

## Orientalization of Gaming: A Postcolonial Study of *Call of Duty Modern Warfare*

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### Abstract

*Call of Duty* is a popular first-person shooter (FPS) game. *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2007) was the first game in the franchise which did not focus on the World Wars' history. It was also the first *Call of Duty* which had a continuous interactive digital narrative (IDN). This article attempts to take a comparative approach to the game. As a cultural product, the game is susceptible to postcolonial and orientalist discourses. This article attempts to apply Edward Said's theories to *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* in order to prove that the game's IDN was shaped by postcolonialism and orientalism. The game functioned as a cultural medium which disseminated orientalist discourses amongst its player base. As such, this article tries to not only shed light upon a lesser-known aspect of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* but also to demonstrate that computer games are not exempt from external cultural forces.

**Keywords:** Clash of Civilizations, Interactive digital narrative, interactive media, postcolonialism, orientalism, war on terror

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## 1. Introduction

Computer games are important cultural products. The industry's consistent economic growth, accessibility, and manifestation in ever newer formats, have turned them into one of the most important sociocultural phenomena of the 21<sup>st</sup> century:

Computer games are a sociocultural phenomenon of increasing relevance. They have left behind their early stage as a 'youth and children's medium' and are now being used by broad levels of society as essential recreational activities, and thus are of considerable economic importance (Sudmann & Stockmann 2008: VIII).

Gone are the days in which games were considered only appropriate for children. Computer games have become extremely complex; as has their place in society. This complexity can be divided into several domains. This article briefly mentions these domains and examines *Call of Duty's* unique position in each.

## 2. Domains of Computer Games

The first domain is academic. From an academic standpoint, the issue of interactive media, especially computer games, has been a contentious one. While a minority of researchers have become more interested in computer games, the majority have ignored their significance. A number of psychoanalysts have studied the effects of computer games on the player base, i.e., how gamers interact with each other or how violence in games can in turn make gamers more violent. Left-leaning academics claim that computer games reinforce the patriarchal hierarchy of metropolitan societies through the promotion of "toxic masculinity," and violence toward minorities. *Call of Duty's* player base has been accused of being extremely toxic (Salaun 2022). Male gamers have displayed misogynistic and racist behavior. Furthermore, the franchise has been blamed for the gamification of terrorism:

It can be, and has been, argued that [the Christchurch] attack had distinct features of video games and in many respects, at times, felt like a video game. The live-streaming of the attack, for example, had distinct parallels with popular 'Let's Play' videos where audiences watch people play video games live (or as a recording afterward), giving the viewers the illusion of watching footage from a first-person shooter game. In fact, similar to the majority of these 'Let's Play' videos, the assailant often narrated and talked through the attack. In addition, mounting his GoPro to his helmet gave the attack the feel (as mentioned above) of a FPS, a popular gaming style where the player sees the game, or mission, from the view of the character or avatar, as used in globally popular and widely-recognizable game franchises like *Call of Duty*, *Halo*, or *Doom*. The use of multiple weapons was also reminiscent of a video game, with *Call of*

*Duty* once again holding distinct similarities (Lakhani & Wiedlitzka 2022: 8).

Whether or not the *Call of Duty* franchise has gamified terrorism is out of this article's scope. However, it can be inferred from these arguments that the majority of researchers who study computer games, usually focus on their effects on the player base. They do not consider computer games as artistic/literary expressions or cultural products. Computer games have gained no traction as the newest and most complex iteration of art/literature. Literary academia has largely ignored computer games. Literary academia has reacted to the emergence of computer games the same way it reacted to the emergence of novels. It considers computer games as crude virtual products, only fit for mass consumption. It claims that computer games are not "elegant" or "nuanced" enough to be worthy of artistic/literary criticism and study.

The second domain is economics. By early 2003 the game industry, 11 billion USD, had become larger and more profitable than the film industry, 9 billion USD. This trend has continued to this day:

In 2005, the game industry's software sales were considerably higher, \$30 billion, than Hollywood's revenues from worldwide theatrical film releases that, according to the Motion Picture Association of America, amounted to \$23 billion. Meanwhile, the most popular Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG), *World of Warcraft* (2004) connects eight million paying customers worldwide. And the release of each new Nintendo game console turns out to be a consumer event: in Europe, Nintendo's Wii, with its innovative interface, was sold out within a week" (Sudmann & Stockmann 2008: VIII).

Not only does the industry make and sell more computer games each year, but also regularly incorporates artistic/literary elements in order to make ever more realistic computer games. Famous Hollywood actors regularly appear in computer games. The most famous examples are the appearance of Norman Reedus in *Death Stranding* (Kojima Production, 2019) and Keanu Reeves in *Cyberpunk 2077* (CDPR, 2020). During the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the industry's incredible growth had a major impact on the global economy. In 2014, the game industry was valued at over 93 billion USD. The next generations of consoles were planned to be released in 2020. However, the industry was affected by the pandemic. The game industry was one of the few which benefited from the global quarantine. The industry had a 20 percent growth in 2019. Its revenue reached over 179 billion USD. In 2023, the industry's global revenue will increase by 8 percent and will reach 384 billion USD. It is projected that by 2027 the number of active computer game users will reach 3.10 billion and the global revenue will exceed half a trillion USD (Witkowski 2021).

Activision made over 650 million USD in sales during the first week of *Call of Duty: Black Ops' release* (Tassi 2011). *Call of Duty Warzone* (Activision, 2020) quickly became one of the most popular games of all time. Activision has sold more than 150 million copies of the game across various platforms since its launch in 2020 (Mattone 2021). Activision has sold more than 424 million copies of Call of Duty games since their launch in 2003. The franchise has had an astonishing revenue of more than 30 billion USD (Oguntola 2023). One assumes that because of these numbers, economists would be more interested in the game industry. The game industry was even crucial in the sudden rise of cryptocurrencies. However, the economic aspects of computer games remain a largely unresearched area of study.

The third domain is political. Computer games have become an easy scapegoat for politicians. They blame computer games for the rise of crime and violence across the globe. This has been especially true in the United States of America and most recently France. Republican politicians usually blame computer games whenever mass shootings happen. There have been several congressional hearings about violence in computer games (Farokhmanesh 2019). Across the globe, many activists and politicians are trying to regulate the game industry. So far, they have not been successful. But this does not mean that they will not be able to limit the game industry's progress in the future.

To summarize, the game industry is growing at an astonishing rate. The qualities of computer games give them a level of immersion which is impossible to replicate in any other artistic/literary genre. Computer games' graphical qualities are reaching a point where it is almost impossible to distinguish them from reality. Each new game engine gives developers more tools to work with and create gameplays and storylines which captivate hundreds of millions of gamers. And yet game studies is a rare academic field. Faculties and universities are not willing to spend their budgets on computer games. The phrase "computer games" implies childishness, toxicity, and waste of time:

The negative image of computer games, however, is not restricted to the representation, performance, and virtual acts of violence and their effects. Computer games are still considered to be a time-consuming occupation that supports no cultural gratification (knowledge, intellectual reflection, basic life skills) except for the mere pleasure of playing. Compared with other forms of media culture (internet, TV, movies, radio), whose products are more likely to be credited with the ability to advance cultural needs, computer games are still regarded as trivial and one-dimensional activities that serve only as diversions. Above all, computer games are supposed to be addictive and accompanied by social isolation. Finally, despite recent empirical findings, playing

computer games is still classified as a childish or adolescent activity (Jahn-Sudmann & Stockmann 2008: VIX).

### 3. Objectives of the Study

Rarely art/literary critics are willing to study computer games as works of art/literature. Rarer still are researchers who apply literary theories to computer games in order to extract specific readings. Even though its scope is limited to a single game, this article strives to address these shortcomings. As such it considers games works of art/literature and worthy of literary criticism and study. This article applies the theories of Edward Said, specifically Democratic Criticism and Orientalism, to *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* in order to demonstrate that like any work of art/literature, computer games can be subjected to the vagaries of neocolonialism and Orientalism.

### 4. The History of Call of Duty Franchise

The First installment in the *Call of Duty* franchise, *Call of Duty I*, was released in 2003. The game is set during the Second World War. The single-player campaign is based on various Allied operations across Africa, Europe, and Russia. The game is divided into three chapters: the American, the British, and the Soviet Union. Each chapter has a dedicated protagonist and independent IDN, i.e., besides their historical milieu, the chapters have no connection to each other. The game attempts to simulate combined warfare. The gamer takes control of the protagonists and with the help of A.I.-controlled NPCs (non-playable characters), tries to defeat enemy soldiers and complete the missions. The game has received universal praise and has won several awards. By 2022, Activision had sold 4.5 million copies of the game worldwide (Oguntola 2022).

The second installment of the series, *Call of Duty II*, was released in 2005. The game's historical milieu is the Second World War. The single-player campaign is divided into three chapters, the Soviet Union, the British, and the American. The chapters are independent of each other and have dedicated protagonists. Similar to the first installment, the gamer takes control of the protagonists and with the aid of A.I.-controlled NPCs tries to complete certain objectives in order to progress to the next mission. The game has received universal acclaim and is one of the most popular games of all time. By 2022, Activision had sold 5.9 million copies of the game worldwide (Oguntola: 2022).

The third installment of the franchise, *Call of Duty III*, was released in 2006. Similar to its predecessors, the game is set during the Second World War. Once again, the gamer takes control of one of the protagonists and with the aid of A.I.-controlled NPCs tries to defeat the enemies and accomplish the mission objectives. Similarly, the game is divided into independent chapters with dedicated protagonists. By 2022, Activision had sold 7.2 million copies of the game worldwide (Oguntola 2022).

But here is where the similarities end. The third installment has a vital difference from its predecessors. The game has four chapters instead of three. The developers replaced the already well-established Red Army/Soviet campaign of the franchise with the Canadian and Polish campaigns. One may speculate as to why the developers made this decision. For example, certain historians have complained that the media in its various forms, has always focused on the contributions of the Americans, the British, and the Russians to the Second World War and has neglected the contributions of other nations; like the Commonwealth nations, e.g., Canada, or the resistance fighters of the occupied nations, e.g., Poland (Felton 2023). The developers might have been swayed by these arguments and decided to break away with tradition in order to recognize the sacrifices of other nations during the Second World War.

Also, and this is more likely, the developers wanted to placate the critics. A number of game critics have accused the franchise of whitewashing the history of the Second World War (Taylor 2019). Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union had an official non-aggression pact (The Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact). Furthermore, before Operation Barbarossa (1941), they were unofficial military allies and trade partners, e.g., Nazi Germany imported almost all of its grain and oil from the Soviet Union. The two nations had carved the world into spheres of influence. As the Nazis invaded Eastern Europe and Scandinavia from the west, the Soviets did the same from the east (Kennedy 1987: 275). The *Call of Duty* franchise never mentioned these facts. Nor did it recognize the other atrocities the Allies committed after the Army/Soviet Union turned the tide of war in favor of the Allies. The franchise actively depicts a false picture of the Allies' activities during the Second World War. As such, it is probable that instead of illustrating a more historically accurate game, the developers simply decided to remove the Red Army/Soviet campaign.

Although probably accurate, the above-mentioned arguments about the removal of the Red Army/Soviet campaign are still speculations. Unless the developers come forward and clarify the reasons behind this decision, no one can prove any of these statements. What can be factually proven, however, is that *Call of Duty III* paved the way for the demonization of Muslims and Russians in the next installments of the game.

The fourth installment of the franchise and the subject of this article, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* was released in 2007. It has several major differences from its predecessors. First, its historical milieu is no longer the Second World War but the post-9/11 world. It only has two campaigns, American and British. While each campaign has a dedicated protagonist, they are not independent from each other. Instead, they are part of a single cohesive IDN. Most importantly, the game is culturally and politically charged. It demonizes Muslims and Russians and presents a positive view of the War on Terror. The game is universally praised for its gameplay and realism. By 2022 Activision had sold 15.3 million copies of the game worldwide (Oguntola 2022).

## 5. Research Methodology

One cannot simply use the words “narrative,” “plot” or “storyline” in order to describe what the gamer experiences during a single-player campaign. When reading a novel or watching a film, the order of the words or scenes does not change based on the preferences of the reader or the audience. However, in computer games, the gameplay changes based on the decisions the gamer makes. When playing a game, the gamer can change a wide array of options, e.g., kill NPCs or ignore parts of the gameplay. As a result, several critics prefer to use the phrase “interactive digital narrative” or (IDN), instead of words such as “narrative,” “plot” or “storyline.” IDN correctly demonstrates that the relationship between the game and the gamer is a complex give-and-take which changes both of them.

The inherently playful, detached vocabulary of [computer] games allows neither the gamer nor the game designer complete control over the experience. This establishes a novel exchange between creator and consumer, producer and receiver, sender and reader. More poetically described, playing a game is closer to “living inside a symphony than reading a book or watching a movie” (Van Dreunen 2008: 9).

As such this article uses the acronym “IDN” in order to describe what the gamer experiences when he/she plays the single-player campaign.

This article utilizes a multi-leveled narrational approach in order to analyze the game’s IDN. Such an approach is needed because while games can be works of art/literature, the act of playing a game is widely different from reading a book or watching a film. First, the gamer does not engage the game on simple textual and visual levels. He/she consciously and subconsciously interacts with its mechanics. Game mechanics are “any action performed by [the gamer] that modifies the game state, that is, the position and specific characteristics of all objects and environments present in the game at a precise moment in time” (Tokio 2023). It is important to note that one cannot separate the game mechanics from the IDN. The gamer experiences the IDN through game mechanics and the IDN in turn can change the game mechanics. To conclude, one must recognize that the act of gaming is a give-and-take between the game and the gamer. The game’s IDN cannot be examined in isolation. The IDN must be investigated in conjunction with the game mechanics.

Second, playing games has deep emotional consequences. Certain critics have argued that one of the main characteristics of gaming is “the separation from consequence” (Van Dreunen 2008: 6). This means the gamer is not punished for the choices he/she makes during the gameplay. After all, he/she can replay the game. While this statement is correct for some games, there are also numerous games which emotionally punish the gamer for the choices he/she

makes. This phenomenon usually takes place in RPGs (role-playing games). However, it can happen in FPS games as well. The level of immersion and the loss of self in the game gives an unprecedented sense of joy or grief to the gamer. The ending of a game can cause a sense of loss, mental numbness, and even hardship in dealing with the reality of everyday life. For example, in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*, the death of the American protagonist, Sergeant Paul Jackson, and later in the game, two of the NPCs, Captain Price and Gaz, extremely shocked the gamers. By interacting with the game mechanics and experiencing the IDN, the gamer becomes emotionally attached to NPCs and protagonists. When a beloved NPC or protagonist dies, as they frequently do in *Call of Duty*, gamers usually experience a wide array of negative feelings:

Video games incorporate a creative dimension that represents the ‘cultural layer.’ In computer code such aesthetic differences are meaningless, but they are not on the level of human interface and experience. So, what we see is a ‘cultural interface,’ because ‘we are no longer interfacing to a computer but to culture encoded in digital form.’ On a micro-level, the extensive character grooming – the continuous organization of the abilities, items, weapons, etc. of an avatar, is equal to, if not more important than, meeting the requirements for successful completion of the game (Van Dreunen 2008: 8).

Gamers enjoy deeper emotions because the act of gaming is far more immersive than the act of reading or watching. To argue that gaming is emotionally inconsequential belies the complexity and interactivity of computer games. The mental and sensory experience of games is vastly different from other forms of art/literature. The immersion, loss of self, and suspension of disbelief are so different that each of these terms needs new understanding within the context of computer games. The audience does not just empathize with the characters as in a film or novel. He/she becomes the protagonist, with choices of body type, gender, voice, and a multitude of other choices. The gamer can create a protagonist who resembles him/herself. The gamer can romance other characters, and choose how to speak with them, with consequences for each of the decisions he/she makes. Choosing the wrong dialogue can change the ending from a happy one to a tragic one, where the protagonist whom the gamer has so carefully created and developed, may die:

Computer and video games go beyond mere ludic experiences but include elements of fantasy play, character identification, and narrative immersion. Deeper immersion generally makes for a better game. Properly deployed, references to real or fictional worlds within the player’s experience, careful reuse of



in-game locations, aggressive and creative use of believable and mimetic in-game signifiers, and a consistent approach to architecture and design will all serve to enhance the immersive qualities of a game (Berger 2008: 54).

A number of critics have argued that computer games' IDNs are so thin and unbelievable that they cannot be put in the same category as novels, short stories, and other works of fiction:

Narratives in computer games have drawn criticism for their insufficient complexity. Janet Murray (1997, p. 51) comments on the lack of story depth in computer games and notes that, even in very popular games, the plot is often so thin that it is difficult, if not impossible, to adapt the games into successful movies (Herbst 2008: 75).

One cannot argue that all IDNs are thin and without artistic/literary worth. These critics often use the *Doom* franchise, another famous FPS, to “prove” this point. These critics contend that *Doom* is full of repetitive action. Apparently, *Doom* is simplistic, unsophisticated, and without any narrative depth. Furthermore, it is written in code which is an “unnatural” language (Herbst 2008: 75). However, the latest installment of the game, *Doom Eternal* (2020), has an extremely rich IDN. The game actively comments on the decline of traditional religions, the popularity of new age movements, the worthlessness of human lives in the face of corporate capitalism, and even the woke movements (the game repeatedly tells the gamer to not call the supernatural enemies, “demons” but “mortally challenged”). The game produces an engaging post-apocalyptic environment. As such, “it is a serious mistake to underestimate [computer games] by regarding them from the viewpoint of naïve representational thinking, as a mere series of images and sounds that function as signifiers of a [poorly implemented] fictional world” (Cain 2008: 57).

Third, the act of gaming is repeatable and each repetition is a unique experience. One might read a book or watch a film several times. But unless one has misread or misinterpreted the said book or film completely, the act of rereading or rewatching will only be marginally different. This is not the case in computer games. The gamer is capable of changing a vast number of gaming elements. And each change results in a different experience than the previous gameplay. Modern RPGs can have up to 30 different endings. Every simple decision made by the gamer affects the ending. While *Call of Duty* games always have one ending, they have other elements which change the gamer's experience:

... a game designer merely hands a player the raw materials

with which to create or destroy harmony within the game reality. This is not unlike how a soccer coach deploys players or an army commander his soldiers. Thus, not only the design and production of a computer game but also its reception and consumption have to be considered as an active, interpretive, and social event (Van Dreunen 2008: 10).

Games can be played in different ways. Each gameplay is different from the previous. This replayability potential gives games significant cultural and social power. Games can be used to disseminate different types of cultural discourses. They have significant artistic/literary potential. This potential can be used in negative and positive ways.

Finally, characters in computer games (NPCs) are intractable. Excepting certain theatrical traditions in which the audience (spectators) can engage the actors, no artistic/literary genre allows the reader/spectator to actively interact with the work of art/literature. This is not the case in computer games. Gamers can interact with the NPCs of the game. The fate of NPCs can be cathartic for gamers. The death of Captain Price and Gaz in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*, shocked the gamers. A number of critics have argued that NPCs can be reduced to their functions. According to these critics, gamers do not care about their fate. However, during the past decade, NPCs have become increasingly complex and more important to the games' structures. From a purely theoretical standpoint, certain NPCs can be reduced to their functions, but from a narrational standpoint, their fates can change the IDN. The fates of NPCs can be the difference between a happy or a tragic ending. They influence the gamers' deepest feelings. Their deaths affect the gamers' emotions, usually deepening their bond to the games' overall structure. In the case of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*, it is a string of NPC deaths that shapes the game's overall IDN.

## 6. Discussion

This article supports the claim that computer games are the newest form of art/literature. Their IDNs can be treated as works of art/literature. Art/literary critics must carefully criticize and study computer games, not only in order to understand their effects on gamers but also to increase the body of the literary canon. This article asserts that different literary theories are applicable to computer games. However, this does mean that the application process should take place at a superficial textual level. Doing so will result in the misapprehension of computer games. The multi-leveled narrational approach, along with the appropriate artistic/literary theory will result in a correct understanding of computer games.

### 6.1. Orientalization of Gaming

Edward Wadie Said proposed the theory of Orientalism in 1979, during the disinte-

gration of traditional colonial powers and the Arab-Israeli Conflict. Said and other postcolonial activists were hopeful that the newly-formed postcolonial nations would be democratic, and free of metropolitan hegemony. This of course did not happen. The newly-formed postcolonial nations became tyrannical and thralls to the metropolis. Said gradually became disillusioned not only with the postcolonial nations but also with the possibility of change from within the metropolis (Said 2006). He lost all hope when 9/11 happened. He iterated his final beliefs about the metropolis and postcolonial nations in a book called *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2006). Both *Orientalism* and *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* are vital to this research. Utilizing the concepts Said proposed in these books, this article contends that Orientalism circulates itself through computer games. In order to do so, Orientalism uses three aspects of computer games; First, the repeatability (replayability) of computer gamers (explained above); second, gamers' emotional attachment to computer games (explained above); and third, familiar aesthetic imagery.

According to Said, Orientalism makes false statements about the Orient. Then repeats them through various media. As time passes, the false statements become historical "facts" or rather pseudofacts:

"Onto the character of [the prophet] ... was heaped a bundle of attributes... Since Mohammed was viewed as the disseminator of a false Revelation, he became... the epitome of lechery, debauchery, sodomy, and a whole battery of assorted treacheries, all of which derived "logically" from his doctrinal impostures. Thus, the Orient acquired representatives, so to speak, and representations, each one more concrete, more internally congruent with some Western exigency, than the ones that preceded it. It is as if, having once settled on the Orient as a locale suitable for incarnating the infinite in a finite shape, Europe could not stop the practice; the Orient and the Oriental became repetitious pseudo-incarnations of some great original (Christ, Europe, the West) they were supposed to have been imitating. Only the source of these rather narcissistic Western ideas about the Orient changed in time, not their character. Thus, we will find it commonly believed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that Arabia was on the fringe of the Christian world, a natural asylum for heretical outlaws, and that [the prophet] was a cunning apostate, whereas in the twentieth century an Orientalist scholar, an erudite specialist, will be the one to point out how Islam is no more than second-order Arian heresy" (Said 1978: 63).

*Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* begins in the Arabian Peninsula. The game repeatedly makes use of Orientalist elements. Gamers play the game over and over. They connect with each other to play the multiplayer. Orientalist discourses are vi-

sualized and revisualized: Muslims are barbaric; they do not understand democracy; they are a danger to themselves and the metropolis. The game becomes another media, like countless biographies, fantasies, novels, and short stories, which spread Orientalist discourses.

According to Said, the Orient has always acted as the imaginative and psychic background of the metropolis. Whatever the metropolis frowned upon or prohibited in public, it allowed within Orientalism's imaginative framework. If an author could not have several sexual partners in the metropolis, he could imagine Oriental harems and write about them in his novels. Or better still, he could travel to the Orient. The Orient became a psychic dumping ground for the metropolis. Similarly, after 9/11, if the metropolitan citizen could not cause destruction and violence in the Muslim diaspora, he could travel to the Orient and cause death and destruction there:

In the U.S., the hardening of attitudes, the tightening of the grip of demeaning generalization and triumphalist cliché, the dominance of crude power allied with simplistic contempt of dissenters and 'others,' has found a fitting correlative in the looting, pillaging, and destruction of Iraq's libraries and museums (Said 1978: 7).

Also, he/she could satiate his/her hatred of Muslims by playing the game. He/she can kill as many Muslims as he/she wants. He/she can destroy cars, ride a tank in the middle of a Muslim city, or even shoot paintings of the walls. The game is an emotional space where the metropolitan citizen/gamer can act out his wildest fantasies.

Orientalism uses familiar aesthetic imagery to reinforce its narratives. The metropolitan citizen/gamer may not be able to experience or understand the "real" Orient but he can read about it in a book or visualize it in a computer game.

The Orient, like the fierce lion, was something to be encountered and dealt with to a certain extent because the texts made that Orient possible. Such an Orient was silent, available to Europe for the realization of projects that involved but were never directly responsible to the native inhabitants, and unable to resist the projects, images, or mere descriptions devised for it... Such a relation between Western writing (and its consequences) and Oriental silence [is] the result of and the sign of the West's great cultural strength [and] its will to power over the Orient. But there is another side to the strength, a side whose existence depends on the pressures of the Orientalist tradition and its textual attitude to the Orient; this side lives its own life, as books about fierce lions will do until lions can talk back (Said 1987: 95).

Familiar aesthetic imagery means that while the events, locations, names, etc. of the game are fictional and created in a virtual space, they are inspired by or refer

to real events, locations, and names. For example, the American campaign starts in a fictional Muslim country. But there are such things as actual/real Muslim countries. In order to further strengthen the game's aesthetic imagery, the game zooms in and out of the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf. Interestingly enough, American soldiers repeatedly claimed that what they experienced during their tours of Afghanistan and Iraq reminded them of what they played in computer games.

The similarities in gaming and military training products can help explain why, in Michael Moore's 2004 documentary on the Iraq war... an American soldier notes that he anticipated the war to be more like a computer game. Likewise, in the U.S. bestseller *Generation Kill* (Wright), which documents American soldiers' experiences in the Iraq war, a Marine refers to games: "It felt like I was living in [a game] when I [saw] the flames coming out of windows, the blown-up car[s] in the streets, guys crawling around shooting at us" (Herbst 2008: 72).

As demonstrated in this section, the theories of Said can easily be applied to *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*. This article does not claim that Said's theories are applicable to all games. However, the majority of literary theories are applicable to computer games. Literary critics must carefully select the appropriate theory.

## 6.2. The Axis of Evil and Weapons of Mass Destruction

President George Walker Bush invented the concept of "the axis of evil" after the event of 9/11. The phrase referred to Iran, Iraq, and North Korea:

States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic (Bush 2002).

The metropolis expanded the concept of the "axis of evil" to include a wide array of nations, most of them Islamic. These "rogue nations" supposedly produced weapons of mass destruction and sponsored Islamic terrorism. The "conflict" between Islam and the "civilized" world became the most important political affair of the day (Said 2006). In order to prevent "Islamic terrorists" from gaining WMDs, The U.S.-led Coalition toppled the Ba'ath Regime in Iraq and the Taliban in Afghanistan. The "threat" of international Islamic terrorism intensified the metropolitan chauvinism. Orientalism associated Arabs and Muslims with the images of extremism, fundamentalism, and terrorism. Furthermore, Orientalism greatly enhanced the ideas of metropolitan (American/Western) exceptionalism.

*Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* visualized the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other parts of the Middle East. The gamification of deaths and destruction reinforced the ongoing “clash of civilizations.” While U.S. troops “cleared” Iraq from WMDs, *Modern Warfare* gamers did the same in the virtual space. The only difference between the real War on Terror and its gamification was the visualization of mass destruction. The developers used their artistic license to “portray” what President Bush spoke of. In the game, an atomic bomb explodes in the fictional Muslim nation and kills thousands of American troops, including the American protagonist. Several ICBMs are launched towards the East Coast but the British protagonist neutralizes them before they reach their targets. These images, played by millions of gamers, associated Islam and Arabs with WMDs. The American troops found no WMDs in Iraq but the gamers could visualize what could happen if Muslims actually had them; Countless metropolitan lives would be lost:

Islam came to symbolize terror, devastation, the demonic [and] hordes of hated barbarians. For Europe, Islam was a lasting trauma... The ‘Islamic peril’ lurked alongside Europe [which] represented the whole of Christian civilization... In time [the] European civilization incorporated that peril and its lore, its great events, figures, virtues, and vices, as something woven into the fabric of life (Said 1978: 59).

### 6.3. **Khaled Al-Asad: The Muslim Par-Excellence**

Khaled Al-Asad is the secondary antagonist of the game. According to Captain Price, he is the second most powerful man in the Middle East. The game does not say who the most powerful man in the Middle East is. Although he shares a family name with Bashar Al-Asad, Khaled Al-Asad is inspired by Muammar Al-Ghaddafi and Saddam Hussain at the height of their power. The military dress, the beret, the sunglasses, and the fiery speeches against the metropolis are some of the similarities Al-Asad shares with the two Arab dictators. He addresses his followers in Arabic. Here is the translation of his speech:

Today, we rise again as one nation, in the face of betrayal and corruption! We all trusted this man to deliver our great nation into a new era of prosperity. But like our monarchy before the Revolution, he has been colluding with the West with only self-interest at heart! Collusion breeds slavery! And we shall not be enslaved! The time has come to show our true strength. They underestimate our resolve. Let us show that we do not fear them. As one people, we shall free our brethren from the yoke of foreign oppression! Our armies are strong, and our cause is just. As I speak, our armies are nearing their objectives, by which we will restore the independence of a once great nation. Our noble crusade has begun. Just as they lay waste to our country, we shall lay waste to theirs. This is how it begins (Mattone

2021).

Also, like Ghaddafi and Hussain, he is a military strongman who rises to power through a coup d'état. Within the context of Orientalism, Al-Asad is the Arab/Muslim par excellence. He is armed (with a WMD); he is dangerous, he is violent and most importantly, he hates the metropolis. One can take a cursory look at the game's IDN and its visual effects and realize that there is no difference between what Orientalism advocates about Islam and how the game depicts Muslims through Al-Asad and his followers. The game uses shock value imagery in order to dehumanize Muslims. The gamer sees Muslims (Al-Asad's soldiers) shooting civilians at point blank. He/she sees Muslims siccing dogs on civilians and using WMDs to kill millions of people, including thousands of American soldiers. The game mechanics reinforce the same idea since the gamer has to fight and kill hordes of armed Muslims. It must be noted that the game associates the Arabic language with danger. The first WMD has Arabic instructions. Al-Asaad gives his speeches in Arabic. As the gamer takes control of the American protagonist, he constantly hears Arabic:

Arabic as a language is a dangerous ideology... Arabic is characterized by general vagueness of thought, overemphasis on linguistic signs, overassertion, and exaggeration... The Arab is a sign for dumbness combined with hopeless overarticulativeness, poverty combined with excess (qtd. in Said 1978: 320).

The game depicts a bleak image of Arabs and Muslims. The aesthetic imagery of the game creates a level of immersion that no Orientalist artist, author, or director can dream of. No artistic/literary genre can match the depth of Orientalist indoctrination games can produce.

#### **6.4. Yasir Al-Fulani: The Futility of Islamic Democracy**

Yasir Al-Fulani is the democratically elected president of the fictional Muslim nation and the first victim of Al-Asad. The gamer views the atrocities Muslims commit through his eyes as he is dragged across the battle-ridden streets and onto national television in order to be publicly executed. During the cutscene, which includes Al-Asad's anti-metropolitan speech, Al-Fulani watches his supporters being slaughtered; yet he remains completely silent. He does not utter a single word. His silence during the game is in stark contrast to the constant bombardment of the gamer with Al-Asad's speeches. In Arabic and Persian, the word "fulani" is a placeholder word. This means that the word can take the place of proper names. The word can be roughly translated to "anyone", "someone" and, "no one." According to Orientalism, a democratic Muslim is an aberration. Islam by its very nature cannot be democratic. A democratic Muslim is either dead or silent. There is no such thing as a free and democratic Muslim. Thus Al-Fulani and his supporters are deviants and are killed and

silenced by the real Muslims (Al-Asad and his followers):

“The Oriental is imagined to feel his world threatened by a superior civilization; yet his motives are impelled, not by some positive desire for freedom, political independence, or cultural achievement on their terms, but instead by rancor or jealous malice” (Said 1978: 249).

### 6.5. Islam and Russia

The true antagonist of the game, however, is not Al-Asad but Imran Zakhaev, a Russian general and an ultranationalist, not dissimilar to President Vladimir Putin. He is the puppet master behind the puppet (Al-Asad). He is also the mastermind behind the Russian civil war. He is the one who gives WMDs to Al-Asad. And here lies the great irony of Orientalism. It creates a myriad of negative images of Arabs and Muslims but in the end, it claims that Arabs and Muslims are cowards: They are a formless mass of pseudo-humans; They lack agency and the desire for action (either good or evil). However, they can be intimidated to do evil, as is the case with Al-Asad and Zakhaev. Al-Asad’s name is also symbolic. His name means “lion” in Arabic, the symbol of chivalry and bravery in Islam. But according to the game, he is a coward (Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2003). He is not capable of doing anything. Someone must be behind his actions. This “someone” turns out to be Zakhaev.

The relationship between Al-Asad and Zakhaev is the relationship between two evil fictional individuals. One may argue that fiction does not translate into reality. However, the issue of Russian influence in the Middle East is an actual problem for the metropolis. According to Orientalism, Russia can have undue influence over Islamic nations. As Muslims are incapable of making decisions for themselves, it falls to the metropolis to not allow Russia to take hold of the Middle East and its resources. Whatever the metropolis does in order to control Muslims and neutralize Russia is justified. It is not evil to destabilize the region, use gunboat diplomacy, or “preemptively” strike against “rouge” Islamic nations. The game never explains why the U.S. attacks the fictional Arab nation. It cannot be for the sake of democracy in the Middle East as the staunchest allies of the U.S. are all dictators. It attacks the fictional Muslim nation in order to control the region. Al-Asad’s use of WMDs proves that Russia and Islam make an extremely dangerous combination. This article by no means defends the military and political action of Russia. Russia itself has a long and sordid history of Imperialism and Orientalism. What this article claims is that according to Orientalism, Arabs, and Muslims lack agency and are incapable of critical thinking.

## 7. Conclusion

In his final book Said advocated for a new humanistic Renaissance across the world. He never argued for the censorship of books and other media which advocated Ori-



entalist narratives. Similarly, this article does not advocate for the censorship of computer games which spread pro-metropolitan messages. *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* is a work of art/literature. Its IDN is nuanced and its gameplay is artistically beautiful. Its IDN is worthy of literary criticism and study. This statement is the aim of this article; to show that like any other work of art/literature, computer games can be susceptible to Orientalism. They are not exempt from the overwhelming power of Orientalism. As such they must be carefully studied and their inner workings exposed to academic scrutiny. It is the duty of art/literary critics to analyze games. *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* was published during the heyday of the War on Terror. It benefited from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* allowed gamers to experience the reality of modern warfare in a safe psychic-virtual space. But by doing so, the game also spread pro-metropolitan and Orientalist narratives. Its game mechanics and IDN reinforced the false imagery of Orientalism. The game allowed Orientalism to reach millions of people around the globe. It allowed Orientalism to do what it does best; to vilify Arabs and Muslims.

In his final book, Said advocated for a global humanistic Renaissance across the world. He did not support the censorship of media which promote Orientalist discourses. Similarly, this article does not advocate for censoring computer games that spread pro-metropolitan messages. This article *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* is a work of art/literature, with a nuanced IDN and visually appealing gameplay. This article tries to highlight that, like any other genre of art/literature, computer games are susceptible to Orientalism. As such researchers should carefully analyze and study them. *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* was published during the War on Terror. Its developers benefited from the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. The game allowed gamers to experience modern warfare safely. However, it also perpetuated pro-metropolitan and Orientalist discourses, reinforcing negative stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims.

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