

Experiencing the Call of Duty: Exploring Emotions in Commercial War Games

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Abstract

This article explores how players interpret and reflect on themes in mainstream war videogames, specifically the Call of Duty franchise. Scholars have long focused on the ideological content of war games, which is marked by increased collusion of military institutions with the gaming industry and assumptions about the influential capabilities of war games, in which player agency is often downplayed. This study builds on Lenoir and Caldwell’s (2018) observations that the interpretation of mainstream franchises should focus more on their attempts to create an “affective framework” that emphasises certain emotions in players. Through a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 25 participants, this study found that participants outlined their discomfort in certain missions, to the point where they even altered their playstyle, suggesting that players often reflect critically on the aspects of war these games explore. This article concludes that mainstream franchises, like Call of Duty, should be considered complex cultural artefacts consisting of various layers of meaning. Rather than directly transmitting militaristic ideologies, these games craft an emotional aesthetic capable of exploring more controversial aspects of war. The key to understanding these franchises lies directly with the players themselves, which is why audiences should be treated as conscious agents who play an active role in drawing meaning from such an aesthetic.

Keywords

affect; audience research; Call of Duty; commercial war games; emotion; military; videogames

1. Introduction

Videogames have come a long way from the moral panics and associations with societal violence dating back to the 1990s. At the centre of this controversy was the first-person shooter (FPS), which continues to be one

of the most popular gaming genres. Over time, however, FPS games have come to be defined by their embrace of militaristic themes and narratives (Voorhees, 2012). According to Schulzke (2020, p. 141), military games celebrate simulated violence as necessary acts that aid national security interests and encourage players to identify with real armed forces. Most Western-made military-themed games allow players to experience a predominantly celebratory view of war. This has led to a growing concern amongst scholars over the potential of these games to reinforce certain attitudes surrounding war and the military (Nieborg, 2010; Power, 2007). However, Sicart (2016, p. 317) outlines that it is possible to view military games as devices for reflection, which create experiences that are open to more nuanced interpretations. Therefore, within these discussions, it is also essential to acknowledge the active role of the player in determining meaning from topics covered within the games they play.

This article seeks to understand how players, as active participants, determine meaning from their experiences playing war-themed games. The term “war-themed games” incorporates various genres, but this research looks at civilian-developed FPS games, namely Call of Duty. The article sets out to answer the question: How do players make meaning from their experiences playing commercial war games? Drawing from 25 semi-structured interviews conducted with active videogame players, the article demonstrates that players came to define their experiences through the emotions they felt during play. More specifically, participants outlined numerous missions that channelled more negative emotions, such as guilt and discomfort, in which certain moments made for an unsettling experience. This study highlights how commercial games create an affective experience of war and that certain mainstream games expand on this by confronting players with moral dilemmas which expose them to the harsh realities of war. Despite franchises like Call of Duty glorifying conflict, they also feature immoral moments that highlight more controversial aspects of war, including war crimes and the consequences of war on civilian populations. These controversial moments place the player in uncomfortable situations, which open opportunities for reflection on the game’s content and their virtual actions. The key to understanding these war games lies with the players, who play a crucial role in determining meaning.

The article begins by exploring debates on military videogames and how they have come to be defined by their celebration of military themes and support for militarisation. Commercial videogames play a pivotal role in this process, and their popularity among gamers demonstrates how entrenched militaristic themes have become, especially within the FPS genre. The article proceeds to explore the unique way commercial war-themed games generate meaning by exploring Lenoir and Caldwell’s (2018) “affective framework,” which outlines the affect of emotions within these games, which immerse players into a personalised war experience. The article sets out the research methodology and how audience-based interviews with players can contribute to a better understanding of these affective experiences. The analysis explores how participants experienced more negative emotional reactions to two campaigns from the Call of Duty franchise: Modern Warfare 2 (Infinity Ward, 2009) and the reboot of Modern Warfare (Infinity Ward, 2019)—these moments confronted players with moral dilemmas, which left them feeling guilty and uncomfortable, providing opportunities for reflection on their virtual actions.

2. The Military and Gaming

Most of the existing literature characterises military videogames through their close affiliation with the military, with scholars from various disciplines documenting the extensive structural relationship between

game developers and the military dating back to some of the earliest videogames (Halter, 2006; Herz, 1997; Huntemann & Payne, 2010; Lenoir, 2000). This historic collaboration between the military and the gaming industry has come to be understood as the “military–entertainment complex” or what Der Derian refers to as the “military-industrial-media-entertainment-network” (Der Derian, 2009, p. 83). One of the most infamous products from this collaboration is America’s Army (US Army, 2002), a game created by the US Army to encourage players to enlist in the military. However, these structural studies serve as primarily descriptive studies that reveal little about the content of these games. Schulzke (2013, p. 72) argues that demonstrating these military connections does not tell us what ideological messages the games promote or how military games are experienced. Other studies have focused more on the content of military games, like America’s Army, and have accused them of promoting militaristic ideologies that contribute to the growing militarisation of society by glamorising war and promoting military service (Nichols, 2010; Robinson, 2012). Power (2007) notes that military games put a “friendly, hospitable face on the military, manufacturing consent and complicity among consumers for military programmes” (p. 278). Delwiche (2007) provides the most literal take on the military themes found in videogames by claiming that they “have the potential to shape attitudes and behaviour in ways that Goebbels could never have dreamed” (p. 92).

However, irrespective of the messages within games, the assumption that players will simply absorb these messages without critical reflection is problematic. The audience plays an active role in determining meaning, which should be taken into account when considering the effects of war games. Players demonstrate some degree of agency in how they play and experience videogames, which makes it challenging to make definitive assertions about a game’s meaning (Schulzke, 2017, p. 615). Stuart Hall outlines the various ways audiences can read a text in his “encoding/decoding” model, where reading falls into three categories: it can be “dominant/hegemonic” in that it follows the encoded message inscribed into the text; it can be oppositional in that audiences reject the message; and it can be negotiated (S. Hall, 1980). Audience engagement with popular media is complex, and they often negotiate and struggle over the given meaning of a product (Glynn & Cupples, 2015, p. 272). Therefore, any analysis looking for “ideological reference in a given video game might yield astonishingly different results depending on the diversity of players’ values” (Cassar, 2013, p. 341).

Audience-based research has previously emphasised the diverse ways players experience military games, with very few fully subscribing to their themes. Huntemann (2010) conducted interviews with 26 military videogame players and found that while these games create a sanitised fantasy that glamorises military action, she was unconvinced that they prevent players from critically engaging with the content. Festl et al. (2013) carried out a representative survey of 4,500 gamers and concluded that the “development of militaristic attitudes cannot be attributed to the use of military-themed computer games” (p. 403). Even games that are considered more critical in their messaging can reveal the diversity of player engagement. For example, Jørgensen (2020, pp. 84–85) conducted an ethnographic interview with players of *This War of Mine* (11 bit studios, 2014), a survival game that focuses on the civilian experience of war, and found that some players were opposed to the rhetorical messages of the game. Relating to Hall’s “encoding/decoding” model, these reception studies demonstrate that the way audiences interpret messages is not as straightforward and underscores the idea that the meaning of a given piece of media is contested and subject to multiple interpretations. Players do not always accept the meaning of a videogame but offer a more active role in determining meaning from their gaming experiences, allowing for more significant insights into the militaristic themes in these games and how players come to make sense of them.

3. Affective Experiences in Commercial War Games

It is important to consider how audiences make meaning from military games, especially considering how popular the genre has become over the past 20 years. The turn of the 21st century saw the rise of popular commercial military-themed games, including FPSs, such as *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield*, which have become some of the most successful franchises in the gaming industry and have immense global outreach. Militarism remains integral to these games, which adopt an Anglo-Western political and ideological perspective on war through narrative themes and visual imagery (Godfrey, 2022). Commercial war games invite players to participate in a cinematic experience of past, present, and even futuristic wars. For example, *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward, 2003) originally started as a World War 2 shooter, allowing players to participate in historical battles like D-Day. In 2007, *Call of Duty* leapt into a more contemporary setting with the release of *Modern Warfare*, which explored issues including terrorism and the threat of nuclear war. The content of these games has undeniably been shaped by real-world events, especially in the aftermath of 9/11 and the “War on Terror” (Robinson, 2019, pp. 14–15). The world in these games is depicted through a Western lens, and they “draw upon and are reflective of contemporary US geopolitical intrigues” (Bos, 2018, p. 57). According to Gagnon (2010), games like *Call of Duty* echo the militarist ideology that has been dominant in the post-9/11 US national security debate. These studies demonstrate how prevalent militarism is within commercial war games in which players are immersed in an entertaining war experience inspired by modern geopolitical developments.

Developers exert considerable effort to make an entertaining and pleasurable experience for consumers, and at the core of these franchises is their emotional appeal. Lenoir and Caldwell (2018) argue that the focus on commercial games as being grounded in communicating militaristic ideologies is unfruitful, and more attention should be paid to how they create an entertaining and stimulating experience that appeals to players. They suggest the key to understanding commercial military games is through:

The construction of an aesthetic—an affective framework for experience—that targets and exploits embodiment more than cognition to immerse the player in the game world. Far from concerning themselves with communicating propagandistic values or skills that are unique to the military, wargame developers focus their most significant efforts on constructing the gaming experience—that is, how players feel when immersed in their game. (Lenoir & Caldwell, 2018, p. 84)

In their view, commercial games can be better understood through their attempts to translate war, an act that is not inherently pleasant, into a positive affective experience that is entertaining for the player. The priority for developers is to create an exhilarating experience that depicts war as a spectacular event with which consumers can connect. War itself is not fun on its own and requires significant rewriting in order to create an experience that players support, which works to both legitimise and normalise the act of warfare (Godfrey, 2022, p. 679). Franchises like *Call of Duty* emphasise certain emotions through their sensational and dramatic narratives, exhilarating set pieces, and well-written characters, which all combine to create a positive affective encounter of war that makes players feel excited and heroic. *Call of Duty* is infamous for its cinematic cutscenes and scripted set pieces that give the game meaning and “convey a stronger emotional punch” (Sicart, 2016, p. 311). Commercial war games utilise more pleasurable encounters to stimulate affect, which plays an influential role in shaping contemporary military imaginations. Dittmer and Bos (2019) note how commercial war games generate an affective experience of war, but one stripped

of danger and consequences. It is, therefore, not surprising that most commercial games present a more sanitised experience of war that fails to cover more controversial and negative aspects of conflict, such as the consequences of severe acts of violence. In this way, a flawed reality of war is presented (Pötzsch, 2017, p. 160). Creating a sanitised war experience makes playing the game less problematic and more enjoyable, encouraging broader demographics to buy the game.

In addition to the affective framework outlined by Lenoir and Caldwell, other scholars have emphasised that war-themed games utilise emotions to constitute specific meanings. Payne (2016) uses the concept of “ludic war” as a “pleasurable experience of playing military-themed videogames” (p. 11). Games like Call of Duty are described as “first-person shooters” as they appeal directly to the player’s emotions by making them empathise with narratives of military sacrifice. He also uses the term “sacrificial citizenship” to describe how avatars, and, by extension, the player, “participate in dramatic acts of virtual patriotism” in service of their virtual nation (Payne, 2016, p. 92). In the opening mission of Modern Warfare (Infinity Ward, 2007), the player experiences a segment in which their character is executed by a gunshot to the face by a terrorist called Al-Asad. This “face-to-face” confrontation sets up the plot and serves as a critical moment in which the imagery of Al-Asad pulling the trigger becomes “the face of enmity, and the fight is made personal” (Welsh, 2012, p. 403). Seeing their own avatar or another squadmate die is a very personal moment for the player and is likely to create a strong emotional response if the player has developed a close attachment to that character.

This affective framework primarily considers how videogames create powerful emotional moments that shape players’ attitudes on specific issues and contribute to a more positive outlook on war and the military. However, it is important to consider that affect is not just used for militaristic means but is pliable and can be put to any end of any political persuasion (Dittmer & Bos, 2019, p. 139). When discussing emotions in videogames, it is important to look beyond the facilitation of positive affective experiences when, in actuality, videogames offer complex, paradoxical emotional experiences that can also be precarious and unpleasant (McSorley, 2020). In other words, it is just as possible for these games to explore more negative emotions and create a distressing experience for the player. Players should be considered an essential element when making sense of this emotional aesthetic. Through their interactions with games, they have the capacity to critically consume and reflect on their in-game actions (Bowman et al., 2022). Through considering the complexities of emotions in war games, it is important to understand how players make meaning from this aesthetic, especially when considering the possibility of videogames presenting players with more controversial aspects of war. When discussing the effects of videogames, scholars tend to downplay the agency of players in constructing meaning. It is crucial to acknowledge that audiences play an active role in how they make meaning from their experiences. Furthermore, given the success of commercial war game franchises like Call of Duty, it is important to consider the emotional impacts of these games, specifically the impact of more negative emotional experiences on how players determine meaning. This research will engage directly with gamers to understand how they experience commercial military games, specifically focusing on their emotional reactions during play. The following section outlines the methodology used to explore how players make meaning from their in-game experiences.

4. Methodology

This study is part of a larger project that delves into the ideological complexities of modern military videogames. A key aspect of this project is to consider the viewpoints of players, aiming to contribute to a

more comprehensive understanding of how average gamers make meaning from the games they play. In line with Jørgensen's (2011, 2020) call to include more player perspectives in serious videogame investigations and treat players as experts, this research examines how players interpret and determine meaning from playing commercial war games.

The study involved 25 FPS players who expressed an interest in military-themed games. A poster campaign across Newcastle upon Tyne, UK, was used to recruit participants. Gaming-related student societies were contacted across universities in the North-East region (Northumbria, Newcastle, Sunderland, and Teesside). Advertisements were also posted in online forums, including Reddit and Discord servers, which catered to FPS games, including Call of Duty. The online recruitment strategy proved to be a significant asset, attracting international players and providing a unique global perspective on how different audiences experience commercial military games. Participants hailed from the UK, the US, Ireland, Greece, Hungary, Brazil, and the Philippines. Twenty participants identified as male, three as female, and two as Other. They were invited to participate in an interview to share their experiences playing military-themed games. The interviews were conducted in person in private rooms and online via Microsoft Teams and one-on-one Discord calls and were audio recorded, manually transcribed, and analysed using NVivo. Pseudonyms were also assigned to ensure the confidentiality of participants.

The interview questions were intentionally open, inviting participants to discuss their experiences of any military-themed games they had played. This approach aimed to include more participants from across multiple games, fostering a sense of inclusivity in the study. Call of Duty was discussed by all 25 participants, a testament to the franchise's popularity, having sold more than 425 million copies over 20 years of annual releases (Park, 2023). The semi-structured interview questions followed an established list of open-ended questions that allowed more exploration of areas of interest. Cote and Raz (2015) outline a helpful question structure that involves a series of "warm-up questions" to build rapport before moving on to more "substantive questions" that attempt to collect deeper data (pp. 103–104). The interviews begin with more general questions about what motivations players had for playing FPS games and their gaming habits, which eased the participants into the interview process and gathered information about the participant's background as a gamer before moving on to questions that focused on the participant's engagement with the games, asking them to recall memorable moments. This led to questions about the emotions and reactions of participants at specific moments within the games, reflections on their actions, and prominent themes featured in the narrative. These questions were designed to explore how players interacted with key moments in commercial war games and how they drew meaning from their experiences.

Using a thematic analysis of the interviews, the study found that Call of Duty created an emotionally charged experience that resonated with participants. More specifically, players outlined that they remembered more uncomfortable and controversial moments from their time playing, which often made them critically reflect on the themes of the narrative and the consequences of their virtual actions.

5. Analysis

Call of Duty has several different modes of play in which players can immerse themselves. Almost every Call of Duty entry in the franchise (apart from Black Ops 4 in 2018) contains a single-player campaign, a story-driven experience spread across several missions. Call of Duty is also renowned for its online multiplayer, which allows

for social interaction with other players and a progression system that gives this mode a high replay value and heightens the appeal amongst players (Marcano Lárez, 2014, p. 35). While all the participants admitted to spending most of their time playing the multiplayer mode, this did not mean they neglected the single-player experience. Ethan (21) outlined how he approached each new Call of Duty release:

With Call of Duty, the campaign is still essential to the experience. Once you finish the campaign, you go and play multiplayer with friends. But I will always make sure to play the campaign first before I touch any of the other modes.

Ethan described a ritual among Call of Duty players: They initially play through the single-player campaign before moving on to the online modes. Nevertheless, despite the more limited engagement with the single-player, at least compared to the multiplayer, it still formed an integral part of the player's overall experience. It was frequently mentioned within the interviews, except for two participants who claimed they stopped playing the campaigns as they grew older. Regardless, the participants could recall their time playing specific missions in the campaign mode and discussed key themes and events in great detail.

The analysis focuses on two Call of Duty games that routinely came up throughout the interview process. The first part examines the infamous mission "No Russian" from Modern Warfare 2. This mission is notable for the controversial decision to make the player participate in a terrorist attack, sparking intense discussion amongst players. The second part explores two missions from the 2019 Modern Warfare reboot: "Old Comrades," which allows the player to take part in an interrogation; and "Hometown," a mission that introduces a playable child for the first time in the franchise.

5.1. Analysis: "No Russian"

"No Russian" is the third mission in the Modern Warfare (2009) campaign. CIA agent Joseph Allen, the playable protagonist of the mission, is sent undercover to win the trust of Russian ultranationalist terrorist Vladimir Makarov, who is planning a false flag attack to trigger an international conflict between Russia and the West. The mission begins as the player and four gunmen exit an elevator into the terminal of a Russian airport, and suddenly, they begin firing into a crowd of civilians. There is no indication given in the mission briefing prior that the player would be expected to shoot unarmed civilians. Kyle (24) discussed his reactions to the opening moments of the mission: "It starts as a typical mission; the elevator doors open, and suddenly, hundreds of civilians are being mowed down in front of you."

The player is suddenly thrust into a position where they are now taking part in this mass shooting. The airport section of the mission is populated primarily by unarmed civilians who pose no threat to the player. All 18 participants who discussed "No Russian" in the interviews admitted to taking part in the shooting the first time they played it, and all described it as a different experience from the rest of the game. Oliver (22) claimed that when he aimed down the sights to see unarmed civilians, he felt awful about his actions, which was something he had never experienced in a game before. He reflected on his gaming habits and said:

When playing these games, you're in a "shoot and kill mode." When those elevator doors opened, I started shooting. I willingly participated in that, and I don't know how to feel. It's just something you've been doing for the entire game, and now, suddenly, it feels bad.

Players like Oliver had become accustomed to the core mechanics of these FPS games, which involve shooting armed enemies. The core mechanics of “No Russian” are no different, with the only exception being that the area is populated with defenceless civilians. The civilians’ behaviour reinforces their status as innocent people who pose no threat to the player. Some civilians attempt to surrender, whilst others drag the bodies of wounded people to safety. Players are constantly confronted with the brutal consequences of the shooting as they are forced to slowly walk through the terminal as the massacre unfolds. The combination of civilian behaviour and deliberate restrictions on the player’s movement creates a distressing experience for the player. When asked about their emotional reaction when they were walking through the airport, Karter (25) admitted to feeling bad about their role in the shooting: “It wasn’t really a good feeling. Going through it, you think, “What have I just done? What the hell was all that about?” And you talk to your friends about it, and they were all in the same boat.”

Karter expressed feelings of remorse over the shooting of virtual civilians, leading to some critical reflection on their morals. This also included discussing the mission with friends, meaning that the emotions felt after playing “No Russian” spurred conversations among players about their actions during this mission. Feelings of guilt among players have been highlighted in previous studies involving virtual violence despite players understanding that no actual actions of aggression have occurred (Krcmar et al., 2018). The experience of “No Russian” instigates these adverse reactions from players, which are grounded in feelings of grief, guilt, and remorse (Bowman et al., 2022). Welsh (2012) believes that “No Russian” is purposefully staged to affect and re-sanitise players to the point where players will likely feel some degree of sympathy for these virtual victims and have genuine concerns about their own involvement in what happens to them (pp. 410–411). By analysing participant experiences, “No Russian” can evoke an affective response from certain players in which they assign some semblance of humanity to these virtual civilians.

There is very little direct agency granted to players during this mission, and it is impossible to prevent the attack from taking place as Makarov and the other terrorists are invulnerable. Sicart (2016) is critical of “No Russian” because of the lack of autonomy given to the player who is placed in an “uncomfortable middle ground that does not help develop a critical understanding of the game actions” (p. 317). However, this study found that certain players altered their playstyles when they played “No Russian.” Marc (25) admitted to taking part in the shooting the first time he played, and he recalled that shooting the civilians made him feel uncomfortable. In subsequent replays, he discussed an alternative approach to the mission:

The difference between then and now was that I figured out you could shoot your gun at the floor or the ceiling to avoid killing civilians. So, there was a way to complete the mission without taking part in the killing.

Marc demonstrated some degree of agency by actively choosing not to take part in the shooting and doing everything in their power to avoid killing civilians. Participants like Marc went against the established conventions of Call of Duty by refusing to kill. Mohammad Alavi, a designer at Infinity Ward, explains how “No Russian” uses player discomfort to create an emotionally charged experience that would remain anchored in people’s minds. He explained that the big question of “No Russian” is “How far should America go in the pursuit of homeland security?” and refusing to take part in the shooting is a way for the player to voice their answer through their virtual actions (Purslow, 2023). This reveals that the developers attempted to create moments that confront the player with moral questions, and the player’s response to these moments can be reflected through changes in their gameplay.

“No Russian” is an emotionally charged experience. However, instead of making the player feel excited and satisfied, participants recalled that it was an uncomfortable sequence that confronted them with the consequences of their virtual actions. Players had become accustomed to immersing themselves as the hero who defeats the enemy and protects civilians. “No Russian” rips the player out of that fantasy and thrusts them into a distressing position.

5.2. Analysis: *Modern Warfare 2019*

Participants hesitated to name alternatives when asked about other emotionally intense moments in the Call of Duty franchise; however, *Modern Warfare (2019)* came up multiple times. Participants discussed how specific missions in the campaign tackled controversial aspects of war, such as the role of non-combatants in conflict zones, which resonated with some participants. Matt (25), for instance, said:

I rarely replay a Call of Duty campaign after going through it the first time. But I have replayed *Modern Warfare 2019* multiple times, even recently. It felt much more realistic regarding the story and tried to take itself more seriously. It was nice to play something more serious and not have everything exploding every five minutes. I loved how grounded and real it felt.

In the interviews, players talked much more positively about *Modern Warfare (2019)*. They praised its attempts to tell a more serious and grounded story rather than creating an exciting spectacle like in previous Call of Duty instalments. Overall, 13 participants discussed *Modern Warfare (2019)* and outlined how the campaign elicited more negative emotional responses by confronting players with uncomfortable moral choices and visceral imagery.

In the mission “Old Comrades,” the player apprehends a terrorist known as “The Butcher” during a chase through the streets of St. Petersburg. The player is tasked with leading the interrogation to find the location of a hidden bomb somewhere in the city. A “package” is delivered to the room, and it is revealed it is the wife and son of “The Butcher” and the player is given a gun and ordered to shoot them as they beg for their lives. Shooting the gun reveals it is unloaded, yet this is not indicated to the player, who believes the gun contains bullets. Henry highlighted this moment in his interview and said:

I had a trigger finger the first time I played. Aiming down the sights to see a woman and child cowering was a weird experience, but you needed that information. I did take that shot, and you find out it's not loaded. The guilt just flooded over me. I was just like, “Oh no, what have I done?”

Henry indicated feelings of remorse over his actions in the interrogation. The imagery of aiming a weapon towards an innocent child as he pleads for his life elicited an uncomfortable reaction. This moment served as a moment of reflection on just how far the player would be willing to go to get that information, and the act of shooting what they believed was a loaded gun at an innocent woman and child was too much. The revelation that the gun contains no bullets is taken as a moment of relief, but that does not change the fact that players pulled the trigger as if they were going to kill an innocent child. At the end of the interrogation, “The Butcher” finally reveals the location of the bomb after the player is given real bullets to load into the gun.

Given the linear nature of Call of Duty, the player is given limited agency on how to interact in this scene. It is worth noting that players can refuse to take part in the interrogation outright, having it be resolved

off-screen. This allows the player to draw a line on what they would be willing to do. However, all participants who discussed this mission chose to participate in the interrogation. Ryan (28) admitted to taking part in the interrogation but was uncomfortable harming a child and took steps to avoid shooting the hostages before realising the gun was unloaded. He said:

You can refuse outright. There are many different ways to approach it. But on my first time playing, I went into the room, but I wasn't going to go as far as to shoot a kid, so I just aimed above their heads and fired, and the mission still progressed.

Players like Ryan managed to maintain a degree of agency by refusing to aim at the hostages, shooting at the wall instead. Whilst Ryan was willing to do what needed to be done to get the information, the idea of threatening a child was an act he was not comfortable with. Causing harm to children in a virtual space is still a controversial topic within videogame circles, and it is extremely rare for a game to feature killable child characters (Schulzke, 2020, p. 117). In general, the gaming community tend to view violence against children in games as ethically wrong (Cassar, 2013, p. 349). Developers tend to avoid such content over fear of generating controversy, but, in the case of "Old Comrades," no violence takes place against the child, only the expectation of harm. It serves as a moment for reflection on what the player would be willing to do in the interests of security. The player is given the means to stop a terrorist attack but takes unorthodox actions which involve harming a child. It was a difficult scenario for participants like Henry and Ryan to process.

Another part of the campaign that participants discussed was the mission "Hometown." This mission is a flashback that tells the backstory of Farah, a freedom fighter from the fictional country of Urzikstan, which has been under Russian occupation. The player assumes control of young Farah, who experiences the invasion of her village by Russian soldiers. The player is stripped of their advanced movement, moves significantly slower, and can be killed in one shot, making the mission a highly vulnerable experience. The mechanics attempt to emulate what being a child in a warzone would be like. Players like William (23) discussed how unique the mission was, which made it stand out from the rest of the game, but spoke of how eye-opening it was to experience an invasion through the position of a child: "It was really interesting to see war from a child's perspective. It made me think about how children are affected by war when they happen to be caught up in the middle of it."

Throughout the mission, the player witnesses horrific scenes as Farah flees through the village, including the use of chemical weapons. Farah also sees the deaths of both her parents. Kalim (22), an American-Egyptian gamer, said he had mixed feelings about the mission but praised how it included the experiences of civilians caught up in war:

It does show the reality of what happens in these combat zones. People are just doing their normal lives; they go to school, hang out with friends, and do normal things. And then, when war comes, they have nowhere to go; they truly suffer, which you never see in videogames because it's unpleasant. It does make you think of the Arab people caught up in the conflict in the Middle East. I just wish they spoke Arabic instead of English. I feel like that was a missed opportunity.

Despite his criticisms of some aspects of the mission's presentation of Arab people, Kalim acknowledged the importance of representing the lived experiences of people currently experiencing conflict. It is rare for a

game like Call of Duty to feature any explicit attention to such issues of war; yet, “Hometown” is an entire mission dedicated to showcasing real people’s struggles, which is a unique experience for the player. These reflections relate to the findings of Kessner and Cotes (2023), who believed that missions like “Hometown” created deeply visceral experiences that allow players to develop civic empathy with the lived experiences of their avatar’s real-world counterparts. Missions like “Hometown” craft an unsettling emotional experience that raises awareness of the negative consequences of war, which is an aspect rarely featured in commercial military games.

Modern Warfare 2019 is another example of a Call of Duty campaign that creates an affective experience for the player. The campaign confronts players with uncomfortable truths of war and moral dilemmas that depend on the player’s actions.

6. Discussion

Throughout the interviews, participants consistently emphasised how they interpreted their experiences based on the negative emotions they were confronted with in missions like “No Russian,” “Old Comrades,” and “Hometown.” These emotions prompted them to reflect on their in-game actions and the problematic themes featured in the narrative. Despite the franchise’s celebratory interpretation of war, participants came to define their experiences by recalling moments that made them feel uncomfortable and guilty.

Central to all of these missions is the focus on civilians; their presence raises questions about the conduct of war and forces players to consider the existence of non-combatants, especially when discussing a mission like “Hometown” in which the player embodies a civilian and the trauma they endure. It is rare for a war game to feature civilians. Instead, they often consist of battlefields populated by nothing but enemies and are “conspicuously void of civilians” to maintain a simple and unproblematic depiction of war (Keogh, 2013, p. 2). If civilian deaths are presented, they are usually disconnected from the player’s actions. However, the negative emotions recalled by participants in the interviews were typically linked to the presence of civilians in some form.

A common theme was that participants actively contemplated their actions when confronted with civilians. In both “No Russian” and “Old Comrades,” the player is positioned in a situation in which they are presented with the possibility of committing horrendous acts that involve harming innocents, whether civilians in the airport or the young child in the interrogation. These moments confronted players with significant moral dilemmas in which they often contemplated their own justifications for their actions. Reflecting on Payne’s (2016) concept of “sacrificial citizenship” is particularly relevant here. The idea of giving up one’s life for the sake of the nation is a reoccurring trope across many military games, including Call of Duty. However, in “No Russian” and “Old Comrades,” players are forced to sacrifice their humanity by committing unspeakable things in the name of national security. For many participants, the game asked them to do something they knew was wrong, making them reflect on their own actions and morals.

Certain players demonstrated agency and interacted with the game space in an alternative way to avoid such negative emotions by refusing to harm civilians whom they regarded as innocent. Ian Bogost refers to exploring the game’s space by testing the rules imposed onto the player as the “possibility space” (Bogost, 2007, pp. 42–43). This is important to consider, given the linear nature of the missions in action games like

Call of Duty, in which the game designer maintains authorial control over the player's experience, granting them little interactivity and agency (Schleiner, 2017, p. 79). This contrasts with games like Metal Gear Solid (Konami, 1998), which grants players agency by offering more choices in how the player approaches a mission through incentivising non-lethal stealth. Therefore, the "possibility space" of a game like Metal Gear Solid is much broader compared to linear military shooters like Call of Duty (Jarvis & Robinson, 2021, p. 204). The choice of players not to shoot is impactful, given how shooting at enemy NPCs (non-playable characters) is the primary way for the player to interact with the game world. Linear games like Call of Duty can address moral considerations in their narratives, which affect the overall feel of the game as well as how players' interactions with the games are framed (Schulzke, 2020, p. 131). Player agency is still possible in Call of Duty, as demonstrated when participants altered their gameplay habits when confronted with unsettling situations and moral dilemmas.

7. Conclusion

Commercial videogames, like Call of Duty, have come to be understood through their affective framework, immersing players in an entertaining virtual war experience. This research found that some players made meaning through the negative emotions they experienced playing Call of Duty. Specific missions stood out for these players, which confronted them with complex moral issues, primarily by including civilians within these moments. This led to players experiencing guilt and discomfort, resulting in opportunities to address and reflect on critical issues and their own actions.

However, it is important to reiterate that although the participant discussion in this research highlighted the critical potential of specific missions in Call Duty, the franchise continues to depict a predominantly celebratory view of war and the military. For example, whilst "No Russian" exposes players to moral questions about their role in causing suffering to innocents, the same cannot be said for the rest of the game. Likewise, with Modern Warfare (2019), even though the game attempts to tell a gritty story that emphasises the consequences of war, it still generated controversy for its narrative depictions of certain groups, including Russians. For example, the game replicates the infamous "Highway of Death" in which the US bombed retreating Iraqi military personnel in Kuwait during the 1991 Gulf War. "Highway of Death" is the title of one of the missions in Modern Warfare 2019, in which the Russian forces bombed a stretch of road as civilians attempted to escape (C. Hall, 2019). This study does not claim that these games are inherently critical products. However, they have the ability to explore more controversial aspects of war by facilitating negative emotional experiences that resonate with players and encourage reflection.

It is also important to point out that the experiences outlined by the participants in this research are not universal. Given the relatively small sample size of 25, this study only captures some potential ways players engage with these products. Not all players determine meaning in the same way, so the findings of this study should not be perceived as an assumption of how all players make meaning from Call of Duty but rather that certain players can reflect on their emotional experiences and draw alternative meanings. Audience-focused research provides valuable insight into how videogames are experienced and how their themes resonate with players, and further research should seek to study the ability of players to determine meaning actively. Looking beyond Call of Duty at other commercial war-themed franchises such as Battlefield could produce a more general insight into how these games utilise different emotions in their stories. Furthermore, looking beyond established gamers to analyse how people who are not self-described FPS players make sense of the

themes featured in games like Call of Duty could provide a more diverse understanding of how these games are experienced.

This research seeks to contribute to the conversation on how commercial war games generate meaning by expanding the emotional aesthetic and considering negative affective experiences. Whilst these games often create an entertaining depiction of war, they also explore more troubling themes that are emotionally challenging for the player. The player is the key to understanding this emotional aesthetic, which is why audiences need to be treated as active agents who can engage with their experiences within the game, reflect on contentious issues, and draw meaning from experiencing more challenging emotions.

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