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# Marketing Military Realism in Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare

Games and Culture  
7(4) 305-327  
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sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/1555412012454220  
<http://gac.sagepub.com>  


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## Abstract

This essay investigates the challenges that video game marketing encounters when selling the pleasures of playing virtual war. While marketing paratexts are crucial to video games because of the vagaries of their industry, they are especially important for Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, as it is the first of the franchise to be set in the 21st century and immerse players in contemporary theaters of war. These marketing paratexts not only generate hype for the game and work to drive sales, but as importantly, they also suggest particular textual readings over others with the goal of insulating Call of Duty's virtual war play from interpretations and criticisms that might link the violent play on-screen to the worldly violence unfolding in Iraq and Afghanistan.

## Keywords

paratext, advertising, war, realism, first-person shooter, call of duty, video game, military

## Introduction

This essay investigates the challenges that video game marketing encounters when selling the pleasures of playing virtual war. Marketing materials are vital sites for critical media inquiry because these paratexts prime would-be player-consumers for how they should understand these games, and (more importantly for producers'

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purposes) why it is they should buy them. Contemporary video war games are typically advertised as offering players ever-increasing levels of visual and aural realism and computational verisimilitude. However, because simulation fever—a type of moral panic discussed shortly—is latent in all games and is of particular concern to titles that trade in simulated violence, military-themed games must be packaged in such a way that celebrates acceptable technological or aesthetic attributes—elements like algorithmic sophistication or an attention to historical accuracy—while sidestepping issues that might spur critical reflection about war games’ inability to model the social reality that attends to worldly conflict. Commercial video games about military interventions are rarely sold on their ability to prompt gamers into reflecting critically about how the combat scenarios are designed for their enjoyment. Instead, one is only supposed to think about select aspects of combat while playing a war game.

A close examination of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*’s key marketing paratexts—production personnel interviews, press reviews, and online video advertisements—prefigure how “military realism” is ideally understood for the best selling military shooter of 2007 (Klepek, 2008, n.p.). These marketing paratexts not only generate hype and work to drive sales, but, as importantly, they also suggest particular textual readings over others with the goal of insulating *Call of Duty*’s war play from interpretations and criticisms that might link the violent play on-screen to the worldly violence unfolding in Iraq and Afghanistan. The story of a canceled television advertisement will bring these interconnected points about pleasure, panic, and play into finer focus.

### “Standoff” and Simulation Fever

With the release of the Xbox 360 game console on May 12, 2005, Microsoft launched its “Jump In” series of television and Internet commercials, inviting viewers to join their newest online gaming experience. The Jump In campaign was notable for representing diverse groups of people playing together in the real world instead of showcasing the platform’s high-definition game play footage. And while the innovative campaign earned numerous advertising awards,<sup>1</sup> it was not wholly successful. The McCann-Erickson advertising agency responsible for the campaign also produced a spot called “Standoff” that Microsoft elected not to air in the United States.

Standoff unfolds in a crowded train terminal. As two young men pass one another, their eyes meet and their glances hold. They continue to stare as they turn to face one another. Suddenly, one man thrusts his arm at the other’s face, with his hand shaped like a gun. The other man quickly responds in kind (see Figure 1). Another man standing nearby does the same. This action multiplies quickly, spreading like a virus through the station as the traveling population is transformed into a mob of stationary faux-gun-wielding pedestrians. The terminal is at a standstill, at a standoff. The editing cuts aggressively between the multitude of tense faces and stiff



**Figure 1.** Travelers size one another up in Microsoft's "Standoff" ad. (Standoff image captured by author).

arms. Suddenly, the man in the original pairing shouts, "Bang!" and the station erupts into a chorus of mouth-made gunfire. People dive for cover, hide behind tables, and collapse after being "shot." The spot ends, as the others do, with the call for us to Jump In.

While we can only speculate as to how this ad might have been received by U.S. television audiences, we can more easily appraise why it was not aired in the States. The commercial's depiction of a massive game of Assassin (a.k.a., Gotcha, Killer) provocatively connect the pleasures of mediated game play with violence in the real world. That is, play killing and play dying unwittingly but evocatively connect the mediated Xbox video game experience to a moral panic discourse that has hounded the gaming industry since its emergence in the 1970s. This resilient but scientifically unsubstantiated concern maintains that violent video games are the primary driver for a range of violent acts where children or young adults are unable or unwilling to distinguish between right and wrong. The infamous April 20, 1999, massacre at Columbine High School, for example, is but one high-profile case where the heinous crimes were said to have been caused, in large part, by violent games.<sup>2</sup> Clearly not wanting to cast its products or services in a negative light by associating it with such controversies, Microsoft shelved *Standoff* in the United States. But there is perhaps a deeper reason for Microsoft's gun shy attitude toward the *Standoff* ad—namely, simulation fever.

In *Unit Operations* (2006), the video game designer and scholar Ian Bogost defines simulation fever as "the nervous discomfort caused by the interaction of the game's unit-operational representations of a segment of the real world and the player's subjective understanding of that representation" (p. 136). Because any

simulation or video game necessarily models some processes and not others, and because there is a potential friction between how a process is represented with how a user interprets said process, it potentially produces a state of anxiety in the player. For example, a flight simulator set in New York City that allows planes to pass effortlessly through buildings may engender states of simulation fever because this computer modeling disagrees with the user's understanding of physics, and it may also inadvertently rekindle thoughts of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Simulation fever is not an existential ailment restricted to video games; indeed, simulation fever affects non-mediated games too. Bogost states:

Instead of standing outside the world in utter isolation, games provide a two-way street through which players and their ideas can enter and exit the game, taking and leaving their residue in both directions. There is a gap in the magic circle through which players carry subjectivity in and out of the game space. If the magic circle were really some kind of isolated antithesis to the world it would never be possible to access it at all. (2006, p. 135)

Hence, Standoff's depiction of a spontaneous Assassin game proves simulation fever's nascent potentiality in all physical and virtual social games; a potentiality that is especially problematic given the ad's playful representations of violence in a public space after 9/11. According to Bogost, "The idea of simulation fever insinuates seriousness back into play and suggests that games help us expose and explore complicated human conditions, rather than offering mere interruption and diversion" (2006, p. 136). The case of Standoff likewise demonstrates that simulation fever is also a serious consideration for game marketing since undesirable game play associations jeopardize potential sales by laying bare the medium's representational limitations. All games, mediated or otherwise, must correlate—however incompletely or incoherently—with the player's lived reality. In those moments when game play processes fail to match a gamer's understanding of similar worldly actions, players may consider difficult or complicated aspects of reality and the game's failure to render it accurately. Bogost underscores how these moments of friction present opportunities for critical analysis, stating, "Working through simulation fever means learning how to express what simulations choose to embed and exclude" (2006, p. 109).

Combat video games wherein one can shoot their friends and be shot at, however fantastic and absurd the depiction of violence, is mediated play that threatens to force gamers into a consideration of actual shooting and actual dying. Thinking about taking another's life demands deep and personal introspection—an activity that is most certainly not within the commercial purview of military shooters. It is this experiential externality that the marketers of combat games must guard against, lest their products be seen as raising unpleasant, complicated, and ultimately less

profitable questions or feelings for their audiences. The Standoff ad, by depicting a scenario in which everyone is an armed enemy, is a type of play that too easily forces considerations of paranoia and violence in a post-9/11 urban space.

## Realism Versus Realisticness

Simulation fever in the case of military-themed game play highlights dramatically that military realism is *not* military reality. The former is an aesthetic and discursive category; the latter is a factual state of affairs. As Alexander Galloway argues in *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (2006), near-photo realistic digital representations should not be confused with existential realism. Moreover, video game studies should (following film studies' categorization of realist and neorealist films) be careful to define realist games as those that "reflect critically on the minutiae of everyday life, replete as it is with struggle, personal drama, and injustice" (p. 75). This essay adopts Galloway's useful term of "realisticness" understood as a "yardstick held up to representation" (p. 73). Commercial military video games use technological and representational realisticness to deliver visceral experiences. These design attributes do not transform them into realist texts, however, because these games often fail to acknowledge soldiers' lived experiences. Galloway states "Realisticness is important, to be sure, but the more realisticness takes hold in gaming, the more removed from gaming it actually becomes, relegated instead to simulation or modeling" (p. 73). For a game to be socially realistic, there must be congruence between the game's content and the player's subjective context; "some type of fidelity of context that transliterates itself from the social reality of the gamer, through one's thumbs, into the game environment and back again" (p. 78). Galloway illustrates his argument with the anti-Israeli occupation combat games *Under Ash* (produced in Syria) and *Special Force* (published by Hezbollah). Unlike most military games produced in the West, these games are realist texts because Palestinian gamers can play through their political battles on the screens before them. Realism, for Galloway, is more dependent on an invested sense of contextual congruence than any textual fidelity. That is, these Palestinian first-person shooters are not realist texts because they critique the first-person shooter genre; in fact, they are fairly standard with respect to their game play designs. They are instead realist games because they enjoy a deeply meaningful and personal correspondence between what is played and the gamers who play them.

The marketing materials examined presently take the opposite tack—they argue only for the fidelity of the text. The advertised pleasures of playing wars past, present, or future is, in actuality, the pleasure of playing with a delimited textual realisticness, and not a contextual realism that connects the gamer and game to the lived realities of an outside world. Video game marketing of commercial military shooters largely works to collapse the divide between textual realisticness with any broader understandings of "realism" to argue that their game's attention to technical detail offers the necessary representational and simulational bona fides to engender an

immersive reality available to any who might buy their electronic wares. Thus, the marketing campaigns for post-9/11 military shooters are overwhelmingly concerned with selling only select elements of military realism: sophisticated enemy artificial intelligence, military weapons and vehicles that function and look like the real thing, and combat that unfolds in authentic theaters of war, both historic and those “ripped from today’s headlines.” The games industry promises its dedicated and would-be consumers a near-real combat experience, irrespective of the gamer’s personal play context. Said differently, a game that promises military realism purports to tell one all they need to know about war with the goal of inoculating game play pleasures from the threats of simulation fever.

### The Utility of Video Game Paratexts

In *The Meaning of Video Games* (2008), Steven Jones offers media studies one of its first sustained analyses of gaming paratexts. Building on Gerard Genette’s concept of the “paratext,” or the “multilayered system of frames around a text that helps determine its reception,” Jones ably demonstrates that players understand video games as much by the external material conditions of the title’s publication and marketing, as by its internal narration and game play design (p. 7). Jones is not the first to recognize the utility of Genette’s concept, or the power of paratexts in shaping how the center text is framed and interpreted. Television scholar Jonathan Gray assesses how marketing hype (2008, 2010a) and press reviews (2010b) initiate processes of meaning making before media consumers ever lay their eyes, ears, or fingers on advertised goods. Gray states:

In other words, paratexts guide our entry to texts, setting up all sorts of meanings and strategies of interpretation, and proposing ways to make sense of what we will find “inside” the text. When viewed as paratexts, hype and synergy become inherently textual and interpretive, therefore, working, as I have said of ads, to create structures of meaning for texts-to-come. (2008, p. 38)

Or, as Gray later quips of the paratext, it is the “text [that] begins before the text” (2008, p. 46).

Marketing paratexts are of particular value to the culture industries’ producers because they mitigate against a variety of business risks endemic to new media production. This is especially true for a concentrated and oligopolistic video game industry where it is estimated that only a scant 3% of games ever turn a profit (Kerr, 2006, p. 45). Video games must depend on paratextual buzz to entice consumers into parting with \$50–\$60 dollars for a new console title because producers do not rely principally on ad revenue like the television industry, subscription fees like mobile providers, nor can they expect that ancillary products will make their games profitable over time, as is the case with some Hollywood properties.<sup>3</sup> These industry-specific pressures result in a more conservative production environment where

design choices often conform to tested generic formulae and appeal to reliable gamer demographics. The military shooter genre is, along with sports and role-playing games, one of the stalwart generic categories of console and PC gaming because these titles have been historically popular among the industry's young, male "hard-core" consumer base. Kline, Dyer-Witthford, and De Peuter (2003) underscore the pressure to produce sequels like *Call of Duty 4*, stating:

Software development is a risky business. Most products fail. There are fortunes to be made with pioneering games that break new cultural ground. But for each successful experiment scores crash and burn, taking with them companies and careers. This creates a powerful incentive to stick with the tried and true and ride on the coattails of proven success. The repetitive pattern is reinforced by the fact that game developers are recruited from the ranks of game players. Such asexual reproduction gives game culture a strong tendency to simple self-replication, so that shooting, combat, and fighting themes, once established, repeat and proliferate. (p. 251)

The industry remains most comfortable with making its products for and marketing its wares to its hard-core male gaming constituency despite the recent success of the Nintendo Wii console, and family friendly game franchises like *The Sims* (2000), *Rock Band* (2007), and *Wii Sports* (2006) to attract more diverse game playing audiences.

Game marketing campaigns are often as homogenous, safe, and one-dimensional as the titles that have been produced by guys, for guys (Microsoft's "Jump In" campaign remains an industry anomaly). In *The Business and Culture of Digital Games* (2006), Aphra Kerr calls the myopic discourse that dominates games publications and forums—such as magazines, websites, and conventions—"hegemonic heterosexual masculinity" (p. 100). And, in a similar vein, Kline et al. (2003) argue that game production has long been dominated by a state of "militarized masculinity" which is evident in games across genres and platforms (pp. 254–255). Kerr's "hegemonic heterosexual masculinity" and Kline et al.'s "militarized masculinity" accurately characterize the prevalence of violent and sexist tropes across the game industry's texts and paratexts and explain how economic imperatives constrain design experimentation. This essay goes beyond these useful though broad descriptions to detail the specific strategies behind the military realism being sold.

Video game marketing generates hype and primes gamers on how they should understand their game play pleasures. Video game marketing also functions as the preliminary textual interface between producers and consumers. Thanks to a wealth of professional gaming websites and fan sites, players often have access to early game play footage, advanced interviews with production personnel, and press previews by game critics before they ever play the game being hyped. Kline et al. underscore the critical discursive and economic roles played by this paratextual vanguard:

To say that cultural intermediaries like marketers and designers “dialogue” and “negotiate” with the gaming consumer may seem perverse. But from the point of view of capital, it makes good sense to open up channels to consumers, respond to their criticisms, adapt to their ideas and interests, and translate the information into products. We call this mediated-marketing nexus a negotiation in recognizing that cultural industries especially have been at the forefront of audience and market segmentation research, forging a reflexive circuitry of audience surveillance and an acute awareness of, and responsiveness to, changing preferences, tastes, and subcultures. (2003, p. 252)

Provided there is sufficient time and resources, early gamer feedback may be incorporated into the game design, or marketing materials may address or preempt outstanding concerns collected from beta play sessions or feedback posted in online forums. This vital interplay between producers and consumers underscores that production and consumption are not monolithic categories but exist in a dialectical relationship and are connected by a porous technosocial membrane that allow paratexts to move bidirectionally from producer to consumer, and from consumer to producer.

One can cite numerous cases of this productive back-and-forth dynamic in video game culture. For example, *Counter-Strike* (1999) remains one of the most celebrated computer game “mod” tales. Originally a community-developed game modification (or mod) for the PC hit *Half-Life* (1998), *Counter-Strike* became such a popular download that *Half-Life*’s publisher Sierra Entertainment bought the project and later packaged the game for retail release. Moreover, the game’s development studio Valve Software then hired the mod’s main designers. The Halo-based machinima series *Red versus Blue* is another example of an unofficially produced fan paratext that was later co-opted by the game’s marketers to hype the release of *Halo 3* (2007).<sup>4</sup> One additional “feel good” example of a company responding to its community is the inclusion of the “N0M4D” control scheme in *Call of Duty 4*. Randy “N0M4D” Fitzgerald is an avid gamer who competes on the Major League Gaming circuit. Fitzgerald has been afflicted with the rare muscle and joint disorder arthrogryposis since birth and is paralyzed from the neck down.<sup>5</sup> With the aid of a modified controller, Fitzgerald plays video games with his mouth. The game’s developer, Infinity Ward, responded to Fitzgerald’s request and programmed a selectable control scheme into the game to meet his game play needs.

The “N0M4D” game controller setting suggests just how valuable maintaining strong ties to a fan community is to video game producers, and the *Counter-Strike* and *Red versus Blue* examples illustrate how popular fan paratexts are meaning-making (and potentially money-making) texts in their own right. These cases are not just pretextual window dressing. Fan paratexts produced by users and advertising paratexts crafted by marketers open channels for communicating concerns valued by each group, and may be co-opted by the other for economic or community-building ends. Yet the important fact remains that the official publisher-driven game marketing is valuable precisely because it is disseminated before a game title hits

store shelves, and because it is the first word on how the public should understand the interactive experience. Gray (2008) argues:

Ads and hype cannot merely demand our consumption: they must buy it with textuality, creating some form of script and meaning for the product or text in question, giving us some sense that this product or text will offer us something in particular. However, if this is so, then many interactions that we have with texts will be set up and framed by the hype that we consume; more than merely pointing us to the text at hand, this hype will have already begun the process of creating textual meaning, serving as the first outpost of interpretation. (p. 34)

Call of Duty 4's personnel interviews, press reviews, and viral ads build excitement for the product by prefiguring how players should expect the game to look and operate according to an advertised aesthetic of military realism, while also attempting to avoid potential interpretive externalities like the simulation fever affecting Microsoft's Standoff ad.

### **. . . [Call of Duty 4 is] gonna make a weak gamer soil himself. . .**

It is standard practice for game producers to grant gaming websites and magazines advanced coverage and "sneak peaks" of products under development during the months and weeks leading up to a game's retail release. Such techniques build buzz, generate interest, and allow the producers to extol their wares' virtues before game critics and consumers pass judgment in their columns and with their dollars. The marketing efforts for Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare began in earnest well before its November 5, 2007, North American release date because it was the first of the franchise to deviate from the previous games' popular World War II (WWII) setting, representing instead contemporary armed conflict in international hot spots. In a host of interviews conducted for game sites, magazines, and cable programs, Infinity Ward's production personnel hyped the game's aesthetic of military realism and its visceral game play, while promising gamers that Call of Duty 4 would remain faithful to the franchise's successful design formula.

In a series of interviews, Grant Collier, one of the Studio Heads at Infinity Ward, discusses wide-ranging aspects of the upcoming game but spends considerable time describing Call of Duty 4's near-real world setting and political narrative. Collier works to strike a balance between the game's fictional content and the lived reality of contemporary warfare. For instance, he stresses that the game is not "about the war in Iraq . . . [but instead, Call of Duty] is a global conflict" and that the gamer is charged with hunting down a "fictitious villain in a fictitious setting" (Collier, 2007). Collier also rebuffs any characterization of the game as a "tactical shooter," which typically connotes slower pacing and the need to obey strict procedural demands. Instead, he frames Call of Duty 4 as a combat-oriented action game in the same visceral vein of the previous titles. He states "It's going to be an action-packed

modern game with rapid redeployment of forces . . . players being in multiple locations, being able to see multiple types of conflict. It's the battlefield from the soldier to the satellite, and everything in between" (Collier, 2007). During a co-interview with Collier and Hank Keirse, Call of Duty's military advisor, who will be discussed shortly, Keirse asks Collier on behalf of a Russian journalist why the Russians are "still" the bad guys since they are "not the communists anymore" (Collier & Keirse, 2007). Collier downplays the negative gamer feedback, saying that this narrative choice has irritated a few who have posted on the site's forums, but that it is important to remember that the game is fictionalizing a Russian separatist group. It does not, according to Collier, negatively represent Russians citizens or the Russian military. In these promotional videos, Collier leverages his insights on the game's design and his authoritative status as a knowledgeable production head to prefigure the narrative and game play expectations of gamers and critics alike; essentially reassuring would-be consumers that the brand's celebrated style of virtual war remains firmly in place even as Infinity Ward takes their franchise and loyal gamers into the 21st century.

Having outlined the fictional aspects of the title's enemies and the nonspecific locations of the urban firefights in the Middle East, Collier argues that the game's essential military realism is based on the production team's attention to details like combat tactics, gear, dialogue, and the game's sophisticated visual and audio design. In a particularly striking promotional video that chronicles Infinity Ward's research process, Collier describes how the production team took an educational field trip to the Marine Air Ground Combat Center in Twenty Nine Palms, California (it is one of the few training installations where tanks engage in live fire exercises). This video shows marines training in a mock town alongside the game's artists who are taking notes and recording audio and visual data. The clip then alternates between the recorded live-action exercises, and the game development process unfolding on PC monitors to attest to the fidelity between these two worlds. Collier declares emphatically "Our guys are diehard about being as authentic as possible."

The final segment of this promotional video shows a group of marines visiting the Infinity Ward studio to play a beta version of the game. As Collier tells the story, the visiting marines were defeated during their first few matches. However, once they began communicating and coordinating their assault tactics, they easily outwitted the opposing team of beta testers. The rhetorical power of this final anecdote suggests that even though Call of Duty 4 was produced outside of the defense community proper, that Infinity Ward has nevertheless engineered a title that enjoys high degrees of military realism because of the generous input of the armed forces and which has even been beta tested by a group of approving soldier-gamers.

Military advisors and subject matter experts play a critical role in the development of war entertainment in general, and in video games in particular. They are not only the members of a production team who ensure that military terminology and protocols find accurate digital expression (see, Payne, 2009), but they are also useful for marketing purposes. Hank Keirse, Call of Duty 4's military advisor, is a good

case in point. Like Collier and the other Infinity Ward creatives, Keirsey is the subject of numerous promotional videos posted before and after *Call of Duty 4*'s release. Keirsey, who has decades of experience with the Army infantry and who has taught history at West Point, began working with Infinity Ward during their creation of their first *Call of Duty* title in 2003. Keirsey's testimonials about the game's two-year development cycle and team's meticulous data collection methods lend credence to the marketing materials' claims of authenticity. In one of the more colorful interviews, Keirsey (2007) remarks: "The game has approached a level of intensity that's gonna make a weak gamer soil himself. It is that good. It's really got a feel for it." His praise continues:

Someone asked me, "Could you use this game as a rehearsal tool?" And I actually said, "Absolutely. You could, but it's not the intent of the game." The last thing on the mind of the developers was making anything that could be used by the Department of the Army or anybody else. But what they did by making the game so authentic . . . By getting all the physics exactly right, getting the weapons exactly right, the ballistics right, frankly—you know—if you had a hit squad to go in on Osama bin Laden . . . you could do a hellacious rehearsal. Headset-to-headset, man-to-man. [You] still got to go do it . . . But the commands, the coordination between people, rehearsing contingencies—[*Call of Duty 4* is] a tremendous engine to do that with. Again, it's unintentional. It just happens to be because [Infinity Ward] made it so close.

Keirsey's testimonial is all the more compelling because of his outsider status as an advisor with considerable military experiences.

Another noteworthy theme in Keirsey's interviews is his belief that the *Call of Duty* games appropriately memorialize soldiers' sacrifices. He was reluctant at first to work for a video game company until he saw their "passion" for creating an authentic military past. Keirsey was also initially attracted to the first *Call of Duty* game because the WWII subject matter "taught something about a generation that did amazing things" (Keirsey, 2007). He does not feel any different about *Call of Duty 4*'s depiction of today's soldiers, saying "I enjoy working with these games because I think they're a tribute to the guys that are doing this for real." This suggestion amplifies the supposed military realism by promising players a way of virtually paying tribute to soldiers by buying and playing the game, and it is emerging as a go-to rhetorical motif in the marketing of contemporary military-themed games (e.g., Davison, 2010, n.p.).

These promotional interviews connect technical elements of military realism with the promised experiential pleasure of playing virtual war, while containing simulation-based anxieties that could result from the dissonance between knowledge of how modern combat is conducted in real life with how it is modeled on screen. Marketing materials generally hold out the promise for some future reward, but press reviews are another kind of paratextual fare entirely and need not establish such commitments. The reviews of *Call of Duty 4*, while mostly favorable, allude to the anxieties of simulation fever that are largely elided in the developer interviews.

**... moments [in Call of Duty 4] are almost too real and painful to bear. . .**

If the personnel interviews for Call of Duty 4 are paratextual testimonies that narrate the developers' commitment to military realism during the game's production phase, then the press reviews are the paratextual evaluations by gaming's official taste experts on the game designers' execution of their craft. Call of Duty 4 earned high aggregate scores of "94" for both the Xbox 360 and PS3 platforms on MetaCritic.com, placing the game in the top 10 of the best reviewed games for both systems (as of February 2009). But professional critics and reviewers do far more than score and rank a game based on some in-house rubric. Press reviews, which are usually penned before the game's release date but are often not published until the game goes on sale, join a chorus of other information that influence how gamers understand a title's place within a genre and marketplace, and whether the player ought to part with their money. Furthermore, as elite and experienced players themselves, game critics also suggest how to best interpret titles' content and game play experiences. This section surveys how high profile video game reviews posted within days of Call of Duty 4's early November 2007 release offer strategies for understanding the game's pleasures of military realism and how gamers might appreciate the technical sophistication of the simulated violence without succumbing to its negative affective elements.

The reviews for Call of Duty 4 are nearly uniformly pleased with Infinity Ward's decision to transport the franchise from its WWII theaters to modern day combat zones. Making the title's armed conflict more timely also makes the game more relevant to players' social experiences (potentially increasing its social realism). As Gamespot.com's former editor Jeff Gerstmann (2007) puts it, "By bringing things into a fictionalized story that still seems fairly plausible, the developer has made a much heavier game" (n.p.). "Heavier" in this context probably means that the game is more personally affecting for gamers who may know soldiers serving overseas, or for those who may have served or are currently serving.

Besides the diegetic universe's fictional but no less horrifying terror plot, this game saw graphical and game play improvements over Call of Duty 3 (2006). The reviewers seem most comfortable with praising the game's technical achievements. For instance, in Hilary Goldstein's review for IGN.com, the critic writes:

This is a gorgeous game from top to bottom. It runs almost perfectly, with only a few rare framerate hiccups, and offers rich details, great texture work, excellent animations for your allies, awesome particle effects, and some stellar lighting. The sound is equally impressive. Combat is loud. The shouts of your allies, the curses of your enemies, the ominous clink of a grenade falling at your feet, all go to creating an immersive experience. You may well lose yourself in combat, drawn in by the visuals and the sound. This is a technically excellent effort that won't disappoint. (2007, n.p.)

Gamedaily.com's Chris Buffa strikes a similar note in his review:

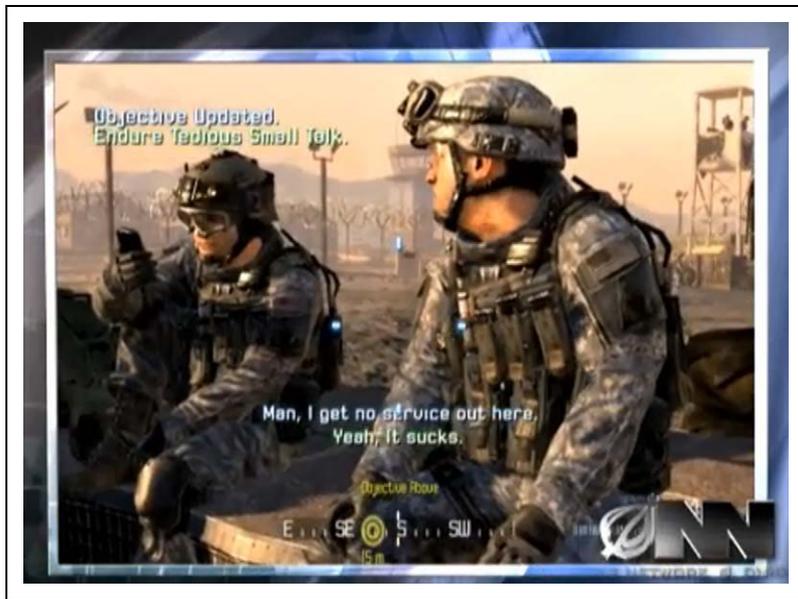


**Figure 2.** A game journalist reports from a gun range in an IGN.com Video Feature (“video feature” image captured by author).

To play COD4 is to admire it. Not only does it play remarkably well, but it looks and sounds gorgeous. Its powerful scenes of civilians getting executed and buildings crumbling strikes deep in the hearts of anyone that pays attention to the daily new [sic]. The way soldiers clear rooms and the mission in which you safely bomb terrorists from hundreds of feet in the air reminds us of the shows on the Discovery Channel. We find ourselves both amazed and terrified at the detail, how characters move like actual human beings, how weapons look and sound exactly like their real-life counterparts and the screams of pain, anger and joy. (2007, n.p.)

But perhaps the most literal game review is a video feature produced by IGN-Australia that compares the virtual Call of Duty 4 guns to their real-world counterparts at a Las Vegas gun store (IGN, 2007). In this video, the IGN reporter test fires numerous pistols and assault rifles, as the video alternates between the live action demonstration and the game’s firefights (see Figure 2). The video’s host explains the pros and cons of each weapon (e.g., accuracy, power, recoil, etc.), and how accurately Infinity Ward brought their digital weapons to life.

This video’s quite literal comparison between worldly arms and their game proxies assumes an unproblematic correspondence and fidelity between the real and the virtual. What comparisons like this and, indeed, all marketing efforts that extol military realism ignore are the implications for how players understand the experiences of the game’s virtual soldiers, and how that understanding informs what they know of actual soldiering. This is, in other words, the key difference that Galloway strikes between textual realism and social realism. Marketing paratexts are far more likely to advertise how the game represents the details of modern war machinery—the physical setting, the political era, or the ability of the development team to



**Figure 3.** Soldiers complain about poor phone reception in the once fictional Modern Warfare 3 (“Onion” image captured by author).

craft a compelling virtual war experience (i.e., the military realisticness) that closely resembles other war entertainment—than it is to sell the gamer on the equally boring and horrifying social reality of conducting war. The parodic news source, *The Onion* has offered perhaps the keenest and most humorous insight into *Call of Duty*’s inability to model the social reality of war when they reported on (the previously fictional<sup>6</sup>) *Modern Warfare 3*, in which players spend most of their time “hauling equipment,” “filling out paperwork,” and “complaining about how bad the cell phone reception is” (*Onion*, 2010, n.p.; see Figure 3).

Unlike the personnel interviews, the game reviewers did grapple with the subjective discomforts of playing a military game during a time of war, and how *Call of Duty 4*’s more haunting moments engender moments of anxiety. Chris Buffa of *Gamedaily.com* echoes Keirsey’s comments about the game’s brutality as being an interactive testament to the valor of today’s soldiers. In his review, Buffa states:

Combat is visceral and unrivaled. You’ve never experienced anything more vicious and unforgiving. Rockets zip past your head, attack choppers shred nearby houses with gunfire, jets carpet bomb an area, tanks blast through walls and soldiers fall by the hundreds. The insanity, coupled with your character’s inability to absorb as many hits as in other games (*Halo 3*, *Bioshock*), causes you to question your actions and rethink strategies. Bottom line, if this game represents even just a fraction of the hell actual

soldiers deal with on a day-to-day basis, we have a newfound respect for the armed forces. (2007, n.p.)

Call of Duty 4 has been praised for introducing particularly stark battles and scenes into the single-player narrative that underscore the ugliness of war. For instance, in an especially bleak sequence near the game's beginning the gamer plays as President Al-Fulani, the kidnapped leader of an unnamed Arab county, who is being escorted to their televised execution. The player is powerless to do anything other than to look around helplessly during this sequence. "Through the eyes of Al-Fulani, you watch as [the terrorist, Khaled] Al-Asad raises a gun to your face; a gunshot rings out and the screen quickly fades to black" (Moses, 2007, n.p.). Gamepro's Travis Moses punctuates his description of the execution, stating, "Because of [Call of Duty 4's] near-photorealistic visuals, moments such as this are almost too real and painful to bear but it again reinforces Infinity Ward's ability to expertly engage both the body and the mind" (2007, n.p.). Andrew Pfister of EGM/lup.com argues similarly that despite the potential for an unpleasant approximation of current military action in the Middle East—a "delicate issue being addressed in a medium best known for 'dude, blow something up'"—that because of Infinity Ward's past experiences in making WWII games, that they have struck the right tone of military realism for playing the current Global War on Terror.

But as any Call of Duty fan can tell you, the people at Infinity Ward are skilled storytellers and masterful scenarists. It's because of this that Modern Warfare finds itself in the company of movies like *Black Hawk Down*, rife with intense portrayals of serious and complicated situations that, though perhaps not entirely realistic, still convey to the rest of the nonenlisted world how war might feel: completely f\*\*\*ed up. (Pfister, 2007, n.p.)

The sacrifice and professionalism of the Marines and British S.A.S. forces (the two squads the gamer plays as in the single-player campaign) are presented in the press reviews as morally righteous actors even if the limited military interventions themselves fail to enjoy the same mythological gravity as WWII campaigns. The press reviews recognize elements of simulation fever that attend to playing wars ripped from today's headlines, and the need for smart design when crafting virtual wars based on recent events. However, the game journalists diffuse any concerns over this subjective tension by celebrating the moral virtues of armed service personnel, and the skill of Infinity Ward to update their award-winning franchise without falling prey to simulation fever. The major press reviews largely reinforce the tagline delivered in Call of Duty's major TV spot: "Wars change. Weapons change. Soldiers don't."

## Very fun game, American Scum

Call of Duty 4's "World Leaders" web videos illustrate just how important fan-authored paratexts have become to the efforts of video game marketers. The

amateur-looking World Leaders videos star five international politicians typically vilified by the mainstream U.S. news media offering their own reviews of *Call of Duty 4*. Like most video reviews that alternate between a talking head and game footage, these satirical shorts contain archival footage of a leader at a press conference, alongside game play clips from *Call of Duty 4*. Conspicuously poor broken-English voiceovers play in these off-color spots, and they closely resemble any number of fan videos posted to video sharing sites like YouTube, or comedy sketches from late night comedy programs like *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart or *The Colbert Report*. Indeed, the World Leaders videos testify to the assumed value of fan-authored texts to help assure a game's success precisely because of what these videos are not—namely, fan-authored texts. These pieces were not crafted by a die-hard *Call of Duty* fan, as is suggested by the host site's appearance (the page's simple layout and repetitive wallpaper background call to mind a somewhat dated MySpace or Geocities page). Rather, the site was engineered by DDB Los Angeles, an extremely successful ad agency and bankrolled by the game's publisher Activision.<sup>7</sup> Additional downloadable content such as the desktop wallpaper graphics and AIM buddy icons featuring the URL hint to site's nonfan origins, as do the links to *Infinity Ward* and Activision at the bottom of website's pages.

The pseudo-fan created World Leaders project impressed the advertising community. The campaign won numerous awards at the 2008 Belding Awards competition, and it garnered the "Most Attention Getters" and "Don't You Wish You'd Thought of This" awards at the 2008 MI6 Video Game Marketing Conference. According to a blog entry by Paul Sears, an account supervisor with DDB LA, the advertisement's goal was to "Raise awareness of the game and give gamers a reason to believe that *Call of Duty*'s move from a WWII game to the arena of Modern Warfare was going to make the game even better." Sears continues, posing the rhetorical question: "Who better to endorse *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* than the experts—war hungry world leaders?" (Sears, 2009, n.p.).

The videos feature Russia's Vladimir Putin, Libya's late Col. Muammar al-Gaddafi, Cuba's Fidel Castro, Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and a media report issued on behalf of North Korea's now deceased Kim Jong-Il. The short pieces are bookended by mock broadcasting slates, most are accompanied by some grandiose nationalistic orchestral score, and these absurdist caricatures assume a familiarity with how these leaders are typically represented by the mainstream U.S. press. Unlike the other *Call of Duty* paratexts, these parodic game reviews keenly acknowledge the centrality of play in game culture—a recognition that is largely absent from the earnest military realism discourse, including the aforementioned interviews and the press reviews.

Play, humor, and textual experimentation are not all that easily commensurable with an advertised military realism that supposedly pays tribute to real soldiers and closely models ballistics and combat tactics. Indeed, play is often disruptive, subversive, farcical, and irreverent. These videos acknowledge what the gaming community already knows—that gamers engage in all manner of behavior during virtual war play that is neither realistic nor particularly militaristic. Despite Sears' blog assertion that "war hungry" world leaders make for the best *Call of Duty* advocates,

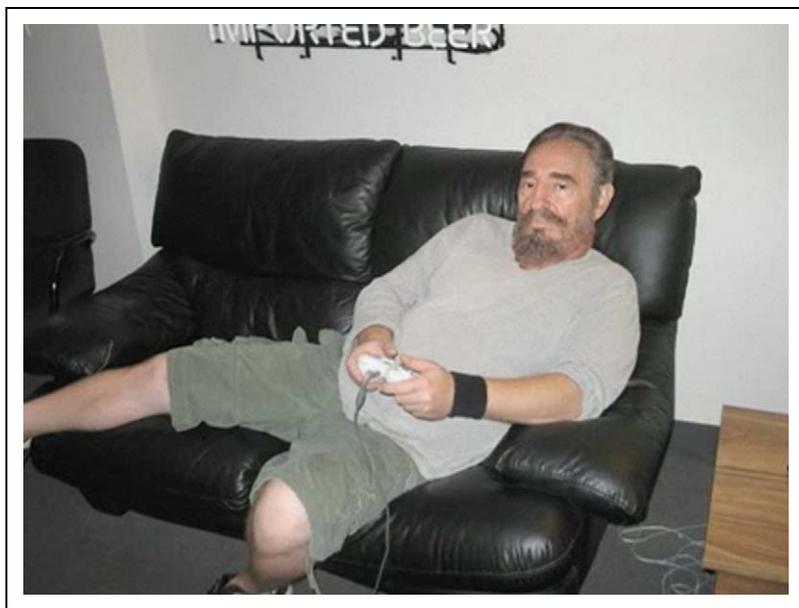
the videos' repurposed archival footage deflate the production personnel's serious rhetoric of military realism, and they acknowledge the vibrant fan community that is absent from *Call of Duty's* major television spots. The World Leaders project signals that creative fan-authored mashups, websites, and paratexts are such a critical component for AAA game marketing campaigns, that when devotees fail to produce the "right" fan goods, producers can manufacture fan-look-alike paratexts for them.

Beyond suggesting a politically aware and creative fan community, the World Leaders pieces also complicate the issue of simulation fever. If simulation fever is the subjective discomfort caused by some disconnect between the manner in which a process is represented or simulated, with the way a gamer understands that process to operate outside of the game, then how might such obviously parodic paratexts contribute to any state of simulation anxiety? The answer lies in the paradoxical nature of play itself. First, these videos inject timely political knowledge into the frames of meaning that circulate around the *Call of Duty* franchise, offering players worldly referential pleasures external to the fictitious game characters and settings. The production personnel and the game make it abundantly clear that *Call of Duty 4's* story and characters are fabricated. Yet the parodic game reviews assume more than a passing familiarity with these leaders' personas. This crafty piece of advertising delivers contemporary political references in the absurd package of game reviews from world leaders-turned game critics.

The videos are thus playfully ambivalent about how the paratextual political truths and the textual representations of military realism offer potentially oppositional readings about the game's depiction of international conflict after 9/11. The videos make this friction between truth and fiction clear because the unifying conceit is the leaders' mixed reviews of *Call of Duty's* near-real narrative and setting. For example, Putin gives the single-player mission a negative review because he believes that the idea of stolen Russian nuclear weapons is a "very implausible story" and that he finds the notion "disgusting, like Polish vodka." Similarly, the state-run media correspondent for Kim Jong-Il reports that while the "glorious leader" enjoyed certain aspects of the game—saying "Very fun game, American scum"—because the game has nukes, "there is no saving Korea. One star." In Castro's review, the Cuban leader says that he has been absent from public view because he has been playing *Call of Duty* (see Figure 4). Castro praises the game, saying "Not since baseball has America given us something this exciting." But due to his health problems and the game's high levels of excitement, his brother Raul is not permitted to play at the same time.

The fictional "complaints" levied about game play anxiety are most pronounced in the al-Gaddafi's video. The Colonel states in his review:

Game developers! Come on, you say this is an unnamed Arab country? Fictional? This is Libya. It's obviously Tripoli. Pretending this isn't Libya is as stupid as pretending



**Figure 4.** Castro playing *Call of Duty 4: Modern warfare* in his “World Leaders” ad (World Leaders image captured by author).

Liberty City isn't New York. If this isn't Libya, then a camel doesn't poop in the desert.  
[Silence. Person coughing.] Camel? Pooping in the desert? Like a bear? Nevermind.

Al-Gaddafi continues to identify people and places as the game footage plays. Near the end of the review, he freezes the action and circles Tripoli's beach with a sportscasting telestrator tool, exclaiming “You can practically see the hot babes in their tropical-print burkas!” The Libyan leader's reference to Liberty City, the NYC-look alike in *Grand Theft Auto IV* (2007), is not the only intertextual allusion to game culture in these videos. These reviews repeatedly acknowledge a playful game culture largely ignored by the game's “official” marketing materials. For instance, Putin (whose online gamer handle is “ShootingPutin187”) praises the game's multiplayer design, saying that he has designed his own class of sniper called the “Russian Bear.” He boasts “I am silent but deadly, like a Boris Yeltsin fart.” According to President Ahmadinejad, Iran has also used the game's multiplayer customization options to develop a new ability to defeat “the Great Satan.” Their army's newest order is that of the “anti-teabaggers” which will protect their soldiers against having their posthumous faces squatted on by their victors.<sup>8</sup> Ahmadinejad's announcement of this new ability is accompanied by a provocative image of a military medal made from twin tea infuser balls (see Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** The “Anti-Tea-bag” Perk from Ahmadinejad’s World Leaders video (World Leaders image captured by author).

## Conclusion

The off-color jokes and insider humor that characterize the World Leaders videos agree with Kerr’s (2006) hegemonic masculinity and Kline et al.’s (2003) militarized masculinity. Moreover, the celebrated liminality between worldly facts and gaming fictions lessens the potency of any critical protests against Call of Duty’s representation of contemporary war. These parodic videos are a preemptive gesture by Activision against those who might criticize war games for profiting from contemporary armed conflicts. In effect, these spoof reviews muddy the simulational waters to obscure the game’s varied strategies of producing its virtual war pleasures. The World Leaders videos do not eliminate the potential for simulation fever so much as they stigmatize any allegations of moral panics resulting from taking video games too seriously, or conflating games’ incomplete simulations for reality itself.

Simulation fever, however, is not only some cognitive disconnect or ludic anxiety that impacts sensitive gamers during game play. Simulation fever can negatively impact promotional buzz and sales, making it a concern for game developers across game genres.<sup>9</sup> Comically presenting world leaders as Call of Duty gamers injects political levity into a game that is purported by its production personnel to be distinctly apolitical but viscerally affecting. The logic of Infinity Ward’s personnel seems to operate as follows: if military realism is the sum total of all the military details programmed into the game, then omitting key geopolitical facts such as real

locations and bodies politic means that the game must be politically neutral. The game's marketers, however, understand that meaning making, hype creation, and sales can be amplified by giving the game community paratextual fare that acknowledges their insider jokes and affords them the license to disregard the complex politics of representation or the ills of simulation fever. For all of its advertised military realism (i.e., its technical realisticness and positive framing of U.S. service personnel), *Call of Duty 4*'s marketers would have you remember that it is, in the end, "just a game."

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Notes

1. One of McCann-Erickson's "Jump In" ads won the "Best of Show-National" and "Mosaic Award" for multicultural advertising at the 2006 ADDY Award Gala hosted by the American Advertising Federation (see Xbox Press Release, 2006, n.p.).
2. Video game violence and gaming addiction have been blamed for crimes ranging from theft to murder to suicide. For additional examples of how games have been implicated in recent crimes, see Benedetti, 2007; Buncombe, 2008; Calvert, 2003; Turner, 2008.
3. Some game franchises are produced with subscription fees and expansion modules in mind, such as the popular massively multiplayer game, *World of Warcraft* (2004).
4. Beginning in 2003, Rooster-Teeth Productions began creating satirical videos using the *Halo* game engine and distributed these shorts online. The series had become such a fan favorite that by 2007 Microsoft commissioned Rooster-Teeth Productions to create ads hyping the release of *Halo 3*, which grossed over \$170 million during its first 24 hours (Geddes, 2007, n.p.).
5. See Martini, 2008, for an interview with Randy Fitzgerald.
6. *Modern Warfare 3* is no longer only a punch line for *The Onion*, as it hit store shelves on November 8, 2011.
7. Conducting a WhoIS.com request of the website's URL reveals that the site is registered to Activision Publishing.
8. "Tea bagging" in video games is when one player places their avatar over another and squats over the dead avatar's face. Because many shooter games allow the defeated player to view the action after their virtual death, victorious players can add insult to injury by performing this act of dominance.
9. Another example is the outcry over the publicity materials for the survival horror game, *Resident Evil 5* (2009). The early trailers for this well-known cross-platform (and multimedia) franchise show Chris Redfield, a white Special Operations officer, shooting

dark-skinned Africans who have been infected with destructive parasites. Fans and nonfans voiced their concerns about the game's racist depiction of having a white American shooting diseased black Africans. Capcom, the game's Japanese publisher, denied any racist intent and quickly introduced light-skinned infected Africans into subsequent trailers. Simulation fever in this case, erupted not because the game failed to simulate a worldly process accurately, but because early game footage appeared as insensitive allegories of Western colonialization and the AIDS epidemic. For a longer discussion of this public relations dilemma, see Kramer, 2009.

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## Bio

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