

The other in action military video games essay sample

[Entertainment](#), [Video Games](#)



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The military video game is a very popular type of interactive entertainment, a specific genre of the medium of relatively recent realm of video games primarily centered around plots and characters dealing with the armed forces of a nation, usually the United States military (Breuer, Festl and Quandt 1). Given the relatively new and developing nature of the military video game genre and its popularity, its sociological effects and inspirations (especially as it pertains to race relations and foreign policy) are still unknown. While games like Medal of Honor, Call of Duty, Rainbow Six and more have begun to bring in tremendous amounts of money and command immense cultural cachet, they also carry a great deal of historical and political baggage. After all, first person shooter (FPS) video games need to give the player character someone to dispatch, and the bad guys need to be given easily distinguishable characteristics to make them easy to shoot and kill. In these games, the villains are typically Nazis, Middle Eastern terrorist groups, Colombian drug lords and the like, showing a level of ill intent and malice that make them easy to root against as villains. What is the effect of these representations, and how do they reinforce a particular attitude towards foreign policy, American relations and military jingoism? Through substantial research and examination, it can be said that military video games enforce a hegemonic and Orientalist view of the Other, trading in even-handed foreign policy for brazen shoot-em-ups that act as soft recruitments for the armed forces, as well as tacit approval of the military-industrial complex and the problematic War on Terror.

In order to understand this effect, the fundamentals of gaming and our relationship to it must be explored. Video games themselves are said to be a

“designed experience” that lets players form new identities when playing a game, engaging in a type of performance within that game’s world as it happens (Squire 19). Video game technology is advanced, complex, and has a decided effect on our neurology. Through their interactive nature and detailed visuals, as well as the component of hand-eye coordination, video games force us to hone our sense of visual attention to selectively process what we see. Visual attention is defined as “the set of mechanisms by which relevant visual information is selected while irrelevant information is suppressed, thus allowing the observer to function in a world made up of nearly infinite visual information” (Green and Bavelier 222). Subjects exposed to video games are most improved in visual selective attention, and therefore have an innate effect on the brain and our perception. Video gamers are shown to have “perceptual and cognitive skills far beyond those observed in non-gamers” (Green and Bavelier 214). To that end, it can be said that video games have a clear neurological effect, closely linking the player to a game world through this identity role-play, which can then affect our perceptions of what we see when we engage in our real-world identities. Military video games are a very popular genre in video games, most games dealing with a fictionalized version of the War on Terror. Action games and shooters make up more than a third of the highest selling video games in America, with many popular game entries having the same level of cultural promotion and profit as blockbuster films (Breuer, Festl and Quandt 1). The Call of Duty series is one of the most popular, as it showcases various fictionalized scenarios based around Middle Eastern, Russian or Asiatic countries and peoples being a threat to America. Other examples of military

video games follow these same formulas, in some ways more overt than others: America's Army is effectively a recruitment tool, directly funded and created by the United States military to drum up interest in recruitment. Full Spectrum Warrior takes place in a fictional country dubbed "Zekistan," and showcases a media-filtered version of the Middle East. The vast majority of military action games take place during World War II, Vietnam War or the War on Terror, and the protagonists of these games are overwhelmingly white characters from the United States (Breuer, Festl and Quandt 7). This establishes a very hegemonic, nationalistic trend in military video games, where the objective is chiefly to fight for white America, with little room for other perspectives.

Depictions of the Other and the military experience in military video games are problematic and rooted in Orientalism. Orientalism is "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'" (Said 2). According to Said, Orientalism is used by European mindsets to alienate and segregate themselves from the Other, projecting all manner of undesirable and confusing characteristics onto them to make them more exotic or dangerous. Western/European attitudes classify the Other as something either mystified, glorified or vilified. Orientalism can lead to both good and bad stereotypes (e. g. Jews as Holocaust survivors, or wealthy, litigious misers). Orientalism is found the form of these cultural trends, in which there is a cultural consensus of these interpretations of the Other that dominates the discourse and leaves little room for more realistic or compassionate views on the Orient. In the use of Orientalism, geographical boundaries are used to create

cultural barriers that inexorably define people from those countries: stereotyping, exoticizing and demonizing of Oriental figures then plays up these cultural differences in order to hold one type of society (usually the Occident) over the other. To that end, being inherently un-Western is likened to villainy.

Upon closer examination of many military video games that are currently popular, Orientalism is present in their texts. As a consequence of these very nationalistic trends in military video games, antagonists in these works are invariably some outside threat to American prosperity and freedom, typically in the form of a foreign menace. As most of these games feature you as a soldier in America's army, with the only objective to dispatch the enemy, the player then becomes complicit in the ideologies these conflicts resulted from. Huntemann (2009) notes that, since most of these games are either about real wars in history (WWII, Vietnam) or real ones that are 'ripped from the headlines' (the War on Drugs/Terror, Afghanistan, Iraq), the player becomes the representative of American foreign policy as it is dictated in the game's storyline. With few exceptions, these games feature uncritical representations of these ideologies, leaving them as straightforward propaganda that would not hold up well to oppositional readings.

The Call of Duty series is one of the most egregious examples of this Orientalism, as it features Middle Eastern terrorists and ultranationalists as its villains, as well as other Orientalizing stereotypes. The villain of Modern Warfare is Khaled Al-Asad, depicted as a turban-wearing maniac who shouts monologues about America's destruction. In one early scene in Black Ops, the player must go on a covert mission to kill Fidel Castro, showing a bloody

bullet going through his head in slow motion – this shows the Orientalizing of foreign villains even going so far as to mimic real historical figures, making the politicizing of these events even more problematic. In this scene, in which the perspective goes into slow-motion, showing a bullet slowly entering Castro's head from your gun, the player is forced to linger in their complicity of the murder of a real historical figure, albeit one they are conditioned to hate due to his terrible reputation in American history, making it feel like post-hoc revisionist American history – a version of the Bay of Pigs invasion that worked. This kind of racist, Orientalized appropriation of South Americans as dirty, immoral and impoverished is solidified in the Call of Duty installment Modern Warfare 2. In this game, a level takes place in the infamous Brazilian favelas, in which the abject poor are shown as window dressing to frame this exciting, violent gunfight the player must engage in. While lip service is paid to the poor conditions the Brazilian citizens must live in, it is not presented as the problem being solved, rather a fact of life that is exotic and appropriately Orientalizing.

Other, lesser-known games engage in this work as well. Full Spectrum Warrior features an especially jingoistic depiction of the Middle Eastern conflict. The country is named 'Zekistan,' playing into the idea that all Middle Eastern countries are indistinguishable from each other. Many villain characters are radical Muslim militants, wearing turbans, firing RPGs and donning earth-toned rags (Hoglund, 2008).

Close Combat, another game in the Middle East, has especially egregious stereotypes. Insurgents wear garish red turbans, and the player must navigate through bombed out, anonymous cities in the Middle East to find

them. Hostility is the only interaction given to the natives by the player; the only Arabs in the game try to kill you. In this way, these games and more become spaces that are able to house these imaginary Oriental depictions that encapsulate stereotypical ideas of the East that simply cause further cultural distance between the two cultures (Hoglund, 2008).

One of the big problems in these games and others is that, despite their fantastical nature, they are steeped in realism and authenticity; the physics of the environment of these games are, according to the gamer's perspective, realistic (Hoglund, 2008). As a result, the ideologies and narratives being put forth in these worlds essentially claim to be based in reality, adding to the sense of verisimilitude that would make such a message more receptive. Traveling through a deeply detailed favela, with highly realistic non-player characters (NPCs) gives an impression through media of what the favelas would really be like; this then reinforces stereotypes and cultural assumptions of these people.

The nature of the military-entertainment complex makes these depictions dangerous and pervasive. The military-entertainment complex (MEC) is the series of complex interactions between the military and entertainment industries to support each other both through profitable, popular media and positive depictions of the military (Huntemann, 2009). The MEC has already existed for decades in the film business, with pro-America war and action films fetishizing military service and linking it to positive values such as patriotism and freedom. There is a vested interest in the military-entertainment complex maintaining these images, as it increases public support for American foreign policy and troops and establishes the narrative

that America is a priori justified in their military decisions. It also serves to fetishize the hardware and lifestyle of the military machine, allowing little room for moral ambiguity or a feeling of injustice regarding military actions the military engages in (Leonard 6).

The most blatant example of this is the recruitment game America's Army, which attempts to combine entertainment with direct recruitment for the armed forces. " Not only does America's Army encode the Army's values into the game play, but it is also designed so that veterans, military personnel and civilians can play together, creating an Army-owned space to interact with the public" (Squire 19). By creating a first-person shooter game to directly tie in with the armed forces, an added sense of legitimacy is given to the game, as players are given the appealing feeling that they themselves are trying out for the military, or are getting a more authentic experience. However, this is problematic, as it offers unambiguously black and white moral situations regarding US foreign policy and military action through its boots on the ground approach – since you are just a simple soldier following orders, you only see the foreign people shooting at you as an enemy.

In order to address these issues of Orientalism and disturbing messaging in such popular works of culture, encouraging discourse and transparency are paramount. Greater media literacy must be cultivated in order to create the conditions necessary for proper rejection of these stereotypical depictions of the Other. Open discourse about the meanings and symbolic significance of these representations and the role of the military in framing war as entertaining must be examined. Understanding the role of the MEC and the

effect of military video games on our perception of the Other is vital to ensuring a greater control over how we process the images we take in.

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