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"Invading Your Hearts and Minds": *Call of Duty*® and the (Re)Writing of Militarism in U.S. Digital Games and Popular Culture

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1. Introduction

> *There's a soldier in all of us.*
> *Call of Duty*: Black Ops TV Commercial (2010)
> The visual and audio effects [...] make the [war]
> experience appear real.
> In fact the experience is sterile. We are safe. [...]
> It takes the experience of fear and the chaos of
> battle,
> the defeating and disturbing noise, to wake us up,
> to make us realize
> that we are not who we imagined we were, that
> war as displayed
> by the entertainment industry might, in most
> cases, as well be ballet.
> Chris Hedges, *War is a Force that Gives us Meaning*
> (2002)
> *Dear Ron McLean. Dear Coach's Corner,*
> I'm writing in order for someone to explain to my
> niece [...]
> the function the ritual serves in conjunction with
> what everybody knows
> is, in the end, a kid's game.

1   January 1, 2010, was a special day in Boston. The Boston Bruins were about to face the Philadelphia Flyers at Fenway Park, in the third hockey “Winter Classic,” an annual event held by the National Hockey League where two teams play an outdoor game. “It's a perfect day for hockey in Boston,” said Hockey Hall of Famer Bobby Orr as he watched the game. “It's a thrill to see all these pros turn into kids again. [...] This day [...] truly is a classic” (quoted in Shaughnessy 2010).

2   The Bruins finally won the “Winter Classic” 2-1, but the event also produced other (less noticeable) winners: those who favour a strong U.S. military and who support the wars the United States and its allies wage abroad. Indeed, like many sports events taking place in the United States, the “Winter Classic” instantly became a pretext for the glorification of the U.S. war machine. The crowd assembled at Fenway offered one of its loudest ovations when the ceremonial opening puck drop was made by a member of the U.S. military. In addition, members of the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps and Coast Guard joined music artist James Taylor in singing the National Anthem. Then “a United States Air Force B-2 Spirit flown by the 509th Bomb Wing of Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri and the 131st Bomb Wing of the Missouri Air National Guard soared overhead” (Morreale 2010). Most people flashed their cameras and cheered when the B-2 flew over Fenway's Green Monster, but nobody seemed particularly surprised (or outraged) to see that hockey – or what Canadian rock band Propagandhi calls a “kid's game” – was being used as a vehicle for militarist promotion/propaganda – right before their eyes!

3   In fact, hockey is not the only popular culture artefact that has been a vehicle for the militarization of post-9/11 everyday life. For instance, it could be argued that Hollywood war movies such as Irwin Winkler's *Home of the Brave* (2006) and Sidney J. Furie's *The Four Horsemen* (2008) have included messages condoning militarism[1] and ideas analogous to those of the George W. Bush administration (for example, the idea that Americans should give their unconditional support to U.S. troops or the argument that the United States must wage wars to fight “evil” enemies and protect democracy in the world)[2]. The goal of this article is to discuss how digital war games[3] have played a similar role. Building bridges between the humanities approach to Game Studies [4], American Studies, International Relations and Critical Geopolitics, it starts from the assumption that digital games are more than “kid's games” or “lowbrow irrelevant child's play” (Souri 2007, 537); they are “sophisticated vehicles inhabiting and disseminating” specific ideologies (Leonard 2004, 2). Accordingly, it uses the example of the *Call of Duty* series to highlight how digital war games contain images and narratives that elicit consent for the U.S. military, militarism and the wars the U.S. and its allies wage abroad. *Call of Duty* is a first-person and third-person shooter series franchise that began on the PC and later expanded to consoles such as *Playstation 3* and *XBOX 360*. Published and owned by *Activision* and developed by companies such as *Infinity Ward* and *Treyarch*, the majority of the games in the main series (*Call of Duty*, *Call of Duty 2*, *Call of Duty 3*, *Call of Duty: World at War* and *Call of Duty: Black Ops*) have been set primarily in World War II or the Cold War, except for *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* and *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, which are set in modern times. While the first four games are relevant to a discussion of digital games and militarism, since they embrace an overwhelmingly positive view of the U.S. military along with a “patriotic willingness to support [U.S.] foreign ventures” and to portray World War II as a “good war” (Boggs and Pollard 2007, 53), this article focuses on how *Call of Duty*

constructs images about the *future* of international relations, the threats the United States faces in the post-9/11 world and the role Washington should play in this context. Therefore, our references in this article will be to *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* and *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*.

4   The methodology of the article builds on Vit Sisler's contribution to the content analysis of digital games. Thus, we "play[ed] the whole game[s] while taking notes and screenshots of relevant visual signifiers, recording the narrative and analyzing the structure of gameplay" via qualitative description (Sisler 2008, 206). Building on Luiza Bialasiewicz et al., we hope to generate a deeper understanding of the (pre)dominant discourses about U.S. identity, Americans' views about their soldiers, the military, and the role the United States should play in the world by identifying the "citational practices that are reiterated in [these] cultural and political sites outside the formal institutions of the state" (Bialasiewicz et al. 2007, 409). In line with this methodology, *Call of Duty* is studied as a discourse: we look at the characters, plot and setting of the games and see those elements as a "specific series of representations and practices through which meanings are produced, identities are constituted, [...] and political and ethical outcomes made more or less possible" (ibid. 406). While the first section of the article offers a review of some of the relevant literature on digital war games and U.S. militarism, the second part turns to the content analysis of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* and *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*. Specifically, this analysis focuses on three themes to highlight the ways in which *Call of Duty* (re)writes U.S. militarism and illustrates that these games (1) resonate with and reinforce a tabloid imaginary of post-9/11 geopolitics; (2) glorify military power and elicit consent for the idea that state violence and wars are inevitable; and (3) encourage our myopia by depicting a sanitized vision of war and by downplaying the negative consequences of state violence.

2. The Politics of Militarism in Digital Games

5   Since 9/11, an increasing number of authors have studied the links between U.S. militarism and digital games. For example, in a book called *Joystick Soldiers*, Nina B. Huntemann and Matthew Thomas Payne have assembled various contributions on the history of the links between militarism and military-themed games, the representation of war in video games, the use of video games for training military personnel, the effects of military-themed games on those who play them, and the acts of anti-war resistance that can be performed in and through war games (Huntemann and Payne 2010). Particularly relevant to our discussion is David Nieborg's contribution, which investigates how *America's Army*, a series of video games developed by the U.S. Army, is used for the dissemination of "state-produced propaganda as a part of a wider U.S. strategic communication campaign" (Nieborg 2010, 54). Nieborg explains that, with its narrative justifying U.S. military interventions abroad and propagating the U.S. army ethos, *America's Army* can be seen as a "powerful vessel for disseminating U.S. Army ideology and foreign policy to a global game culture" (ibid. 63).

6   Other authors have used the case of *America's Army* to make similar arguments about the links between militarism and digital games. For instance, David Leonard explains that the games in this series "exist as virtual advertisements for the present and future glory of the U.S. Armed Forces" (Leonard 2004, 5); Marcus Power shows how the series "puts a hospitable face on the military, manufacturing consent and complicity among consumers

for military programmes, missions and weapons" (Power 2007, 278); Roger Stahl notes that the game has been one of "the most successful experiments in recruiting history" (Stahl 2006, 123); Johan Höglund argues that it portrays the Middle East as "a frontier zone where a perpetual war between U.S. interests and Islamic terrorism is enacted" (Höglund 2008); Alexander Galloway describes it as "a bold and brutal reinforcement of current American society and its positive moral perspective on military intervention" (Galloway 2004); and Ian Bogost argues that it "supports a moral code that corresponds with the U.S. Army's focus on duty and honor" (Bogost 2007).

7   Those who study *America's Army* (or other war games such as *Kuma\War*, *The Medal of Honour* or *Full Spectrum Warrior*) often rely on James Der Derian's concept of the "military–industrial–media–entertainment network" (MIME-NET) to highlight the relationship between the U.S. military and government and the videogame industry. According to Der Derian, this relationship has reached symbiotic proportions: U.S. Marines have trained on *Doom*, a landmark 1993 first-person shooter game; "military war games and computer video games blend" (Der Derian 2001, xi); and members of the U.S. military are consulted on the production of digital games. Jean Baudrillard's and Paul Virilio's contributions are also popular among scholars who study the links between digital games and war.[5] For Baudrillard, postmodernity means a blending of reality and representation (Baudrillard 1994); for Virilio, major powers such as the United States have developed powerful tools for aiming militaristic propaganda at the civilian population. In Virilio's words, "The central electronic-warfare administration — such as the so-called '3Ci' (control, command, communication, intelligence) in place in each major power — can now attend in real time to the images and data of a planetary conflict [...], tak[ing] charge of all tactical and strategic representations of warfare for the soldier, the tank or aircraft pilot [and the civilian population]" (Virilio 2000, 1-2). Ian Bogost's concept of "procedural rhetoric" can also be of great interest for scholars who study how digital games contribute to the militarization of everyday life (Bogost 2007). Bogost defines it as the "practice of using processes persuasively, just as verbal rhetoric is the practice of using oratory persuasively and visual rhetoric is the practice of using images persuasively." (Ibid., 28) Using multiple examples such as the 1982 digital game *Tax Avoiders*, in which the player's goal is to become a millionaire by accumulating income and avoiding taxes, Bogost shows how digital games are programmed in specific ways that "force the player to make decisions with social and political implications" (Ibid., 45).

8   The fact that *Call of Duty* was not *directly* developed by the U.S. Army probably explains why it has received less attention from scholars than games like *America's Army*[6]. Yet the desire of the designers of the game to recreate realistic troops, scenarios, tactics and weapons is crucial to our discussion. As Matthew Thompson explains, digital contemporary war games have become more and more "realistic" and "authentic" (Thompson 2008, 23). Since most gamers know that the digital game industry is now capable of producing games that make one "feel" (almost) like a "real" soldier, the realism and authenticity of digital war games have become vital to their economic success. *Call of Duty* project leader Jason West seems particularly aware of this when he notes the following in an interview about *Call of Duty 4*: "My favourite vehicle in *Call of Duty 4* [...] is the AC-130 Spectre Gunship because, I mean, when you see those web videos, it looks just like that. I mean, you are in the Gunship... you know... using the cannons... annihilating anything in your path" (West 2007). Furthermore, when asked how the developers ensured that *Call of Duty 4* would be authentic, West's answer shows the

relevance of Der Derian's argument about the "blending" of U.S. military personnel and digital game programmers. Indeed, West noted that the creators of *Call of Duty* have "talked to soldiers that have come back from war," discussed with "military advisors," "went to military bases," and "stood there while they fired tanks." To use West's words, the goal of those who made *Call of Duty* was to "put those things into the game" and to "put the player there" (ibid.). Of course, these quotes do not prove beyond doubt that West and his team had the *deliberate intention* of disseminating militarist propaganda. However, our point is that their fascination with the U.S. military and arsenal, combined with their willingness to emulate "real" environments and characters, prompted them to produce a series that contributes to the (re)writing of militarism and the U.S. war machine.

9   Our definition of the "(re)writing" concept comes from the disciplines of American Studies and International Relations: it builds on David Campbell's and Lene Hansen's contributions and is based on the assumption that *the* accepted way of speaking about an event, an object and identities is "not fixed by nature, given by God" (Campbell 1998, 9) but, instead, is "constructed through discourse" (Hansen 2006, 6). In other words, "there are no objective identities [or definitions of the objects that surround us] located in some extra-discursive realm" (ibid.); individuals of a given society help to ascribe particular meanings to words like "soldiers," "threat" and "war."

10   That being said, in a diverse society like the United States, there are many concurrent interpretations of these words. In line with this argument, the U.S. society can be seen as a "marketplace of ideas" (Abelson 2006) where concurrent social and political actors compete to ascribe particular meanings to identities, objects and events. To exemplify this, Frank Costigliola reminds us that an event such as the bombing of a factory can be described in many ways. For example, one reporter could say that the "missile struck the target in a clean hit," while another could say that "the ceiling of the factory burst open, and most of the people working there burned to death in the ensuing blaze" (Costigliola 2004, 279). According to Michel Foucault, power struggles in a given society and the power to assign meaning to such events are inextricable. In *Discipline and Punish*, he writes that "truth" is not outside power and that powerful individuals within a society are often able to impose their discourse as *the* accepted way of interpreting or speaking about an event or an object (Foucault 1975, 36). Foucault sees discourses as unquestioned beliefs, practices, and rules that restrict how people think and act.[7] David Campbell adds to the theory, claiming that a good way for individuals to contribute to the emergence of a (pre)dominant discourse is to repeat this discourse constantly so it becomes perceived as conventional wisdom/common sense by the majority. Following Judith Butler's analysis of gender and identity (Butler 1990), Campbell argues that identities and meanings are "instituted" through a "stylized repetition of acts" and a "regulated process of repetition" (Campbell 1998, 9-10).

11   Drawing on such theoretical considerations, we argue that the creators of *Call of Duty* are directly involved in the stylized process of repetition described by Butler and Campbell. Indeed, *Call of Duty* constantly echoes ideas similar to those of various foreign policy hawks who have supported George W. Bush's response to the terrorist attacks of New York and Washington, thereby (re)producing a mindset that has often pervaded the U.S. national security debate since 9/11. For instance, it invites gamers and Americans to conceive war and the preparation of war as the chief instruments of foreign policy and it feeds what some call an "addiction to war" (Andreas 2004) by "cherishing" and

"fetishizing" the "ethos of armed power" (Boggs and Pollard 2007, 13). Moreover, the fact that *Call of Duty* is one of the most popular war games is not without significance here: it shows that the messages embedded in the series have reached millions of people. Many analysts believe that the digital game industry may eclipse Hollywood for dominance in the entertainment sector within five or ten years (*Newsweek*, date unknown), and the commercial success of *Call of Duty* suggests that their prediction might come true. For instance, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* grossed $310 million within 24 hours of going on sale in the U.S., U.K. and Australia, making it the biggest money maker in entertainment history, ahead of other games such as *Grand Theft Auto 4* and movies such as Warner Brothers' *The Dark Knight* (which grossed $158.3 million in its first three days and is one of the greatest opening box office successes in movie history) and James Cameron's *Avatar* (which netted $352,000,000 in its first 17 days in the U.S.) (Johnson 2009 and Gray 2010). Thus, the programmers of *Call of Duty* have become important actors in the "marketplace of ideas" about U.S. soldiers and the war of terror. In the sections below, many examples highlight how the series (re)writes the ideology of militarism.

3. The (Re)Writing of Militarism in *Call of Duty*

3.1. A Tabloid Imaginary of Post-9/11 Geopolitics

We've got a civil war in Russia [...] and 15,000 nukes at
stake
Gaz, British Special Air Service Veteran in *Call of*
Duty 4: Modern Warfare
What the hell are we gonna do now, man?
Russians got us outnumbered, shit's falling from
the sky.
We're screwed, man! We're totally...
Corporal Dunn, United States Army Ranger in Call
of Duty: Modern Warfare 2

12   The first theme of U.S. militarism (re)written by *Call of Duty* is the idea that the U.S. faces ruthless and evil enemies in the post-9/11 world, enemies it must absolutely destroy to protect itself and the American people. Extending François Debrix's analysis and building a bridge between Critical Geopolitics and Game Studies, our argument here is that *Call of Duty* feeds Americans' "fears, anxieties, and insecurities" by promoting a "tabloid imaginary" of post-9/11 geopolitics (Debrix 2008, 5). Building on John Agnew's work, Debrix defines geopolitics as the "study of the geographical representations, rhetoric and practices that underpin world politics" (Agnew 2003, 5 quoted in Debrix 2008, 9). He also argues that our leaders, intellectuals, thinkers — but also the popular culture products we consume (for example, the *Reader's Digest*) — provide us with "ready-made explanations," "cartographical depictions" and "systems" of "visualizing the world we live in" (ibid. 9-12). In particular, Debrix uses the concept of "tabloid geopolitics" to describe the system of visualizing the world that has pervaded the post-9/11 national security debate. In Debrix's words,

the discourse of tabloid geopolitics seeks to generate some meanings and truths in (inter)national politics by sensationalizing and spectacularizing world politics at all costs. Often recognizable because of the language and imagery of fear, danger, and destruction that they typically mobilize, geopolitical "issues and problems"

introduced by tabloid geopolitical agents (media networks or intellectuals and academics or statecraft) are depicted in such a fashion that it now appears to the public that these so-called geopolitical problems can only be solved by means of military violence. (Ibid. 14-15)

13   This "discourse of tabloid geopolitics" is overtly present in the *Call of Duty* series. In *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (*MW*), U.S. and British forces face Imran Zakhaev, a Russian Ultranationalist who is determined to bring his country back to the Soviet era.[8] Zakhaev, who harbours strong feelings of hatred toward Western countries, argues that the Russian government has "prostituted" his homeland to the U.S. and its allies.[9] To topple the Russian government, he orchestrates a political crisis that leads to a civil war in Russia. His goal is clear: to take power of Russia and gain access to the entire Russian nuclear weapons arsenal, which includes 15,000 nuclear warheads. Zakhaev knows that the U.S. will take vigorous measures to thwart him, so he funds a coup in some unnamed Arab country, organized by his ally Khaled Al-Asad, to draw public attention to the Middle East instead of Russia. Khaled Al-Asad, who is a military commander in this Arab country, leads what he calls a "noble crusade" against his government, which "has been colluding with the West."[10]

14   When Al-Asad takes control of his homeland, the U.S. Marine Corps invades the country, a move to which Al-Asad responds by detonating a Russian-made nuclear bomb that kills large numbers of Marines. The U.S. and British governments soon discover that Russian Ultranationalist Zakhaev's plan was to divert the attention of both countries from the Russian civil war, and they decide to dispatch troops from the Special Air Service and United States Marine Corps Force Reconnaissance to kill Zakhaev and his son. In response, Zakhaev threatens to launch ICBMs against eight U.S. cities: Baltimore, Boston, Hartford, Philadelphia, New York, Washington, D.C., Richmond and Norfolk. We soon learn that such an attack could kill over 41 million U.S. citizens.[11]

15   *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (*MW2*) revolves around a similar "discourse of tabloid geopolitics." This time, however, the game depicts an even scarier world than the one pictured in *MW*. *MW2* is set five years after the conclusion of *MW*. In this game, Zakhaev's Ultranationalists (the same as in *MW*) have seized control of Russia, and the Russian people have made Zakhaev, who was killed by the West in *MW*, a hero and martyr.[12] *MW2* revolves around a new threat: Vladimir Makarov, one of Zakhaev's former allies, who begins a reign of terror against the U.S. and its allies by staging terrorist attacks such as the bombing of a Swedish furniture store in St. Petersburg and of the offices of a U.S. oil company in Baku, Azerbaijan. The game begins in Afghanistan, where U.S. Army Ranger Private Allen takes part in an operation to retake an Afghan city from local militia[13], but we soon learn that Private Allen must join the CIA to lead a secret operation as an undercover agent inside Makarov's organization in Russia. Thus, in the fourth campaign mission of the game, called "No Russian", the gamer impersonates undercover CIA agent Allen (alias Alexei Borodin), working alongside Makarov and taking part in a gruesome terrorist attack at Zakhaev International Airport in Moscow. The goal here is to open fire on civilians at the airport (though the player can abstain and let Makarov and his three colleagues do all the damage). At the end of the level, Makarov finally kills Allen after finding out that he is a CIA agent. Makarov is then able to convince the Russian people that the terrorist attack was carried out by military-trained American terrorists, a situation that leads to a surprise Russian invasion of America.

16   The following scenes probably are the most significant examples of the ways in which *Call of Duty* (re)writes post-9/11 fears, anxieties and insecurities. Indeed, in the "Wolverines!" campaign level, the player impersonates Private James Ramirez, a member of the U.S. Army Rangers, who must help his team to repel Russian attacks on U.S. soil. Taking advantage of a malfunction in NORAD's early-warning systems, the Russian military sneaks in via the East Coast undetected and launches attacks in major U.S. cities.[14] Specifically, "Wolverines!" takes place in an almost destroyed city in the state of Virginia. As the player proceeds through the level, she can see the effects war would have on an average American suburb. Houses and cars are on fire, enemy tanks roll on the streets, the sky is filled with thick clouds of black smoke, U.S. soldiers are panic-stricken, and dozens of gunshots and explosions can be heard simultaneously. Later in the game, *MW2* invites players to imagine the impact war would have on a city such as Washington, D.C. In a campaign level called "On their Own Accord," the Russians have stormed most of the buildings around the National Mall and ruined the Washington Monument and other objects of national pride. Here again, destruction, fire, smoke, gunshots and explosions give the city an apocalyptic look.

17   As one can see from such plots, *MW* and *MW2* clearly disseminate and reinforce a discourse/narrative that was constantly promoted by the Bush administration and other foreign policy hawks after 9/11. This vision has been studied extensively, and there is no need to remind the reader how often Bush and his advisors told Americans that the post-9/11 world was a dangerous place. For example, in countless speeches that could have been directly inspired by a game like *Call of Duty* (or a Tom Clancy book), Bush and his team stressed that there were "thousands of terrorists" in the world who would not hesitate to use weapons of mass destruction against the U.S. and kill millions of innocent civilians (Jackson 2005). Other U.S. national security intellectuals[15] gave credence to such arguments, warning Americans that 9/11 was only the tip of the iceberg and that the worst was still to come. For instance, in a 2005 article titled "Ten Years After," Richard A. Clarke "imagined the future history of the war on terror" and predicted a second wave of Al-Qaeda attacks on America, with suicide bombings in Las Vegas, Florida, California, Texas and New Jersey (Clarke 2005).

18   Just as Clarke does, *Call of Duty* (re)activates post-9/11 fears when it reminds Americans that Arab terrorists such as Khaled Al-Asad could acquire nuclear weapons from "rogue states" and use them against U.S. interests in the Middle East or elsewhere. In the same way as other war games such as *America's Army*, it portrays Arabs as "savages" and "uncivilized warriors," thereby "providing ideological sanction for America's War on Terror" and military intervention in the Middle East (Leonard 2004, 5). Equally interesting is the fact that *Call of Duty* echoes not only Bush's discourse of tabloid geopolitics but also Ronald Reagan's vision of the Cold War. Indeed, *MW* and *MW2* invite gamers/Americans to see Russia as a "terrorist sponsor" and a "hotbed of terrorism," and, more importantly, as a state willing to relaunch the nuclear arms race with the U.S., regain its superpower status, and become an "Evil Empire" again. When playing *Call of Duty*, Americans are thus encouraged to see Russia in the same way George Kennan saw it when he wrote his famous Long Telegram in 1946 —as a "rival" with whom there is no "possibility of a permanent happy coexistence" (Kennan 1947). Therefore, the games "encourage divisiveness" (Sisler 2008, 204) and reinforce stereotypes about other cultures by suggesting that Russians are cold-blooded individuals who can not be deterred from trying to destroy the West and engaging in acts of mass destruction. In this sense, *Call of*

Duty's discourse of tabloid geopolitics is also consistent with the vision of International Relations theorists such as "offensive realist" John Mearsheimer, who argues that international politics is a ruthless and dangerous business driven by "revisionist" great powers willing to shift the current balance of power in their favour (Mearsheimer 2001, 2).

3.2. Glorifying Military Power and Disseminating the Myth that State Violence and Wars are Inevitable

19   In addition to promoting a storyline that "could be pulled from today's headlines" (Mastrapa 2009) or from one of Mearsheimer's books, *Call of Duty* also promotes militarism because it glorifies military power and disseminates the myth that state violence and the wars waged by the U.S. abroad are unavoidable. Specifically, it conveys a clear message about the role the U.S. should play in the world: just like former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, it invites gamers/Americans to believe that "the best defense and in some case the only defense" against national security threats is a "good offense" (quoted in Flounders 2002). Consider the following excerpt from a speech given by U.S. Army Lieutenant General Shepherd in *MW2*: "Learning to use the tools of modern warfare is the difference between the prospering of your people, and utter destruction."[16] In other words, *Call of Duty* invites gamers/Americans to believe that a nation like the United States must either develop a strong military or fade away. This idea has been promoted by many U.S. national security intellectuals since 9/11, especially neoconservative thinkers like Donald Kagan, Norman Podhoretz and other members of neoconservative think-tanks such as the *Project for a New American* Century (PNAC).[17] Indeed, Kagan and others have stressed the "need to increase defense spending" (PNAC 2007), arguing that there is "no substitute for hard military power" (Kagan 2010).

20   In *MW2*, Lieutenant General Shepherd even goes a step further in echoing the neoconservative vision when he argues: "We [the U.S.] are the most powerful military force in the history of man. Every fight is our fight, because what happens over here matters over there. We don't get to sit one out."[18] With such a discourse, *Call of Duty*'s message is clear: it (re)writes the thesis of the American Manifest Destiny — the belief that the U.S. is a "sacred space providentially selected" to embark on a "mission" to promote and defend democracy and American values throughout the world (Stephanson 1995). In the same line of argument, it also suggests that the U.S. has the *duty* and the "overarching rights" (Paterson and Dalby 2006, 19) to go anywhere and to take part in any war in order to protect its hegemony. Here again, Shepherd's speech echoes neoconservative arguments: just like Donald Kagan, it "fetishizes the imperial perspective" (Sisler 2008, 210) and tries to convince players that they should be proud of the fact that the U.S. has "forces deployed in every theatre" (Kagan 2010).

21   Through the multiple campaign levels the gamer must complete in order to beat *MW* and *MW2*, at least three other aspects of the games reveal how they invite players to "love the bomb" and to see state/military violence as an "inevitable", "mandatory" and "normal" — if not "banal" — step in resolving conflicts. First, the characters of *Call of Duty* never consider the possibility of relying on diplomacy to settle disputes with Arab military leader Khaled Al-Asad or Russian Ultranationalists Imran Zakhaev and Vladimir Makarov. On the contrary, in the vision of world politics on which *MW* and *MW2* are based, prospects for peace are dismissed as unrealistic. We are told that the true role of the state

is to kill those who threaten U.S. and British national security. Here, Ian Bogost's concept of "procedural rhetoric" (described above) is relevant to explain how the rules of *Call of Duty* are used to put the player in contact with the ideology of militarism. Given the linear gameplay of *MW* and *MW2*, the player is never allowed to adopt a different course of action than the one imposed by the creators and the fixed sequence of challenges they imagined. For instance, contrary to "non-linear", "open world" or "sandbox" games such as *Fallout 3*, *Fable 2* or *Red Dead Redemption*, which allow players to choose between different paths to glory and to make moral choices between good and evil actions (Schulzke 2009), *MW* and *MW2* imprison the player in a web of restrictive rules that only allow her to follow the path that was drawn by the programmers. As a result, the player is never given a chance to negotiate with U.S. enemies; instead, she is invited to participate in "shock and awe-like" military interventions, counterinsurgency operations reminiscent of the real U.S. wars in countries like Afghanistan, or secret operations and assassination missions. As Matthew Thomson notes, in a digital war game like *Call of Duty*, "the player must learn and internalize [the] rules of warfare and therefore learn how to win according to the logic" of war (Thomson 2008, 46). In this respect, *Call of Duty* gives players/Americans the opportunity to "be there" alongside computerized versions of U.S. soldiers and to annihilate "virtual copies" of the U.S.'s "real" enemies in the world (Ouellette 2008). Admittedly, *MW* and *MW2* can probably serve as a release mechanism for those who had to endure the vicious attacks of 9/11.[19] However, the fact remains that the games not only encourage maniacal revenge against other international actors but also oblige players to conform to a violent vision of the warrior ethos and to (virtually) perform the (often) brutal and gruesome acts concomitant with such a vision. For instance, in the *Call of Duty* environment, the player is soon told one basic fact about war: shooting enemies in the head is preferable to shooting them in the arms, legs or body, since it is more lethal. In the multiplayer modes of *MW* and *MW2*, players even earn more points for "headshots." They can then use the points to unlock new weapons and equipment (grenades, flashbangs, gun silencers, etc.), which, according to the game's logic, is the surest way to become a better and more efficient and effective warrior.

22 A second aspect showing how *Call of Duty* glorifies military power concerns the military equipment that the player can use in *MW* and *MW2*. As Scott Lukas writes, an important feature of the contemporary digital game is that "it is, often above all, about guns" (Lukas 2010, 76). The *Call of Duty* series is no exception to the rule: it gives the player the opportunity to arm herself with most weapons U.S. soldiers can use in "real" contemporary wars. Among the most popular weapons in the games are the following: the Colt M4A1 carbine, an assault rifle tracing its lineage back to the M16; the Winchester Model 1200 Defender, a pump-action, 12-gauge shotgun; the Raytheon and Lockheed Martin FGM-Javelin anti-armor system; and the Cheytac LLC Intervention M-200 sniper rifle. Here again, the goal of the creators of *Call of Duty* was to depict these weapons in the most "realistic" and "authentic" fashion, a situation that illustrates the relevance of aforementioned arguments made by Jean Baudrillard about the blending of reality and representation in the time of postmodernity. Thus, the programmers of *MW* and *MW2* depict weapons in detail and with great exactitude: for example, shooting the Intervention M-200 "feels" different from shooting the Colt M4A1, and some weapons are more accurate and/or more lethal than others. When asked about what their interaction with digital games weapons constitute, many players say that using the weapons is a "strategic decision" and a "means of achieving missions" (Lukas 2010, 87). Accordingly and in line with Ian Bogost's concept of "procedural rhetoric", *Call of Duty* encourages

players to identify the best military tools out there, to develop an attachment to certain guns and to make these guns their "weapons of choice." Often, the weapons used in *MW* and *MW2* are the very same weapons the Pentagon and defense companies such as Lockheed Martin praise in their lobbying effort to convince elected officials in Washington to invest more money in arms development and production[20]. In the multiplayer modes of *MW* and *MW2*, players are rewarded new (and often deadlier) weapons, weapon attachments and/or bonus equipment as they advance and reach new levels. Here, the player's performance is measured with points, which are earned most and foremost by killing opponents. In *MW*, players can even unlock golden-skinned versions of the guns used in the game. These guns are not more powerful than their "normal" versions, but they are meant to look "sexier" to the player. The fact that they actually do look like jewels invites players to see them as an ultimate reward and as precious objects in the game. In short, *Call of Duty* trivializes violence and invites players to cherish and fetishize weapons by applying a simple equation: killing people = unlocking deadlier/"sexier" weapons = killing more people.

23   The third aspect highlighting how *MW* and *MW2* glorify military power and the use of force is the fact that both games show famous pro-military quotes each time your character dies. The quotes are from leading intellectuals, philosophers, military officials or former leaders. They include Albert Einstein's "So long as there are men, there will be wars," which stresses the dark side of human nature and the inevitability of international conflict, General John J. Pershing's "The deadliest weapon in the world is a Marine and his rifle!," and Condoleezza Rice's "We're in a world in which the possibility of terrorism, married up with technology, could make us very, very sorry that we didn't act." Of course, many other quotes, such as George Washington's "My first wish is to see this plague of mankind, war, banished from the earth," clearly have an anti-war or anti-militarist bias. That being said, such quotes are given only limited discursive space and importance in *MW* and *MW2*, since the game plots revolve around ideas that contradict most arguments made by peace advocates.

3.3. A Sanitized Vision of war

24   Besides *Call of Duty*'s tendency to glorify the use of military force, the last major tenet of the ideology of militarism that we observed in *MW* and *MW2* is the fact that the programmers of the games decided to refrain from showing the "real" consequences of armed conflict. To be sure, *MW* and *MW2* are violent games replete with scenes reminding players that war is hell and that armed conflict often means violently taking the lives of other human beings. However, as Roger Stahl points out, games like *Call of Duty* never tell the entire truth about war: "[W]hen humans are hit with gunfire, they crumple noiselessly to the ground. Sometimes a mist of blood escapes an invisible wound, but the victims neither flail nor cry." (Stahl 2006, 124). In other words, *MW* and *MW2* never show you dismembered bodies, "little girls with smashed up faces" (ibid. 126), people with their skin burned or corpses lying on the ground, soaked in blood or massed together. You can kill someone using a grenade or a knife, but you never see graphic details of the "real" effects of an explosion on a human body or of a throat slit by a blade.

25   Thus *Call of Duty*'s narrative gives credence to the arguments of those who praise the "Revolution in Military Affairs" (RMA). This revolution, it is often claimed, inaugurates a new form of warfare, one that is precise, clinical and clean (Metz and Kievit 1995;

Rumsfeld 2002). Consistent with the RMA vision is *Call of Duty*'s tendency to keep silent about "collateral damage," or the adverse effects of war on civilian populations. To be sure, some campaign levels in *MW* and *MW2* remind you not to shoot civilians. But the truth is that most cities and locations in the games are depicted without inhabitants and the U.S. and British war effort is shown not to hurt civilians[21]. In fact, at least one level in *MW2* provides graphic details of the effects of war on civilians. In this level, called "No Russian," you are required to shoot at civilians deliberately. As mentioned earlier, this is a part of the story where you play a CIA agent taking part in a terrorist attack at Zakhaev International Airport in Moscow alongside Russian Ultranationalist Vladimir Makarov, who is your enemy in the game. One game critic recounts his experience playing the level:

> As part of a group of four men with guns, you walk toward a security line full of civilians at a Russian airport. And then you kill them. I'll admit it — I pulled the trigger. The game had instructed me to follow the lead of my fellow terrorists, and I had been told that preserving my undercover status was important for the country [...] As the travelers screamed and fled from the indiscriminate slaughter, I strolled through the airport. I didn't fire my weapon anymore, but I watched the three Russian terrorists kill. One of the men shot a passenger as he crawled along the blood-streaked floor and pleaded for his life. And then I started shooting again. I thought that a guard was going to kill me, so I went after him first. The bullets hit his corpse — he was shot first by one of the other men — and it shuddered on the ground [...] The rules of play were clear: If you want to go forward, if you want to keep playing, you have to kill these [individuals]. Do something awful with me, the game asked. And I did. (Suellentrop 2009)

26   As one can see from the critic's account, *MW2* sometimes invites players to think about the dark side of war and to make moral choices between good and evil paths (shooting innocent civilians or not). That being said, the fact that the only scenes showing the slaughter of civilians are those in which Russians lead the way — instead of American or British soldiers — can also be seen as an attempt to emphasize the idea that only "our enemies" are capable of initiating such unjust and gruesome actions. For this reason, *Call of Duty* seems to tell players that crimes against humanity and acts of mass murder do happen in war but are most often performed by "them," not "us." As David Campbell explains, such binary oppositions have often been present in discourses about U.S. foreign policy (Campbell 1998). Relying on examples such as the National Security Council document number sixty-eight of 1950 (NSC-68), which is widely seen as having established the rationale for U.S. policy of containment of the Soviet Union after World War II, Campbell shows how interpretations of danger and national security threats have played a crucial role in the attempts of U.S. leaders to fix the contours of U.S. national identity. For instance, in addition to observing that U.S. foreign policy texts are often replete with references to the threatening, barbaric, sick, evil or dictatorial nature of "others" like Saddam Hussein or the USSR, Campbell shows that the very same texts have been used to describe the pacific, civilized and democratic U.S. society. In other words, U.S. leaders or national security intellectuals have relied on these texts to construct a moral hierarchy between "us" (the United States) and "them" (the Soviet Union). This is exactly what the programmers of *Call of Duty* try to do when they depict (bad) Russians as "sadistic individuals who kill civilians" and (good) Americans as "compassionate individuals who spare the lives of civilians."

27   In addition to depicting U.S. foreign adventures as benign, *Call of Duty* downplays the effects of war on the *boys*. No matter which character you embody in *MW* or *MW2*, U.S.

soldiers are depicted in the same way Hollywood often depicts them in war movies, i.e., as invincible individuals "embarked upon life-and-death situations" (Boggs and Pollard 2007, 69) or, in other words, as men with Rambo-like strengths who can heal themselves from practically any wound[22]. For instance, it is often easy for your enemy to shoot at you, but it is equally easy for you to hide behind a wall and automatically regain energy. In a similar vein, *MW* and *MW2* never show the graphic reality of the death of your character, nor do they suggest that war has any psychological effect on the *boys*[23]. War is shown as being safe, as having little consequence for the individuals who wage it, and as being "high-tech, fun, and hip" (Halter 2006, xvii).

4. Conclusion

28   The goal of this article was to show how a digital game such as *Call of Duty* can become "an artefact that legitimizes modern militaries as a natural part of social and personal life" (Flusty et al. 2008, 626). We have shown how *MW* and *MW2* echo and (re)write ideas reflecting the militarist ideology that has often been (pre)dominant in the post-9/11 U.S. national security debate. In particular, *Call of Duty* resonates with and reinforces a tabloid imaginary of post-9/11 geopolitics when it tells players that "we" are constantly on the brink of war with international actors such as Arab terrorists and Russia, who will not hesitate to invade "our" countries and attack "us" with nuclear weapons. In keeping with such a catastrophic and pessimistic vision of world politics, the idea that the U.S. and its allies have to maintain a strong military is constantly (re)inscribed in *MW* and *MW2*, the plots of which are based on an "all-pervasive rhetoric of warfare" (Leonard 2004, 6) that glorifies the U.S. war machine, downplays the monstrosities of war and encourage our myopia by depicting a sanitized vision of armed conflict.

29   Granted, it would be going too far to argue that those who play *Call of Duty* will automatically embrace militarism and the values embedded in the games. Though the 1999 Columbine High School massacre has led many academics, media, parents and government officials to argue that digital game use among children has "deleterious consequences, ranging from aggressiveness and violence" (Souri 2007, 542), video game experts such as Joe Bryce and Jason Rutter show that the research trying to prove that digital games are a catalyst for violence is "inconclusive and often contradictory" (Bryce and Rutter 2006, 218). Matthew Thomson agrees with Bryce and Rutter when he writes, "any suggestion that computer games influence public understandings of warfare must concede that the process of audience reception is far more complex than the passive acceptance of meaning that the 'hypodermic needle' model of media effects once suggested, and that the interaction between game and player involves processes of encoding and decoding, as well as resistance and rejection" (Thomson 2008, 20-21).

30   In her study of the meanings players create about their engagement with war digital games, Nina B. Huntemann gathered data in multiple focus group and participant observation sessions with a sample size of 26 male players ranging from 18 to 36 years of age and observed the following: "The players I interviewed retained their skepticism about current military actions, questioning the motives, strategies, purported goals, and likely success of U.S. foreign policy and military intervention" (Huntemann 2010, 232). Having discussed the potential effect of games on understandings and perceptions of warfare with dozens of *MW* and *MW2* players, we also observed that there are probably as many players who are seduced by the vision of the military portrayed in *Call of Duty* as

there are players who are repulsed by it. For instance, one player from the Middle East confided that he loves the game even though he rejects militarism, U.S. interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, and state violence in general. Thus, as the literature on audience reception of digital games and interviews with players show, *Call of Duty* will not necessarily make you want to join the military or support the wars waged by you country.

31   That being said, we have showed in this article that *MW* and *MW2* certainly has – at least – the *potential* to make you "love the bomb" and embrace militarism. This is why we think David Leonard is right to argue that educators, scholars and — most importantly — players must "think about ways to use video games as means to teach, destabilize, and elucidate the manner in which games employ and deploy racial, gendered, and national meaning, often reinforcing dominant ideas and the status quo" (Leonard 2004, 1). In other words, playing *Call of Duty* primarily because it is fun — and millions of players can confirm it is! — is probably not wrong in itself. But playing it for the sake of "making the familiar strange," and "disrupting the taking for granted that blinkers our thinking and reading" (Costigliola 2004, 280) should be encouraged. Indeed, it can help us to critically analyse the moral implications of the (hyper)militarization of our everyday lives, denounce the trivialization of (state) violence, and raise the hard questions that might prompt our leaders to make the world safer for peace, international reciprocity, and social and international justice.

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NOTES

1. Our definition of "militarism" follows Cynthia Enloe's analysis. Enloe (2000) defines it as an ideology that frames military force as a necessary resolver of conflict. This definition is consistent with Albert T. Lauterbach's analysis. According to Lauterbach (1944), "militarism" is an "attitude toward public affairs which conceives war and the preparation of war as the chief instruments of foreign policy."

2. On Hollywood war movies and the war in Iraq, see Gagnon 2009.

3. As Marcus Power (2007) and Aphra Kerr (2006) point out, the term "digital games" is preferable to "video games" since it refers to the entire field and embraces arcade, computer, console and mobile games in all their diversity.

4. The goal of this approach is to understand the meanings constructed through games. See Zagal 2008, 21-22. Thus, in the debate over how digital games should be studied, or the so-called debate between "narratologists" and "ludologists", we tend to prefer the former approach and think that one can rely on theories from existing disciplines (International Relations, American Studies, Film Studies, etc.) to treat digital games as "stories", "representation", "texts" or "discourses" disseminating specific values, ideologies and myths. That being said, we do not totally reject the "ludologist" perspective, developed by scholars who argue that "game analysis should focus on the structural features of gameplay – the rules and goals – along with its unique features – interactivity, simulation, configuration, and the manipulable elements of games" (Thomson 2007). As will be argued below, some rules of Call of Duty greatly contribute to the (re)writing of militarism (for instance, the rule that invites players to perform "headshots" when killing opponents, since it rewards more points than a shot to the body, arms or legs). However, it is a fact that this article focuses more on the narrative of Call of Duty than on its structural features of gameplay. For more information on the "Narratology vs. Ludology debate", read Bogost 2006; Juul 2001; and Simons 2007. Narratologists include Murray 1997 while scholars such as Juul 2001 and Aarseth 2004 have promoted "Ludology."

5. Leonard 2004 and Li 2004 are good examples of this.

6. Grant Tavinor (2009) and Matthew Thomas Payne (2010) provided some of the rare analyses of MW. However, they do not address the case of MW2. Joel Penney (2010) also focused on Call of Duty. However, he studies the installments in the series that are set in World War II.

7. This is Frank Costigliola's interpretation of Foucault's definition of a discourse. See Costigliola 2004, 289.

8. For more information about the plot of MW, see a website called "Call of Duty: No One Edits Alone" at http://callofduty.wikia.com/wiki/Call_of_Duty_4:_Modern_Warfare

9. See Zakhaev's speech during the cutscene before the "Ultimatum" campaign level in MW.

10. See Khaled Al-Asad's speech during the "The Coup" campaign level in MW.

11. Play the "All in" campaign level in MW.

12. For more information about the plot of MW2, see a website called "Call of Duty: No One Edits Alone" at http://callofduty.wikia.com/wiki/Call_of_Duty:_Modern_Warfare_2

13. Play the "Team Player" campaign level in MW2.

14. For more information about the plot of the "Wolverines!" campaign level, play it or see a website called "Call of Duty: No One Edits Alone" at http://callofduty.wikia.com/wiki/Wolverines!

15. Our definition of "U.S. national security intellectuals" is similar to David Grondin's concept of "national security governmental regime." He defines the regime as "all agents of the U.S. government and of the private sector (particularly think-tanks and unofficial advisers) who participate, to a certain extent, in the national security debate and who, incidentally, influence the ways Americans think about national security, threats and the role the U.S. should play in the world" (Grondin 2010, 93, note 1).

16. Play the "Team Player" campaign level in MW2 to hear the speech.

17. To learn more about the neoconservative ideology, read Kristol 2004; Marshall 2003; Kagan 1998; Kristol and Kagan 2004. For an introduction to neoconservatism, read Gagnon and Mascotto 2010.

18. Play the "Team Player" campaign level in MW2 to hear the speech.

19. As Marcus Power (2007) writes, "[Digital war games] offer the possibility of getting back control, of overcoming fear [...] [Y]ou can pretend you have some sense of agency, some control, or at the very least some part in trying to make the world a better place."

20. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, Lockheed Martin's total lobbying expenditures accounted for more than $15 million dollars in 2008 and almost $14 million dollars in 2009. For more information, see this website : www.opensecrets.org

21. Vit Sisler observes that this aspect of MW and MW2 is common in many western war games.

22. David Leonard (2004, 5) makes a similar observation about the depiction of U.S. soldiers in the game Conflict : Desert Storm.

23. For similar arguments, read Power 2007 and Stahl 2006.

ABSTRACTS

The goal of this article is to discuss how digital war games such as the *Call of Duty* series elicit consent for the U.S. military, militarism and the wars waged by the U.S. and its allies abroad. Building bridges between the humanities approach to Game Studies, American Studies, International Relations and Critical Geopolitics, we start from the assumption that digital games are more than "kid's games"; they are sophisticated vehicles inhabiting and disseminating specific ideologies (Leonard 2004). Accordingly, our goal is to conduct a content analysis (Sisler 2008) of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* and *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* to show how these games contain images and narratives that (1) resonate with and reinforce a tabloid imaginary of post-9/11 geopolitics (Debrix 2008); (2) glorify military power and elicit consent for the idea that state violence and wars are inevitable; and (3) encourage our myopia by depicting a sanitized vision of war and downplaying the negative consequences of state violence (Stahl 2006). The conclusion invites players to think about ways to criticize the way games like *Call of Duty* employ

and deploy values that (re)write the militarist mindset that has often pervaded the post-9/11 U.S. national security debate.

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