narrative simulations I studied, the complex humanness of soldierly motivation and lived experience was flattened via the intense sacrificial narratives that soldiers were placed within. As noted earlier, these stories often revolved around sacrifice, placing it tragic ‘reality’ at the core of character development and plot lines. However, such tales are proven wildly unrealistic via true soldierly experience.

Building upon the conversations with soldiers outside the contexts of videogames, my research has found that when asked about games, real soldiers believe that games are unable to reflect the true realities and full aspects of soldiery. In his *What Do Real Soldiers Think of Shooting Games*<sup>18</sup>, Jimmy Thang interviews several military officers to discuss the ways in which the reality of wartime and the jobs of soldiers conflicts with militaristic first-person shooter narratives, such as those of the *Call of Duty* series. In stark contrast to the many scholarly works that insist upon games like *Call of Duty* contributing to the militarization of the American public (Power 2007, Allen 2011), the servicemen in this article insist that these games in no way can prepare players for the reality of war; that not even military tactics can be gleaned from videogames. They later go on to discuss how the structures of these games prioritize individual action, self-preservation, lack of use of cover, etc., which are strategies not useful/deadly in the military. Furthermore, the servicemen discuss the many responsibilities (e.g. paperwork, janitorial work) that these games overlook, as well as how unrealistic the game

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<sup>18</sup> It is necessary to note that this article was published by IGN, perhaps the most influential gaming media source.

combat situations are (Thang 2012). Essentially, not only is player strategy and experience antagonistic to real military action, but players can be lured into a false sense of what wartime and soldierly work entails. As mentioned before, these simulated narratives/narrative simulations make players superhuman with their one-man army approaches and they remove players from the excruciating consequences of war. The soldiers in this article actually discuss this one-man army approach and remark on the super soldier portrayals, saying that they are fun and cool, just unrealistic. Returning to the initial claims that players aren't prepared for the reality of war, Marine Lance Corporal Nicko Requesto adds on to these claims, asserting, "I don't think anyone can prepare for something like war. War is a horrible and dirty thing. People die" (Thang 2012). He invokes the difficulty of attempting to ready oneself for the atrocities of war, even with military training, while also wielding the grotesque viscerality of real wartime and death against virtual narratives. Clearly, there is a great divide between the experiences of these games and those of soldiers.

With this understanding, I can now demonstrate how these narrative simulations/simulated narratives expand upon the economy of patriotism. In short, these games don't accurately convey the actualities of war and soldierly life. Of course, this is not necessarily a new idea. There have been many debates about the realities present within games and what effects they may hold on players. Much literature has been devoted to questioning links of violent games to aggression (Anderson and Bushman 2001, Bartholow et al 2005, Carnagey et al 2007), militarization (Power 2007, Allen 2011), and im/morality (Grossman and DeGaetano 2009, Hartmann and Vorderer 2010). However, as the ethicist Marcus Schulzke points out throughout his *Defending the morality of violent video games*, many of these studies tend to presuppose that games aspire to be realistic and that present qualities of realism blur the lines

between the virtual and the real, allowing for player thought and behavior in games to transfer to everyday motivations, attitudes, and actions (2010). This is not the case.

Though it is not useful for my argument to address the ways in which current perceptions of effects on gamers are problematic (see Schulzke 2010 for an ethical detailing of these issues), I bring attention to such debates in order to highlight the friction present within the blur of reality and virtual narrative. Gaming studies scholar Alexander Galloway delineates ‘realism’ in games into two categories: realistic representation (realistic-ness) and realistic narrative (social realism). Realistic representation entails using visuals to craft a realistic environment and human figures (e.g. *World of Warcraft* lacks the realistic representations of *Call of Duty* games) while realistic narratives means that a social reality is recreated that resembles the lived experiences of humans (e.g. though the *Sims* franchise may be cartoonish, their everyday actions mimic our societal behaviors) (2004). Using these concepts in the context of my demonstration of the civilian-military disconnect in the narratives of the *Call of Duty* games studied, it is evident that these narrative simulations/simulated narratives approach realistic representation without nearing realistic narratives. At once these games both attempt to recreate a “real” soldierly experience and frame this experience in patriotic idealism, yet they only succeed in mirroring what the world, soldiers, and weapons look like/may look like rather than any actual semblance of wartime interaction. This friction between the virtual and the real is great, and I show that it is emblematic of the issues present within the civilian perspective of the economy of patriotism via its failure to recreate a militarized reality whatsoever.

Going against previous narratives of militarization, I argue that there is an inherent ethical disconnect between player affect and the militaristic values of wartime. In contrast to Grossman and DeGaetano’s claims of videogames functioning as immoral and as “mass murder

simulators” (2009), Schulzke argues that there is a distinction to be made between virtual and real worlds. Murder involves the intent to kill, however while “games involve simulated killings, ...players do not intend to kill another person when they play. They only mean to destroy an avatar. In other words, what the player does cannot be considered immoral unless it involves the intention to actually harm someone” (2010: 129). Not only does he qualify the perceived immorality of violent video games, he also makes a great observation about players: that they distinguish between the moral consequences of killing human figures in a virtual world and humans in reality. It is one thing to pull the trigger against a fake human with a fake gun in a fake world; it is another dilemma entirely to decide to harm a real person through extreme violence. Schulzke goes on to speak about the argument from Grossman and others that games train to kill:

This argument is weak because there is too little similarity between the acts of violence in games and in the real world to maintain that the mechanics are the same in each. While there are a number of useful computer training simulations, most casual games do not accurately replicate their subject matter... Games may look realistic, but their realism is usually only in the graphics... Most games accused of encouraging violence not only have unrealistic narratives, but also unrealistic simulation of the action performed. Until technology becomes more sophisticated and more closely models real actions, it is implausible that games are capable of training killers (2010: 132).

This is corroborated with my own experience playing these narrative simulations/simulated narratives. I performed all of my actions through a controller, pressing buttons and moving toggles to shoot, take cover, burst through doors, etc.

Furthermore, this disconnect is not lost on the gaming community at large either. During the funeral scene for your best friend near the beginning of *Advanced Warfare*, you approach the

coffin and the game prompts you to “Press F to pay respects” (this was for the PC version. For PlayStation 4 users like me, it was the X button). Such a moment was so ridiculous or offensive to many players that it became a meme. According to the website, Know Your Meme, “many players of the game mocked the funeral cutscene for its forced element of interactivity that seemed out-of-place at a memorial service” (Morris (user) 2016). This was reified by a Reddit thread titled *Why are people making fun of "Press X to pay respect" from CoD: Advanced Warfare?* in which users consistently refer to the forced simulation of emotion and/or the disrespect felt at a prompt that somehow tried to connect the virtual player experience to the real emotion of a soldier’s funeral.<sup>19</sup> Now, “Press F to pay respects” is often invoked as a meme in response to someone failing or being injured on a grand scale as a form of the laziest forced acknowledgement possible or as a general mocking of the *Call of Duty* series’ tropes. What is apparent from this meme is that the gaming community also readily recognizes differences between the virtual and the real. Though gamers may play into these sacrificial mythologies of soldiers from the civilian perspective, they still discern a divide between the ethics of videogames and of reality.

Nailing the final stake in the coffin against arguments that these games provide any sort of significant, tangible military experience is that real soldiers dispute the idea of these games as useful in tactical training. Some might argue that even if games aren’t training killers, at the very least they may be training players in militaristic strategy and tactics, in this way contributing to the militarization of the civilian populace. However, returning to Thang’s interviews with actual military officers about the differences between their experiences and those of games, this is

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<sup>19</sup> See *Why are people making fun of "Press X to pay respect" from CoD: Advanced Warfare?* in Works Cited for URL

shown to not be true either. He details the soldiers responses to being asked about whether any useful tactics could be gleaned from the games:

The response was more overwhelming that they do more harm in teaching bad habits than they do good. Requesto says that gamers need to realize two things from playing videogames. "Number one, you don't act by yourself, the key to winning and staying alive is communication. Number two, you're not alone. You are fighting to protect the man on your right and the man on your left." Requesto adds that the last thing gamers have on their minds as they play through the campaign modes of these shooters is for the safety of their AI companions. Gonterman says that these would-be gamer soldiers should simply "forget everything" from their videogame experiences and realize that virtual combat simply "does not compare" to the real thing (Thang 2012).

To once again focus on the idea of the one-man army present within these narrative simulations/simulated narratives, the combat players experience is highly unrealistic. But more than that, the values of the game are different from the real military as well. In reality, soldiers communicate with each other and actively assist each other in the middle of combat. Though the trend I witnessed in the *Call of Duty* games researched was that the narratives were improving at conveying ideals of brotherhood and communal bonds, the formation of community happens outside of battle or during scripted moments of combat. In most firefights, the player is simply in charge of pushing back enemy fronts themselves. Not only is there little to no tactical experience gained, but players miss a crucial piece of soldierly reality via combat scenarios that fail to depict the team-based maneuvers and cooperation required to take down the enemy. The trade-off here is that the player gets to be superhuman and mow down large waves on enemies on his own. Certainly, it is rewarding to feel unstoppable and empowered in such a way, but it doesn't connect with how war plays out in reality.

I'm sure that many players are aware that the superhumanness of the characters they play as only occurs within the virtual realm; however, my point is that because of how self-centric the strategies of these games are, players aren't able to comprehend just how soldiers go about their duties in the line of combat, linking these games to a larger civilian narrative that fails to understand soldierly experience of violence. Civilians do not receive a sense of the real violence soldiers experience because such acts are often glossed over in the civilian focus on sacrificial mythology of the soldier that is normalized across all soldiers, rendering their experiences 'generic.' Wool discusses an instance in her research in which a civilian approached a legless soldier to thank him for his service. The civilian intrusively asked what happened to his legs, and all the soldier managed to say is "bomb," likely due to the constraints of his frame of gratitude<sup>20</sup> that is required by the economy of patriotism.<sup>21</sup> Wool notes that "like countless other exchanges, this is simultaneously an encounter with an actual soldier and with the *figure* of the soldier and his generic heroism rooted in generically worthy experiences full of acts of violence about which one need not think too hard" (2015: 111-112). While the civilian is intrigued by the violence experienced by the soldier, he cannot properly learn of the soldierly experience of violence because of the many incorrect perceptions associated with the patriotic narrative and because he ignores the ugliness of truth to praise the soldier for his heroism. As MacLeish figures,

The civilian peers over the edge of this zone of killing and dying, and is witness to it in various circumscribed ways. But in saying thank you to the soldier and extending a hand in gratitude, the civilian is also reaching across the border of this zone, and dragging with him misapplied rules and values that do not make sense once they are extended into the space of exception[alism of the soldier]... where the civilian sees fortitude and brave

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<sup>20</sup> Soldiers are under pressure not to be seen as unthankful or unappreciative of the civilians' gestures of thanks.

<sup>21</sup> The burden and requirement of gratitude is covered in MacLeish 2013: 191-200.

deeds, the soldier may agonize over loss, or wonder over terror and crime (2013: 199-200).

Simply, there is a complete divide between civilian and soldier present within the recognition of the reality of violence of soldierly duty. Civilian players immerse themselves within fictionalized sacrificial narratives, fail to experience the true nature of tactical combat of soldiers, and are removed from the real messiness of the violence of soldiers via the invocation of the holiness of the soldierly figure, the disconnect of violence on the virtual screen compared to reality, and the willful ignorance of the painful consequences of real violent acts had upon soldiers. These narrative simulations/simulated narratives do not provide players with any true experience of militarism whatsoever. Instead, players are embedded within the civilian imaginary of soldierly mythology in the economy of patriotism. As I have clearly demonstrated, this means that the *Call of Duty* games not only invoke the ideals of the economy of patriotism, but expand it via player immersion and experience that champion the same nationalistic values.

In summary, I have theorized that these *Call of Duty* narrative simulations/simulated narratives function as result of the civilian imaginary of wartime. Since they mimic the same narrative assumptions of soldierly experience by civilians, they therefore are situated within the economy of patriotism via their exchange of nationalistic values, extending the economy beyond social interactions into the technological realm of videogames. I have demonstrated the ways in which these videogames invoke and craft sacrificial mythologies of the soldier from the civilian perspective, as well as how they fail to corroborate past theories of militarization and ideas of tactical representation because of their inherent civilian-military divide. I have situated the *Call of Duty* games in conversation with gaming studies scholars, moral ethicists, psychologists, and military studies practitioners with hopes of bridging the gaps within the lack of recent gaming



scholarship and of elucidating the ways in which games can be useful in understanding socio-cultural phenomena and expanding existing theories into exciting, new realms.

On that note, moving forward, I wish to call upon the scholarly community for more recognition of videogames as powerful indicators of contemporary socio-cultural phenomena. Games are a unique media form that combine narrative with interactivity and offer new possibilities for expression of the social imaginary. Given how many contemporary games are reshaping the industry, offering artistic critiques of society, bringing about new advancements in technology, offering new types of experiences for players, and are becoming more widespread, the scholarly community should not shy away from them as a supposedly less ‘serious’ media form. They are rich artifacts that contain vast troves of information.

Specifically regarding the topics I have just explored, I believe that future research could engage with populations of gamers and soldiers to discover more links/divisions between civilian and military perspectives. Furthermore, an interesting topic of research would be an analysis of how these games function within the economy of patriotism as commodities, seeing that they are products of an industry. Certainly civilians exchange material items with soldiers in this system of exchange. But do civilians perhaps exchange in and amongst each other items and narratives that reify the economy of patriotism? Such a question may have some obvious answers, yet it would be interesting to see the more complex answers that could arise out of such a probe. I believe that videogames would offer a perfect medium through which to chisel away at those ideas.

As Marine Lance Corporal Anthony Andrada concludes at the end of Thang’s article, “Most of these games portray us as bad assess, and yes, we are, but we do live ordinary lives as

well. Not all of us are as gung ho as it would seem and I think if game developers showed us as human beings and not just men of war, it would really give non-military game players a more accurate idea of what it's like to be a member of the armed forces" (2012). By extending the civilian perspective of the economy of patriotism to virtual worlds, the *Call of Duty* games further the wedge between civilians and soldiers who are rendered in a relationship that fails to understand the experiences of and meet the needs of the soldier. If we are to take care of the soldiers we idolize, the soldiers we benefit from, the soldiers who experience unimaginable horrors as a regular part of a governmental job, perhaps we ought to start by representing them and their stories correctly, on their terms.

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The photos present in this essay were screenshots that I captured myself on my PS4.