

Bachelor Thesis

Military-Entertainment Complex: The myth of the War on Terror

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*Military-Entertainment Complex: The Myth of the War on Terror*

In 1961, 34<sup>th</sup> American president Dwight Eisenhower, warned the nation of “unwarranted influence [...] by the military-industrial complex” (Eisenhower). He was a five-star general with deep knowledge of the army, which allowed him to observe how the military was rapidly growing into a war machine working more in favour of profit rather than defence. The military-industrial complex (MIC) describes the collaboration between the military and the arms industry, which could lead to the coalition prioritizing their own interests over national security (Dunne and Sköns 2). It was a very beneficial model during the Cold War when the exaggeration of the enemy’s power would justify the increased investment in weaponry. However, the dynamics of war drastically changed with the fall of the Soviet Union. The production and international trade of arms dropped sharply which disrupted the conditions needed for the thriving of the MIC (Dunne and Sköns 7).

With the end of the Cold War a new source of fear got introduced in the American society. Since the eighties politicians, scientist and journalist have warned against Muslim threats “without any considerable evidence to back up their worry” (Mirzayee et al. 228). The negative image of Islam that was being formed got firmly established in the U.S. nation after the terror attacks on the World Trade Center in 1993 and September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2001. 9/11 certainly shook the whole world and the Bush administration promised that “justice will be done”. The influence of media and entertainment was used to promote Islam as a barbaric ideology against freedom and American values; a global threat hidden from sight. The ambiguity of the image of the Islamic enemy have resulted in ascribing the form of the terrorist to all Muslims no matter where in the world they reside. This marked the beginning of a domestic and global *war on terror*, a spectacle of fear. However, the term is used to mark counter-terrorist measures rather than an

actual war. This discourse would be used in the next years to justify any actions taken by the U.S. against countries in the Middle East. Because of the hidden nature and unpredictability of the enemy the Bush administration could exaggerate the level of the threat and state that the American country is at war. This state, naturally, increases military funding but also “maximises the inherent power of the president” (Turley). Meaning that the conditions for the stability of the MIC have been reproduced, however, for those conditions to persist they need to be ideologically justified. Having weapons and troops in a war is just as important as convincing the nation that the war is necessary. People’s minds must also be conquered.

This thesis focuses on the military-entertainment complex (MEC): the collaboration between the entertainment and the military industries. It inquires into the role of the MEC in the War on Terror and asks: What does the pro-American propaganda in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* tell about the role of the MEC in the War on Terror?

In the past couple of years there has been a growing interest in video game research. However not much has been focusing on the political dimensions of games. Scholars like Stockwell and Muir, Robinson, Lenoir and Schulzke have been analysing how the MEC is related to the image of the terrorist. Robinson conducts a research on the critical abilities of video games and how they can be used as a place for protest, how game design can be altered to defy the dominant narratives and how they are affecting the militarization of society. Robinson does not focus extensively on the MEC, however, Stockwell and Muir have dedicated a whole paper to it. They focus more specifically on the aspect of information warfare and its role in the war on terror. Schulzke, on the other hand, discusses counterterrorist games and how they distort the discourse on the war on terror.

I look at video games specifically and their role as vehicles for military propaganda. The case study of this research is the scene “The Highway of Death” from the game *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019). I have decided to use this game because it came out recently and there is very little research on it. The *Call of Duty* series is one of the most popular franchise in the First-person Shooter (FPS) genre. Last year’s campaign<sup>1</sup> *Modern Warfare* became the Top-Selling Premium Game of 2019 in the U.S. Year-To-Date and in November 2019 produced more than \$1billion in worldwide sales (Walker). The success of the game means it will set the standards of the genre and the conventions that reappear in other games about terrorism and war (Schulzke 588). Therefore, it is important to point out the problematic representations and the intrinsic game mechanics that help forming them. In this way alternatives can be provided to attempt to prevent the replication of harmful discourses in other productions.

In Chapter I I look at the history of the MEC and the coevolution of the military and video game industries. In the end of the chapter I introduce *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* and the scene that will be analyzed. Following, in Chapter II I analyse the scene “The Highway of Death” focusing on the three cultural myths on which the game’s ideology is mainly based – the myth of the heroic whole-hearted American soldier, the myth of the evil Russian and the myth of the Oriental Other – and how they are represented. In Chapter III I build on the gathered information presented in the previous chapters to look at the myths in the context of the game’s narrative and the ongoing War on Terror. Finally, I conclude with a summary of the findings which will outline a small part of the way the military-entertainment complex functions and what its role is in the War on Terror.

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<sup>1</sup> Different games from the *COD* series are called campaigns

## Theory

The Military-Entertainment Complex was first described in 1993 by Bruce Sterling. He published an article called *War is Virtual Hell* in the first issue of magazine *Wired*. In the article the author describes his first-hand observations on the military training with SIMNET – a wide area network that connects multiple simulators. SIMNET revolutionized simulation training because it allowed different vehicles (meaning different simulation programs) to be connected in real-time and for users to practice in a more realistic, more complex environment. Sterling goes on to explain that this increased interest in investing in simulation technology will result in a Virtual/Military Industrial Complex. The author states that this will be a way for the military to capitalize on its investment in VR technologies in by introducing them to the wider public, creating “a wired, digitized, military- post-industrial complex, reformed and recreated to suit their own terms and their own institutional interests” (Sterling). By collaborating with commercial industries, the military has spread its influence and increased its profits. As Tim Lenoir and Henry Lowood state in *Theaters of War: The Military Entertainment Complex*, contrary to the popular belief, the military-industrial complex did not fade away after the Cold War, “it has simply reorganized itself” (21).

Louis Althusser’s theory on the State Apparatuses manages to explain the dynamics between the military and entertainment industries. In his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" the author describes two main apparatuses that function to uphold a certain class’s power over the State, i.e., reproduce the relations of production – the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). The first secures “by force the political conditions” necessary for the operation of the latter (Althusser 19-20). The RSA contains some of the most sponsored and powerful agencies in a State – the military, the police, the judiciary

etc. While the ISA is defined by the ideology of the ruling class which is enforced through different institutions like the school, the church, the media etc., systems which can normalize and neutralize the relations between the exploited and the exploiter so they can persist. Thus, the ISA has power and authority protected by the RSA to create a fog around the true intentions of the RSA. When the flow of information is strictly controlled by those in power what is most beneficial to them will be propagated. The use of video games (ISA) for propaganda is one of the ways in which the military (RSA) ensures the continuation of the actions which secure the stability of the hegemonic regime. This is the basis for the military-entertainment complex.

The discourse on the war on terror was formed mainly through ideological institutions that promote the fear of the unknown Oriental Other. In his book *Orientalism* (1978) Edward Said describes Orientalism as a discourse at the roots of which lies the “ontological and epistemological distinction made between “the Orient” and [...] “the Occident” (Said 10). This distinction has been emphasized by many scholars, writers, artists, etc. through the ages and is central to Western ideas and thinking. Said also argues that after the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Orientalism can be observed “as a Western style for dominating restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (11). This dualism between the West and the East is an imperialist construction used as evidence of the West’s superiority.

The old image of Orientalism has faded but the discourse has been “reconstituted, redeployed, redistributed in a globalised framework” (Samiei 18). This rebranding of classical Orientalism has been termed Neo-Orientalism and even though scholars have not yet agreed on its specific definition, it heavily marks the post-9/11 social anxiety (Mirzayee et al. 229). Oriental scholars consider the imagined backwardness of Islamic cultures has resulted from the quietness and submission that their religion teaches, favouring “fatalism, a lack of critique,

despotism” (Tuastad 594). Neo-Orientalists, on the other hand, theorize that the Islamic law is intrinsically anti-governmental and leads Muslims to view any form of political authority as illegitimate, thus, the lack of co-operation between state and society is what leads to a lack of development (Tuastad 595). The Neo-Oriental discourse is currently being reinforced by different institutions. It is used to explain one universal condition of the Islamic states, constructing the image of an ambiguous barbaric Middle Eastern enemy, which is to be feared. This fear is what fuels and sustains the war on terror, which in turn reproduces the myth of the Neo-Oriental terrorist haunting the American society.

### **Method**

To answer the research question of this thesis I will use Roland Barthes’ theory on semiotics and method for analysing texts, which is described in his book *Mythologies* (1972). He builds on Ferdinand de Saussure’s model of the sign (Fig.1), which looks at the *signifier* – an image, a sound pattern, something that references an object but is not the object itself, for example the word “cat” - and the *signified* – the concept that comes to mind when exposed to the signifier, in this case, the animal “cat”. These two elements create the sign, which is denotative, i.e., presenting the literal meaning of something. An example of that would be the drawing of a four-legged black creature with pointy ears denoting a black cat. Saussure was interested in the fact that there is no connection between the drawing and the concept associated with it. Barthes calls this structure *the first-order semiotic system*, “the language which myth gets hold of in order to build its own system” (Barthes 115). He looked beyond language and into ideology introducing the existence of the second-order semiotic system, that of cultural signification. He analyses the obvious and looks for its hidden meanings, which he calls the *myth*. The sign in the first system becomes the signifier in the second, the signified is the cultural code and all

ideological discourse associated with the signifier. An example of this would be the black cat (signifier) and the superstition that it brings bad luck (signified), creating the sign of the second semiotic system which is connotative.



Fig. 1. Barthes, Roland, and Annette Lavers. *Mythologies*. Noonday Press, 1972, p. 113.

I have chosen this method because I am focusing on three myths communicated through different signs in the game. Barthes' theory is fit for the analysis of different types of texts (e.g., literature work, photographic image). Even though video games are not classic narratives they can be considered cybertexts that are formed of various parameters and dimensions. To adapt the medium of the video game to Barthes' method I will, for the sake of achieving a more productive analysis, combine his theory with that of Óliver Pérez-Latorre, Mercè Oliva & Reinald Besalú detailed in the paper "Videogame analysis: a social-semiotic approach". They built a model for game analysis by combining "game studies [...] and semiotics" (588). More specifically, they use social semiotics, which is a branch of contemporary semiotics, that focuses on meaning-making in society. However, I will not use social semiotics but Barthes' theory. The model tries to combine the main established research methods in game studies – "the "narrativist" approach, ludology and procedural rhetorics, and [...] "ludo-narrative" approaches"(Pérez-Latorre et al.

588). The authors introduce four dimensions of the analytical model – audiovisual, ludo-narrative, system-gameplay and designer-player. I have decided that looking at the ludo-narrative dimension of the game is most suitable for this analysis as it focuses on representations - the representation of the character/player, the representation of the fictional world and the representation of activities.

The research question of this thesis will be answered by looking at three cultural myths present in *COD: Modern Warfare* – the myth of the heroic American soldier who stands for U.S. values; the myth of the evil Russian, originating in anti-communist propaganda; and the myth of the Oriental Other or the Neo-Oriental terrorist. The myths will be observed in the selected scene and then further discussed in the context of the ongoing War on Terror.

## **CHAPTER I**

### **The Military-Entertainment Complex**

During the Cold War dealing with a hidden enemy justified the U.S. increased investment in military. It was then that the Military - Industrial Complex (MIC) manifested due to the unique conditions that the defense market had to operate in. During that time the main contractors were state owned and usually had a monopoly position on the market (Dunne and Sköns 6). This structure alongside “high military spending, lobbying, regional dependence, limited transparency and oversight” (Dunne and Sköns 6) led to increased prices and corruption which were believed to influence the civil industry. It ensured that powerful people could gain control over resources and use them to their own benefit (Dunne and Sköns 7).

In the post- Cold War period the demand for investing in the defense industry decreased. The discussions of policy were targeted at redistribution of research funds in a way that served

national defense and could also benefit the commercial sector (Lenoir and Lowood 21). This is how the focus shifted towards a Military – Entertainment Complex (MEC). To cut down on training expenses the military started investing more in simulation technologies which could also be used in the development of movies and video games. There were many changes that reflected the new policies. One example is the collaboration between aerospace defense companies Martin Marietta and Lockheed Corporation to release “Real 3D”, an establishment whose research is solely on 3D graphics for the commercial market (Lenoir and Lowood 27). This marks a transition from focusing on simulation technology to directly providing products for the entertainment industry. For the synergy between the two industries to be stable, the things need to also operate vice versa.

Lenoir and Lowood give an example of games that after being released to the public caught the attention of the military. The famous *Doom II* (1994) was a revolutionary creation for its time. It incorporated superior graphics, had a multiplayer mode, introduced the genre of ‘first-person shooter’(FPS) and was running smoothly on PC (Lenoir 31). The Marines were interested in these new developments because their access to simulation training was restricted. Thus, *DOOM II* proved to have the proper mechanics for the soldiers to train their strategic thinking, decisions-making and problem-solving (qtd. in Lenoir 32). The coevolution of both industries marks the stabilization of the MEC.

However, the MEC goes further than that to secure profitability. The MEC secures the military’s rights over its own portrayal to the public by providing help to the entertainment industry that portrays it. As is stated in the article “The Military-Entertainment Complex: A New Facet of Information Warfare “– “Propaganda has always been best served as entertainment” (Stockwell and Muir). Magazine *USA Today* posted an article stating that the Pentagon would

not allow the usage of its weaponry or prototypes until they go through and change the script of the production, in which they appear. Movies like *Top Gun* (1986) and *Pearl Harbor* (2001) were sponsored by the military. In them the U.S. army is depicted as a place of heroic justice and brotherhood, while the enemies usually barely get any representation except as inhumane killing machines. This trope is used to make the audience associate with the main protagonist/s and remain distant towards the antagonist. The Hollywood fantasy was sold, *Top Gun* (1986) producer John Davis reports, after the movie many of the young impressionable audience were looking to become pilots. The military used the movies as an advertisement for recruiting and it worked because spectators were overwhelmed by the action, the plane maneuvers, the effects and were convinced they will become just like the badass protagonist who appeared in the movie.

With the firm establishment of the MEC the military already had enough power over media and journalists to show only the content that it found fit to the public. Thus, it was easy to uphold the constant threat and fear of the ambiguous enemy. The destruction of the World Trade Center was showcased worldwide reminding “of a scene in a Hollywood thriller” (Mirzayee et al. 228). The whole Iraq war was broadcasted using *cinéma vérité*, mimicking reality television suggesting “unplanned and unrehearsed subject matter” (Musser 23). The military could represent the war in any way they wanted. The story of Jessica Lynch is a good example of how the Pentagon would distort the reality of a situation. Lynch is a former U.S. army soldier who took part in the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Her story begins when she was working as a unit supply specialist and her convoy got ambushed. Afterwards, it was stated that she was tortured and held as a prisoner of war. The U.S. army managed to save her, filming the happening and broadcasting it on national television. This was a huge event because a prisoner of war has not been rescued

since World War II. The short movie showing her saving presents several vehicles stopping in front of the Iraqi hospital where Lynch is kept, going inside and transporting her back to the U.S. with a plane. The footage is consisted of many grainy and random shots to resemble a situation in which a camera cannot always be filming. After Lynch came back to the U.S. her story was being told in all media sources. However, in 2007 she confessed that none of it was true. In fact, the girl was taken to a local hospital by Iraqi soldiers, where she was treated and her rescue was staged. The story was blown out of proportions to portray the American military as heroic and the Iraqi people as barbaric. Her image “was used as justification for the war in Iraq in particular, and the War on Terror more broadly” (James 27). This is a representation of Neo-Oriental rhetoric, Orientalism is no more than a Western image of modernity and superiority, it “establishes limit between Civilization and new Barbarism“ (Mirzayee et al. 231). In this way, the military form the myth of the war on terror, convincing the public of the imagined enemy and proclaiming itself the hero. This benefits the U.S. military because, as already stated, it is the largest arms exporter and, thus, perpetual war benefits the country’s economy. The role of the MEC is to use media and entertainment (ISA) to bind “society to sovereign power by will rather than pressure” (Yılmaz and Kirazoluğu 1528).

According to Althusser a class cannot hold on to State power for a long time “without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the State Ideological Apparatuses” (Althusser 17). The potential of video games to engage makes them a good vehicle for propaganda. The merging of the military and domestic spheres has been both provoked by and allows for the militarization of video games (Robinson 510). Since the Gulf War and especially after 9/11 the Pentagon has released numerous games that allow the player to experience being a soldier in

different real-life events. These games enforce “a particular view of, and response to, conflict situations” (Robinson 510), which fits the hegemonic ideology.

The *Call of Duty* (COD) series is consisted of 16 campaigns (i.e., 16 games) set in various places and time periods. In most of the games the protagonist is taking part in current or past real-life war conflicts (e.g., Cold War, WWII), some of them deal with fictional events and/or monsters like *COD: Advanced Warfare* (2014) and *COD: Infinite Warfare* (2016). The campaign that will be analysed is *COD: Modern Warfare* (2019) which is a reboot of *COD 4: Modern Warfare* (2007). The plot focuses on CIA agent Alex who travels to Urzikstan to aid the Urzikstan Liberation Force (ULF), a group of freedom fighters, against Russian forces occupying the country. He spends the game by the side of Farah Karim, leader of the ULF, and her brother Hadir Karim. The game has been advertised as highly realistic, as a window towards war zones and an authentic experience of being in the American army. Narrative director of the game developing studio *Infinity Wards*, Taylor Kurasaki says in an interview that what they were trying to achieve would not “just be a Hollywood depiction”(Washington Post, 00:00:11 - 00:00:13). The creators of the game worked in collaboration with ex-Navy SEALs consulting them about the credibility of the scenes, character performance, as well as the legitimacy of weapon and vehicle operations.

The selected scene for analysis - *The Highway of Death* – has been chosen because it reflects the selected myths on the level of character representation, game mechanic and particularities of the video game medium. It carries the name of an existing highway spreading from Kuwait City to the border town of Safwan. The road has earned its name because of the hundreds of abandoned and destroyed vehicles. They were left behind during the Gulf War by Iraqi forces who, even though retreating, were being persistently attacked by American troops.

Newspapers from that time mention the number of vehicles was around 1,400 but the number of Iraqi fatalities is still controversial and can range from 400 to 10,000 (*PDA*). Whether there were civilian casualties is also under question as on the scene there were regular non-armoured vehicles like cars, milk trucks and buses. In all cases this massacre is identified as a war crime under the Hague Convention of 1907, which lists “*Killing or wounding a combatant who, having laid down his arms or having no longer means of defence, has surrendered at discretion;*” (*United Nations*) as a serious violation. This is a very serious violation that hurts the American image as it goes against its values. In the game reality is completely denied and the crime, along with the rest of American war atrocities, have been ascribed to the Russians. The developers want the production to be as realistic as possible when it comes to what people in war zones, both military and civilian, experience during these difficult times. However, they want to do that without presenting the American military in a bad light. In this way *COD: Modern Warfare* (2019) can establish a simple structure justifying the U.S. army’s actions in the Middle East by displaying them as heroic while reinstating the fearsome figure of the terrorist.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **The Myths**

The developers of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* have not stated that they are giving true factological representations of the wars in the Middle East. Moreover, they use partly fictional countries and groups, and fictional characters. However, the game carries many resemblances to real-life events, people and organisations. The main protagonists are Alex – a C.I.A. soldier, Farah Karim and Hadir Karim – brother and sister from Urzikstan. The three are brought together by common interests and enemies. Alex is set out on a mission to retrieve nerve gas heading for Urzikstan, a fictional country that is a representation of Middle Eastern countries that

have been in war conflict with the U.S.A. However, he and the Marines accompanying him get ambushed and the gas gets stolen by an unknown agency. Thus, Alex is sent to Urzikstan where he needs to get in contact with Farah Karim. There they agree that she will help him find the stolen gas if he aids her in defeating her enemy, the Russian leader of the oppression in Urzikstan, Roman Barkov. Thus, their journey begins.

The myth of the evil Russian has been forming for centuries. Anti – Russian propaganda can be traced back to the Napoleonic era (Neumann 132). The Red Scare has been a hanging threat in the USA for a long time. It manifested in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and World War I. The left-wing social agitation and inclinations towards anarchism did not appeal to the U.S. society, thus, they undertook strong measures ensuring the stability of the government and current regime. The U.S.’s strong opposition towards socialism and communism, ideologies heavily associated with Russia, became a part of the country’s national identity, a symbol of ‘Americanism’ (Ryan 26). The image of “the Red Menace” or the “Red Scare” was fully formed after WWII and with the beginning of the Cold War. The terms were used for describing a country’s or nation’s fear of communism or anarchism as these political views were considered chaotic and extremely destructive. Russia was marked as a territory of communist terrorism. All the ideals of the country were a negation of U.S. values.

The scene *The Highway of Death* begins with an animation and Farah’s voiceover explaining the battle plan for the next mission. She tells the story of the highway and how it was bombed by the Russians, “killing the people trying to escape” (Zanar Aesthetics 00:00:16 – 00:00:19). The developers chose to keep the name of the real-life place associated with an event that carries heavy connotations with destruction and cruelty. In this way they strengthen the

connection between those signs and the image of the Russian. The whole game treats the figure of the Russian soldier in this way. The developers have taken the time to carefully tinker the representation of communist terrorism. The soldiers are seen hanging people off cranes, forcing an obviously disturbed woman to watch; killing civilians, raiding houses, attempting to murder children, etc. Not even once was the enemy shown in any other light than barbaric.

Non-playable characters' (NPCs) behaviour is part of the ludo-narrative dimension on the level of world representation (Pérez-Latorre et.al. 593). In this scene there are two types of NPCs – your allies and your enemies – the first you need to protect, the latter you need to kill. These are the simple rules that are required for the winning of the classic FPS game. The Russian terrorists do not appear until you have repelled the Al-Qatala forces. This is a mark of a difficulty level change as the player reaches the end of the mission and deals with the final threat. As the player is shooting the last soldiers, Russian MIGs appear out of nowhere and gracefully fly above the enemy lines bombing all the members of Al-Qatala that remained on the scene. Then several Russian APCs appear, and Alex needs to shoot their tires to force the enemies outside their armoured vehicles. The Russian forces are represented in an inhumane way, their arrival marked by destruction and death. Roman Barakov's forces do not have any apparent aim in the whole game besides inflicting terror and oppression on the Urzikstan nation. This is reflected in their fierce behavior, after their APCs have been broken down the soldiers go out and start running towards you. Even though you are sniping them from a roof, almost a kilometer away, they never stop to hide behind the abandoned vehicles or implement any strategy for surviving, they just keep on running. This gives the player a time pressure because the soldiers are numerous, and it is hard to catch up so eventually they end up entering your camp. At this point the player can get overwhelmed because Alex is being shot at and bombarded from a lot of

sources at the same time. Unable to distinguish between ally and enemy, the player needs to be quick and decisive to proceed in this level.

We can observe that, even though, Russian speech can be distinguished among the noise the developers have not put in the effort to translate or even transcribe what the soldiers are saying. This decision does not have any effect on the gameplay, naturally, but same goes for the exclamations and remarks made by your allies during combat, however, they are transcribed even if they are in English. The disregarding of the enemy as a person without a character and emotions fuels the image of the Russian soldier as a sign of evil and amorality. The soldiers are stripped of their humanity and even their language is incomprehensible, useless. The Russian soldiers is a signification for Russia's negative ideology and is introduced in the game to negate the image of the American soldier who stands for the ideals of the American dream. As mentioned earlier, this binary opposition between Russia and America has been defining American society since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even though, Russia does not fit in the Oriental discourse it adopts a similar role in the establishment of the American identity.

The myth of the hero soldier is one that has existed for centuries and is present in many culture and societies. The hero carries connotations with "extraordinary acts" (Sullivan and Venter 101) that cannot be accomplished by simply anybody. Those acts are usually life-threatening and, thus, the hero is ascribed the qualities of morality, bravery and courage (Harvey et al. 313). In art since Greek mythology heroes have been depicted as more than human and less than god, retaining their humanity and allowing for people to associate with them and strive for the same values.

Similarly, today's image of the American hero carries all those characteristics but is also enhanced by political discourse. The myth has played an important role in the American society

after 9/11 (Sullivan and Venter 101). It has been heavily propagated in media (e.g., the story of Jessica Lynch) and entertainment (e.g., *Top Gun*). The American hero is the one that “exhibits compassion for the society of which he is not really a part” (qtd. in David 9), he is far away from home fighting the evil forces that threaten his people. His image connotes the values of the American Dream and strengthen the myth of America as a liberating force, an ideology deeply embedded in colonialism.

In the game the myth of the American hero is not only formed by the socially embedded archetype of the hero but also by negation of the Russian and Al-Qatala terrorists. The two antagonist groups are presented as sadistic, immoral and have been stripped of their humanity so they can be the image of evil. In this way the protagonist can become a hero by fighting them. If the enemies were represented as people with emotions, friends, families, the game would be making a completely different and much more nuanced statement about war. However, the aim is to mythologise the American hero who connotes the American values and reinstates the negative form of the evil terrorist.

This myth will be analyzed on the level of character/player representation in the ludonarrative dimension (Pérez-Latorre et.al. 592). Since in this section the image of the playable character will be discussed, more attention will be paid to the influence of game mechanics and how they affect the formation of the myth. After Farah’s introduction of the mission “The Highway of Death”, she leads Alex to the camp. Hadir is waiting for them there with a sniper of his own production. The next objective is to learn how to shoot the sniper. To make things easier for the player there are white flags set up along the highway marking distance and wind strength and direction. These parameters are needed as they can divert the course of the bullet. Apparently, Alex is the only sniper on this mission, therefore he is assigned the most important

job as he needs to cover the rest of Farah's soldiers, eliminate enemies before they get to the camp and neutralize their vehicles. On several occasions though they do manage to get close and Alex needs to resort to close gun combat. This part of the mission is very intense because the player is being targeted from various directions. The NPC allies barely able to inflict any damage because if they did the game would be too easy and, therefore, not entertaining which is the main expectation in a video game. However, a video game sets the player at the center of the story and everything revolves around them. The decisions taken by the developers had the player's satisfaction in mind and if the NPC allies could fight the Al-Qatala forces without you, there would be no game. This central position gives almost every video game protagonist a certain agency and since the playable character is doing way better than the NPCs, it also gives him a sense of exceptionality. Alex's heroic image is reinforced by him fighting the evil oppressors but so are the rest of the ULF. However, exceptionality is a major part of the heroic figure, in this case it stems from the unique performance of the playable character, who achieves things that nobody else can achieve and saves people nobody else could save.

The enemies in the game come in waves. In order to trigger the next wave, the player needs to kill all the enemy soldiers of the current one. This rule deprives the player of the choice whether to kill all or not, similarly, the enemies will not ever retreat and continue to attack you until you kill them. The war for the soldier works on a simple principle - either kill or be killed, however, this is not at all what the developers are trying to convey. The enemies are represented in such a barbaric way that killing them is an act of justice, an act of good will. The situation is about surviving but it is more about eliminating the global terrorist threat. This emphasis on doing the right thing rather than the prioritization of survival is what truly turns the figure of Alex into an American hero.

The final third myth that will be analysed is that of the Oriental Other. The discourse behind it has been forming for centuries. Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* states that the "distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts" (12) is in the essence of the myth. In other words, in Western societies every institution from entertainment to politics aims to legitimize the colonialization of the Middle East. The binary opposition between West and East was imposed by the former side, thus, the West is negated by the East and vice versa.

The representation of the Oriental myth in "The Highway of Death" will again be observed on the level of the representation of the fictional world, more specifically NPCs behavioural pattern and the space-time environment. Alex's allies - the UFL are an organization whose main aim is to defeat the terrorist oppressor Roman Barkov and to destroy Al-Qatala. The latter are the first enemy in the scene that needs to be defeat. Their behavior and representation have a lot of similarities to those of Barkov's army, discussed earlier in this chapter. However, The Wolf's people have a very different way of combat that reproduces all the Neo-Oriental stereotypes associated with the Arab terrorist. First, they use Kalashnikov type guns, probably AK-47, that are heavily related to global terror attacks. The weapon is not regulated on the market therefore it has become "a global commodity" (Sprague and Griffiths 1). Because it is so easy to obtain, Ak-47 has been used in a lot of mass shooting and has, thus, become a signifier of terrorism. Second, they wear Sikh turbans, which is a religious symbol and is a signifier of the persons' association with Sikhism. However, in Western societies, due to the present Oriental discourse, it connotes terror and destruction. That is because many Americans associate the piece of clothing with Osama bin Laden (Gohil and Sidhu 1). The image of the terrorist has been so heavily reproduced, carrying the same physical and behavioural characteristics, that there have

been numerous hate crimes in America against Sikhs who are simply wearing a turban. There was even an instance of an innocent person getting shot and murdered by a guy passing by. The motive for the crime was that the victim was dark-skinned, wearing a turban and had a beard, resembling the media portrayal of a terrorists (Gohil and Sidhu 24). Thus, the developers' choice to equip the Al-Qatala soldiers in this way reinforces the strongly embedded in the American social psyche image of terrorism securing the persistence of similar hate crimes.

After you have cleared all Al-Qatala members and the player is waiting for the next wave of enemies, out of nowhere a single suicide truck appears quickly approaching the camp. Farah and Hadir are shouting at and giving instructions to Alex while he is trying to gun down the driver before he gets too close. Eventually, he shoots him, and the truck explodes, no consequences. This part of the scene is completely unnecessary as the truck does not have any back up to allow it to get closer to the camp, it also comes from afar and can easily be targeted by Alex with the sniper. Keeping in mind the previous waves of Al-Qatala soldiers were sent, as Hadir states, "to clear the way"(Zanar Aesthetics 00:13:29 – 00:13:32), i.e., kill allies, the truck approaching from a long distance would've allowed the few people that remain to hide from the explosion in the bunker lying 30m away. Thus, the pointless maneuver was included for sake of entertainment rather than to render the situation more realistic. Suicide bombing is the sign most heavily associated with terrorism. It lays at the roots of the myth, the terrorist that is so hungry to take live he is willing to sacrifice himself.

### **CHAPTER III**

#### **Discussion**

First let's look at the myths and the bigger picture that they stand for as analyzed in the game. The myth of the heroic American is a signification of the American dream and values. The myth of the Russian terrorist is a signification of the destructive and oppressive ideology of communism and its strong association with Russia. In the game the Russian forces lack clear motivation for their oppression of Urzikstan and all the atrocities they have done to civilians. Finally, the myth of the Oriental Other on the one hand is a signification of the oppressed that need the help of the Western saviors, on the other - a signification of cold-blooded terrorism and extremism. It is apparent the myths have been formed from a Western social perspective because only the Americans and ULF forces are good.

All three of the discussed myths form the underlying ideology of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019). However, they do not exist separately, rather they form and reinforce each other. The myth of the heroic American in the specific scene is formed, as discussed in the previous chapter, by Alex specific position as the main playable character. However, what truly makes Alex embody the myth of the American hero and preserve its functioning is the form of the Russian terrorist. In the game, the American hero can be only if he fights the enemies threatening his country and allies. Meaning that for the myth to be preserved and reinforced it needs the negation of the others and vice versa. All groups in the game define each other. All the myths in the game are a part of an ideological whole – supporting and reinforcing the discourse on the war on terror.

In an interview with *GameSpot* narrative director of *COD: Modern Warfare* Taylor Kurosaki says they educate and enlighten players on the difficulties experienced in a war zone (00:08:46-00:08:56). Raising awareness for the way things work out in conflict zones. However, it is problematic that the game is focusing on presenting war as a spectacle rather than a cause of

violence and destruction. Even though the developers are stating the opposite, by insisting on the fact of realism they have turned the game into a spectacle. There are many aspects of the game that are unrealistic and many awkward choices that oppose that statement (e.g., suicide truck; enemies resemble robotic killing machines). Taylor Kurosaki himself suggests that most of the *COD* players are not aware of this type of conflicts (*GameSpot* 00:08:40-00:08:45), therefore, how is the fact that they are presenting false information (Highway of Death bombarded by Russians and simplistic representations of characters, besides the two main protagonists, enlightening in any way? The SEALs in the interview with *Washington Post* say that in their communication with the developers on creating the game, the ex-military were introducing facts and realistic aspects of being a soldier in a war zone while the rest of the team was adapting this information into something entertaining (00:01:55-00:02:02). Saying that the game gives accurate representation of the happenings in a war zone while also claiming that they have reworked the aspects to be entertaining does not fit the same picture. War is not entertaining.

The representation of the different groups in *COD: Modern Warfare* can be argued to be nuanced because not all Middle Eastern organisations are terrorist. It is also true that there are members of the UFL who betray their own, also a Russian private military company “Chimera” who helps you stop Jamal “The Butcher” Rahar but in the end the main battle is between moral principles and ideologies. The heroic American soldiers and all that side with them fight against the oppression of the evil Russian and Al-Qatala terrorists. Singular cases in which a person or a small organisation goes against the ideology ascribed to his group, do not change the qualities or the position the group is associated with, it does not disrupt the social myth. The gruesome actions of Al-Qatala and Russian soldiers combined with the narrative director’s statement that the game is educational and comes close to reality is obviously problematic. The fearsome image

of the terrorist continues to scare the American nation and Russians keep on being perceived as cold-hearted nationalists.

*COD: Modern Warfare* was a production that benefitted tremendously from working with the military. However, in the nature of the MEC, the military would like something in return – good publicity. The game is reinstating the ideological conditions for the reproduction of the war on terror discourse and is also setting the standard for future FPSs. If one looks at the research of Johannes Breuer, Ruth Festl and Thorsten Quandt in their paper *In the Army Now – Narrative Elements and Realism in Military First-Person Shooters* they take 189 FPS games and trace what the race and the nationality of the protagonist is, what wars are being depicted and what nationality the enemy is. The results show that many of the protagonists in those games are white (N=66) and American (N=158), while the most common enemy are the Germans (N=111) due to the large amount of games taking place during WWII (Breuer et al. 9-10). That shows how little diversity there is in one of the most popular video game genres. One of the logical reasons for that is that the FPS genre consists predominantly of military or combat games which allows the developers to get in close contact with the military. Games like *COD* ensure that this lack of diversity stay like this and the myths continue to thrive in the American society.

## **Conclusion**

In this thesis I revealed how *COD: Modern Warfare* builds on socially established myths in America to present the country in the best possible light, while reestablishing Orientalist stereotypes and thus reinstating the conditions for the thriving of the discourse on the war on terror. I achieved this result by analysing the three main myths in the game using Barthes’

semiotic theory and Óliver Pérez-Latorre, Mercè Oliva & Reinald Besalú's theory on the game analysis that combines a semiotic and game studies approach. The analysis showed that there is significant pro-American propaganda. America is represented by the protagonist who is a heroic figure of justice. The image is supported by the negation of the gruesome representation of the enemies. Russian forces and Al-Qatala have similar way of operating but the latter has a motivation to clear out the land of foreign beliefs and non-believers. That fact does not justify their horrid actions, but it certainly is a better representation than that of the Russian who goes around killing civilians without hesitation or a clear motive. Moreover, the U.S.'s war crimes in reality have been ascribed to the Russian army. These myths of the Russian and the Al-Qatala terrorist are being presented as truth when the narrative director and many other people from the team insist that the game is very realistic and come close to reality. *COD:Modern Warfare* is also being promoted as authentic because of collaboration with the military on its development. This means that many will believe what they see in the game and that is catastrophic because it heavily strengthens the anti-Russian and anti-terrorist discourse in American society. These mythological images are what sustain the discourse on the war on terror and thus keep allowing the imperialist U.S. government to fuel money into the military industry and infiltrate the Middle East, while being supported by the American population.

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