

Right click to de-escalate – *Call of Duty* & turning propaganda into pleasure

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper aims to provide a case study of select games from the *Call of Duty* franchise in order to analyze the relationship between pleasurable mechanics and the games' political messaging. Focusing mainly on the *Modern Warfare* series, I will use the framework of procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2007) as a means of showcasing how *Call of Duty's* systems make persuasive claims about the nature of armed conflicts.

The problematic nature of the franchise's portrayal of war starts with the very characteristics of the genre it belongs to. As first-person shooter games, *Call of Duty* is designed to make the action pleasurable and mechanically satisfying. A key component of the genre is embodiment – the player sees conflict focalized through their character, which makes their perspective in the geo-political context of the game more impactful (Godfrey, 2022). The gameplay relies on the affective immediacy of encounters, with the fast pace of the game “defying critical distance” (Väliaho, 2014). This means that more often than not, the player has no time to properly analyze the actions in which they are partaking; the game even encourages this quick mode of play by placing the player in a time-based training level first. This becomes particularly problematic in some of the scenarios showcased in the franchise. In one of the missions in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II* (Infinity Ward, 2022), the player is tasked with chasing members of the cartel through a town on the US-Mexico border, running through multiple civilian houses in the process. When faced with a few panicked civilians, the player is met with a prompt to de-escalate the situation. However, when pressing the assigned button, the player character proceeds to aim their weapon at the civilians, which is one of the examples of how the franchise portrays military violence as a mandatory solution (Gagnon, 2010).

Another mission in the same entry sees the player controlling an AC-130 in order to eliminate enemy forces residing in small Mexican towns. In the section, the player can fire upon and destroy civilian infrastructure, such as schools or residential buildings – which is prohibited by the Geneva Convention (Donald, 2019). However, the campaign never brings this up as a potential issue – as if the rules of war did not apply to the special forces controlled by the player. *Call of Duty's* problematic approach to war

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crimes is further exemplified by the *Killstreak* mechanic in multiplayer, which rewards the players for eliminating multiple enemies without dying. In *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward, 2019), one of the *Killstreak* rewards is white phosphorus, which while not explicitly prohibited, may fall into the category of weapons causing “unnecessary suffering”, thus also possibly breaching the Geneva Convention (Donald, 2019). The placement of white phosphorus as a *Killstreak* reward alongside ordinary missiles, UAVs, or gunships may reinforce the idea of its usage in conventional warfare being just.

In the original *Modern Warfare* trilogy (Infinity Ward, 2007-2011), the main threats come from the possibility of nuclear warheads falling into the hands of terrorists; the games also show a Russian invasion of the United States soil, where the player is shown the destruction of suburban neighborhoods and Washington D.C. The aforementioned scenarios are directly tied to post-9/11 anxieties and discourses promoted by the Bush administration (Gagnon, 2010). By reinforcing these narratives, the trilogy shows a vision of modern warfare that is inherently grounded in real-world geopolitics, which might create a lens through which the player subconsciously integrates the series’ narratives into their own worldview (Evren Eken, 2016). This is also apparent in the games’ portrayal of the enemy forces: the enemies are a dehumanized mass stripped of their identity, with their designs often resembling Islamist extremists, their combat tactics often wild and unpredictable; a stark contrast to the professional way the games depict the western forces. (Šisler, 2008).

The *Modern Warfare* series aims to provide an authentic portrayal of war, but it seems reduced solely to aesthetics. While certain parts of the game, such as the attention to detail in weapon designs or the AC-130 footage appear realistic, the vast majority of it showcases a sanitized version of the battlefield (Godfrey, 2022). The franchise depicts a vision of conflict that is meant to *feel* authentic but omits the most glaring issues of real-life warfare – a portrayal characterized by a selective approach to realism (Pötzsch, 2017). Thus, the games rewrite the way war is viewed, creating something akin to Baudrillard’s (1994) simulacrum, as well as functioning within what Baudrillard (1995) called “deterrence of the real by the hyperreal”. This is perhaps most visible in the ways the series has been used to promote the military itself. A former US army colonel advised on the development of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward, 2007), focusing on using video games as a means to “teach about the military’s heroic sacrifices” (Godfrey, 2022). As of 2026, *Call of Duty* has also been used in videos shared by the official White House account on X, which mixed gameplay with real-world military bombing footage (Makar, 2026).

Through the lens of procedural rhetoric, this analysis demonstrates that *Call of Duty*’s game mechanics are not politically neutral but actively construct and reinforce specific ideological positions regarding modern warfare. It should be emphasized that the series often uses “authored agency” to restrict the player’s choices (Sicart, 2016) and while this might lead to a more introspective act of play in some cases, the games rarely acknowledge the morally questionable nature of the player’s actions. The series’ design choices work to glorify the portrayal of the army and sanitize armed conflict. With the franchise having documented ties to military recruitment programs (Goodpastor, 2020) and reinforcing certain political narratives, it’s important to critically examine the way the games embed their messaging in pleasurable mechanics. With the games’ characteristics actively working to defy critical distance,

it's key to analyze not only the messages apparent in the games' stories, but also how the mechanics reinforce them.

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