

# Military Entertainment After 9/11: A Case Study on Call of Duty Modern Warfare Franchise

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**Abstract.** The Call of Duty franchises are renowned for being the best-selling first-person shooter games globally and boast the highest number of concurrent players worldwide. The franchise has significantly impacted the creation of war narratives, particularly about heroism and values exported from the United States. Notably, Call of Duty: Modern Warfare (CoD: MW) was the first series to exhibit the characteristics and iconography of a modern war film. This study examines the narrative themes and structural components of the Call of Duty: Modern Warfare series since 9/11. The interaction of the 'dangerous frontier' has not been directly discussed in Call of Duty narratives, as a result of the combination of Bush's defense policy, economic globalization, and neoliberalism in the post-9/11 era. The study revealed that the game design and narrative of Call of Duty Modern Warfare relies on a dichotomy of "dangerous borders," where audiovisual technology, storytelling, and cultural symbols are employed to starkly distinguish between advanced attributes within the borders and barbaric mapping outside of them. The game also disseminates values of just war which are based on the American Exceptionalism Theory. Meanwhile, recent research has revealed a stronger correlation between narrative changes within the Call of Duty: Modern Warfare franchise over the past five years and recruitment advertising with war entertainment, and that this dynamic has reduced the impact of narrative styles within the media in the post-9/11 era.

**Keywords:** Video games; Call of Duty, war entertainment.

## 1. Introduction

As of June 2022, the first-person shooter Call of Duty has grossed \$30 billion and is one of the best-selling video games in the world [1]. There is a wealth of research based on the relevance of first-person shooters for political decision-making and adolescent audiences [2]. Much of the research on Call of Duty based on media psychology has focused on the moral choices present in the game and the relationship between violent behavior and adolescents [3]. Renic states that Call of Duty can satisfy a progressively expanding population for war culture consumption [4]. The Call of Duty enhances citizens' understanding of war. Payne suggests Call of Duty's storytelling is intentionally designed to relate to real-life war conflicts [5]. Call of Duty's focused narrative model based on the first-person perspective has been widely used in the propaganda of other military actions. Several studies examined the role of legal justice in video games, revealing significant differences between the nature of modern warfare and the laws of war. Electronic entertainment is strongly associated with "Virtuous Wars" and the post-9/11 era has laid the foundation for much of the artistic aesthetic of video games [6]. Much of the research has focused on the Call of Duty series based on World War II themes, but a more comprehensive interpretation of recent Modern Warfare series is lacking. The lack of research has led to fewer current examinations of the direct connection between geopolitics and video game narratives in the post-9/11 period.

The events of 9/11 destroyed the naïve assumption of American society that terrorist events were isolated from it and led to the creation of mass anxiety and vengeance from society to governmental policymaking bodies [7]. Conservative Bush Doctrine military policies were linked to the neo-liberal trend of economic globalization, to create a "dangerous periphery" that would divide the world in two. The military-industrial-entertainment complex creates three-dimensional conditions for public opinion about the war on terror, and the persistent allusions to "terror" play an essential role in the War on Terror propaganda [6]. Warrior geopolitics and imperial warfare are themes in post-9/11 cinematic narratives, and moral status is affirmed for warriors engaged in combat overseas [7]. Nearly

two-thirds of players in a survey indicated that contextual realism and historical recollections were critical in enjoying the game [8]. Politicians and strategists reach for the necessity of spreading neoliberal ideas and advocating using force by portraying the world outside the global economic sphere as a barbaric region [9]. War-themed games, including Call of Duty, can attract potential young people who wish to join the military [4].

The research seeks to understand how the Call of Duty Modern Warfare series references the political culture of the post-9/11 era and translates these cultural ideas and symbols into storytelling, visual, and aural art with technology. On the other hand, the study captures the narrative differences between the old Modern Warfare and the new Modern Warfare series and examines the factors inherent in this shift in the storytelling paradigm.

## **2. The Case Study: Call of Duty Modern: Warfare Franchise**

### **2.1. The Transmedia Narration between Games and Films**

Call of Duty is the world's best-selling first-person shooter franchise published by Activision Blizzard in the United States. Call of Duty stories are drawn from the history of hot or cold wars directly related to the United States over the past one hundred years. The Call of Duty: Modern Warfare (CoD: MW) series, directly related to the culture of war in the post-9/11 era, is selected as the primary case study for this research. The first Call of Duty: Modern Warfare, published in 2007, is a direct outgrowth of the influence of war game narratives on the events of 9/11, with a gradual shift in the paradigm of war entertainment from World War II to the War on Terror [10]. A total of six Call of Duty titles from 2007 to 2023 used the Modern Warfare story context.

The theme of transmedia narratives in war entertainment changed dramatically due to 9/11, with video games, movies, and television series focusing more on telling stories of the war on terror. Unlike war films or documentaries that attempt to 'shut down' the memory through documentary re-enactment, Call of Duty allows the player to re-open the memory in the first person through the act of re-experiencing it in the context of computer technology and the internet [2]. Players could experience this lucrative historical narrative in a relatively comfortable, highly interactive state. Video games have "engaged" Americans of all ages in the War on Terror, and Gish examines the narrative significance of early Call of Duty, which is closely tied to the context of World War II [2]. Compared with CoD on World War II, the 'historicity' of the Modern Warfare series virtually evaporated as the player is playing a current, modern-based picture of war, engaging in a direct witnessing of the war on terror and the environment in which it is lived, a gaming experience that occurs in tandem with realities [8]. The game story is based on a dichotomous depiction of the world's geopolitical map that the Bush Doctrine and the neoliberalism espoused by the global economic system work together and generate: the world is divided into civilized regions within its borders and barbaric zones outside of them based on the neoliberal economic order.

In the aftermath of 9/11, Hollywood and game developers have shifted their creative themes from the Second World War to an ambiguous picture of modern warfare. Models of war based on territorial sovereignty and regime stability have been displaced by modern warfare without stable rules of engagement. The game's characters carry out military operations or infiltration missions in various parts of the globe in the context of a larger narrative of the War on Terror, with the core objective of defending the civilized world. This definition of the civilized world is derived from the depiction of dangerous perimeters in the post-9/11 period [11].

### **2.2. Supportive Technologies and Historical Contexts for Transmedia Narratives**

Home consoles and personal computers developed from the computer development and sales boom that originated in Silicon Valley in the 1960s. Introducing inexpensive, portable, and privatized personal computers into American homes provided the hardware for the game market. Video games are irrefutably recognized as an emerging art due to the same aesthetic experience and purpose as other art genres [12]. Video games have also become an important form that fills an expressive void

impossible in traditional art. Imagery is the most important means of communicating ideas in video games, and the more precise the pixels are in a limited unit of video equipment, the more tangible the idea communicated by the game becomes [13]. Another impetus for richer video games stems from the other media [14]. George Lucas and Spielberg were ambitious in their intentions to use established movie franchises and story scripts to create games. In the 21st century, video games have a similar hardware base regarding media audiovisual technology. They also had a common creative approach to commercial competition and publicity. From the management perspective, video games, television, movies, and the streaming media industry have maintained a close relationship, similar in the return-on-investment model, management methods, technology, and human resources composition. In the early days, Hollywood studios and Nintendo partnered to produce Super Mario movies to lure gamers into movie theaters. This strategy seems to lack insight into media channel connections today, but it has been a bold business attempt, considering how different the disciplines of television and film studies are. The Star Wars franchise reinforces the adoption of business models based on transmedia narratives, with millions of consumers across the planet repeatedly enjoying, interpreting, and even creating new stories and experiences belonging to Star Wars in front of a screen, in movie theaters, in comic bookstores, at anime parties, and game consoles. This concept is explained by Jenkins as "the movement of narrative content across media channels" [14].

Unlike the sci-fi aesthetic of Star Wars, Call of Duty Modern Warfare tells a more realistic story. The rapid response to 9/11 issues and cooperation from the U.S. government and film production organizations on public opinion campaigns has built a lucrative war entertainment machine over the decades, and it was not long after 9/11 that the Motion Picture Association of America began communicating with the White House about the "War on Terror." Just as they had supported U.S. involvement in World War II half a century earlier, Hollywood would fully support the War on Terror with public opinion campaigns [10]. War movies like *The Sum of All Fears* and *Black Hawk Down* were accelerated and geared toward audiences in the case of 9/11. There has been a significant increase in the number of war movies created based on stories of U.S. soldiers deployed to Iraq, Afghanistan, or Somalia. The Motion Picture Classification Board and other film review organizations played an essential role in recasting games as "cinematic" content. Some government agents and media researchers at the time valued the educational opportunities and the ability of video games to promote nationalism [7]. The story of Call of Duty, the method of distribution, is thought to stem from the cultural strategy established during the Bush administration: Future designs for games will be evaluated and constructed primarily based on the aesthetic and ideological foundations of films [10].

Indeed, such ideologies are essentially derived from the national strategic security system constructed by the Bush Doctrine [11]. A preventative, preemptive, and proactive counter-terrorism strategy is established, and intelligence divisions are empowered [15]. Military operations traditionally waged since territorial integrity were deemed inapplicable to today's context, and over 60,000 US soldiers were deployed to the Middle East in the ten months following 9/11 to protect the security of the free world in the guise of foreign warfighting and maintaining regional stability.

### **2.3. Dichotomous Stories Characteristics of Call of Duty: Modern Warfare Narratives**

The story of CoD: MW follows the dichotomous portrayal of geographic setting and cultural environment. The story takes place in a hostile, exotic environment or a war based on the capitalist cityscape. When the first Modern Warfare unfolds, the protagonist of the game's campaign, Captain Price, and other SAS Special Forces team members raid a medium-sized cargo ship traveling in the Pacific Ocean in the middle of an electrifying night. There are no rules of engagement for this battle, no civilians, no hostages, just an entire shipload of radioactive nuclear material that threatens the security of the world and Russian-speaking armed men. The operations were kept strictly secret, and no diplomatic note was required for the government to send military personnel to the outside world; the government and the military were not held accountable for these actions. They acquire intelligence in secret and strike preemptively and proactively against international terrorism. The rationalization

of this formal style and story stems from the sentiment of righteous vengeance born of the war on terror in the post-9/11 era and the game's symbolic simplification of the real, complex battlefield.

Combat scenes in the "savage world" are direct expressions of a documentary-based vision of the post-9/11 war on terror narrative. Dalby analyzes the case of Ridley Scott, a key contributor to war films in the post-9/11 era [8]. Against the context of remilitarization based on political anxiety, warriors are dispatched to fight in foreign lands. They are required to confront gloriously exotic cultures and dangerous surroundings. The Warriors, on the other hand, are presented in the film as crucial figures in the protection of Western society in a logistical sense, exclude terrorism from the civilized world and become symbols of virtues [9]. Due to the consultants of military personnel, modern warfare comes close to realistically presenting the actual performance of combat troops overseas, including weapons usage, rules of engagement, and conversations that align with the military culture. In these scenarios, masculinity and the cult of strength become the dominant constitutive language. Movies and games often mask the violence of war by highlighting the brotherhood of soldiers. Some scenarios present the close-knit combat system of U.S. military units, such as the supportive cultures of the Army and Air Force. In contrast, the "enemies of freedom" are also symbolized, and a picture of Middle Eastern cities and Muslim culture based on American filters and memories of the War on Terror recurs throughout the game. Based on this dangerous border, the striking difference between the free world and the barbaric zone is implied to be a cultural necessity, even though the level of socio-cultural and economic advancement of countries and regions is a complex issue

Combat in the "civilized world" contains a mapping of the attacks on Western societies in the post-9/11 era. Cities with capitalist solid attributes have been used as the setting for many of the war stories of the post-9/11 era. This concept is carried into the modern American urban landscape in war games as the transportation links, such as highways and airlines, continued to extend from the major cities to the periphery. Some cities, like New York, were abstracted into miniature cultural symbols [16]. Stalingrad, once the "city not to be lost" of the Second World War, has been replaced by New York (economy), Washington (politics), the Pentagon (military and intelligence), or London and Paris (Western allies). While no game, movie, or television production directly references 9/11 as a subject matter, the event paradigm of 9/11 is constantly encoded, transcribed, and hidden in other works based on public sentiment. New York became a symbol of freedom chosen by capitalism and consumer mania. London and Paris were also given this nature. New York was shaped after 9/11 as an abstract war meme in numerous games, a museum-like display for players to recreate. As shown in Fig 1, the "civilized world" combat occurs in seclusion, but the landmarks in the vision screen suggest that the player is in the hinterland of a developed region. Strong contrasts and tensions are built. The developers use sound effects and visionary images in these developed cityscapes to suggest the regularity of the city but also to warn the players that they are engaged in a dangerous operation. In CoD: MW 2019, a phrase is repeated by the main characters: We get dirty and the world stays clean.



**Fig 1.** A game sense in Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3(2011) [17].

This line justifies the game's protagonists' display of overstepping the boundaries of violence, exercised for righteous purposes. The violence exercised by characters, like that exercised by the

terrorists in the story, is dichotomized based on the original intentions of the people involved. Even this potential behavioral outcome will not be directly verified, which shows that the cruelty of some will create a cleaner world. Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 has been criticized for constructing a plot in which a British family and SWAT team are subjected to a planned suicide bomb attack. The stories alluded too obviously to the 2005 suicide bombing of the British subway system. In Modern Warfare 2019, the terrorists drive a van to detonate a bomb at Piccadilly Circus, and women and children are deliberately featured in the images. The terrorist attacks suggest real-life events form a mutually corroborating relationship with the fighting in the barbaric zone. Call of Duty Modern Warfare espouses American exceptionalism in its storytelling and symbolically presents the complex conflicts of the War on Terror through an imperialist lens and civilizational filters.

#### **2.4. Transmedia Technics in CoD: MW**

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare franchise keeps pace with the values and aesthetics of post-9/11 war movies by directly porting character sketches, plots, and geographical features that have appeared in Hollywood war movies. Video games offer a more flexible and varied framework for war narratives than movies, allowing multiple story scenes to be created in a single unit to portray the story and characters. Emerging video games are still based on the fundamental theories of cinematography and photographic techniques, and digital cameras still play an important role in game creation. Regarding management perspectives, technological advances have allowed modern warfare to create rich and exciting campaigns within a given amount of time and resources. Developers can reconstruct scenarios, plots, and stories in virtual worlds based on a cinematic aesthetic. Scenes from popular American movies have been moved into the game as smoothly as possible.

The main characters' design is derived from the war on terror movies and actual events. It is necessary to discuss the game's primary characters, secondary characters (NPCs), and negative portrayals in the game separately. CoD: MW centered around the military theme of portraying armed soldiers from multiple countries based on nationalities and a certain degree of stereotyping of these in-game soldiers. The protagonists of the games contain faciliated superhero-like qualities. To emphasize their facial features and macho qualities, they do not need to wear helmets in combat and "Die Hard." Images of crucial protagonists from movies like Black Hawk Down, Tears of the Sun, Double Sniper, and Bravely Default were carried over into Call of Duty characters. Some critical characters from real-life military operations of counter-terrorism agencies, such as the SAS, have also been used as prototypes woven into the story of CoD: MW. Call of Duty's character design is based on the War on Terror and reinforces the uniform culture and the cult of strength, which both villains and heroes practice. Military personnel provided the developers with character design input, and the game's secondary characters, especially the "Western Warriors," were well represented in terms of force culture symbols, dress, equipment design, and movement. CoD: MW 2019 utilizes motion capture to enhance these designs further.

Scenes from war movies and cultural symbols are carried into the game by modern warfare in large numbers. The study shows some pictures to present the similarities between these movies and the game. The similar scenarios for the story and characterization make the game consistent with the values of Hollywood war on terror movies. The game repeatedly draws on scenes from war movies by Ridley Scott and Michael Bay. Some of the war's satirical cultural symbols, such as the action code name "Charlie Does not Surf," pay homage to the 1980s war movie Heart of Darkness: Apocalypse Now, which alludes to the Vietnam War. Some of the campaign stories are based on influential war movies like Michael Bay's Thirteen Hours to Jeopardy and Sicario by Denis Villeneuve, respectively. These two films are known for their battle scenes in defense of the U.S. Embassy and conflicts in the U.S.-Mexico border.

### 3. A Shift in the Call of Duty Storytelling Paradigm

Group memories and perspectives based on the 9/11 disaster have dissipated as those who lived through the event have moved on, and new concepts have been introduced to the media industry. With the last U.S. troops leaving Afghanistan in 2021, the foremost military operations of the War on Terrorism have come to an end. The "Virtuous War," which was claimed to be a precise, low-casualty war, ended with massive casualties, economic losses, and a chaotic political situation in the region [6]. Discrimination against ethnic Arabs, Pakistanis, and Iranians since terrorist attacks in the United States has also been prominently discussed [18]. 9/11-based traumatizing stories have changed over two decades regarding the tellers and audiences, with filmmakers and game developers rapidly adapting and exporting new perspectives in an increasingly competitive environment. In this context, war entertainment culture's narrative and realist elements are slowly decoupled, and war stories and propaganda are presented in a more commercialized form. These post-9/11 foundations for shaping the warrior are challenged when modern warfare places the characters in a more fantastical storytelling context and implants their actions into a kind of comic book-style reenactment of heroism.

Recent releases of the latest CoD: MW (2019-2023) have begun to avoid direct engagement with post-9/11 narratives intentionally. The study focuses on the new Modern Warfare's role in the narrative paradigm. New game production engines and computer hardware have brought character and scene textures closer to reality, but the storytelling core has gradually disengaged from 9/11-style realism. Call of Duty Modern Warfare 2019 revived the Modern Warfare style story and rebooted all the significant characters from the past, both villain and villainess, surviving and dying. A few new characters have been added to the mix, and the fateful endpoint of the traditional character's story has been wholly overturned to enter a parallel world to wage another struggle, much like the maneuver Marvel movies have used over the years. The realism of the characters of the former Modern Warfare series attached to the culture of war was further diminished, while the superheroism these characters carried was further enhanced. The main characters of the new MW series are not sacrificed to create "defining moments," and a culture of "use it or lose it" that emerged after the Vietnam War has been stripped away [8]. Barry Sloane, the quintessential war movie actor, was tapped to play a significant role in Call of Duty, further blending what used to be a significant role with Hollywood celebrity culture to inspire commercial value.

Modern Warfare 2019 showcases a revolutionary graphical enhancement in the series, with richer, grander, and more detailed scenarios available for players to experience. For the first time, the game introduces cinematic aspect ratio over-length animations instead of the previous analog briefings. Over-length animations are based on motion capture technology and are played by real people. A notable change is the increased opportunity for the player to observe the main characters from a third-person perspective. The order in which the player subconsciously reads the game's content has changed: from "a character in combat fatigues with a gun creates heroic moments" to "a heroic character in combat fatigues with a weapon engages in combat." The "resurrection" of dead characters from past stories rejects the fatalism of the traditional military image and pushes these warriors toward commercial immortality. Like Spider-Man and Captain America, they do not, and will not, be expected to age. Another argument for the Marvelization of the new Modern Warfare is the "necessity of presence" of the story's themes. In old Call of Duty Modern Warfare, the identity of the player's character was tied to the setting based on the logic of realism and historical narrative. For example, the player takes on the role of a Ranger fighting in Afghanistan or a Delta Force unit conducting covert sabotage and decapitation missions. In real modern warfare, the division of labor between these warriors follows the same logic. They become ubiquitous and omnipotent when new modern warfare focuses on portraying the fictional Task Force 141. The necessity to exist based on abilities and image departs from the logic of reality in favor of superheroic photogenic opportunities.

#### 4. Intervention of Video Games in Military Promotion

Considering the strong connection between emerging technocrats in the modern force with video games [8]. The study examines the last five years of the Call of Duty: Modern Warfare franchise and U.S. military recruiting propaganda and examines the progressively stronger connections. 2021 marked the release of the latest recruiting propaganda video on goarmy.com, What is Your Warrior on the YouTube page [19]. Hundreds of millions of dollars in recruiting advertisements intend to reverse the poor outcomes of the past few years. Dozens of recruiting videos in multiple languages showcase the Army's different combat units to attract a diverse, multi-talented group of young Americans to join the force. This massive advertising effort portrays military service as video games. The new recruiting "campaign" targets young people in the online world, gamers, and live-streaming enthusiasts. Sweepstakes ads and enlistment tweets are quietly running on YouTube and Twitch to attract millions of gamers each night. Professional army-affiliated broadcasters sit in broadcast booths constructed with neon lights and flags, spending five to six hours a day playing Call of Duty and informing viewers about military benefits [20]. Although it is not the first time that CGI technology has been utilized to create military recruitment videos, there has not been any recruitment video released utilizing VFX and CGI technology that resembles a video game more than What's Your Warrior. The images of warriors are less based on a composite of the honest more like the virtual characters that operate in video games. What's your Warrior consciously references an image that will be viewed repeatedly in Battle Royale mode of CoD: MW.

Both Call of Duty and What's Your Warrior circa 2019 shift from a more practical, complex military entertainment narrative to a more virtual, comic book style, with a lack of consideration of the realistic relevance of the narrative context. U.S.-style recruiting campaigns exhibit incremental iterations over time and reduce the marginal cost of attracting high-level technical talents [21]. Over the past three decades, commercial advertising firms reshaped the obligatory didacticism of enlistment advertisements and broadcast models [22]. The agitprop narrative of enlistment deliberately shifted the center of the conversation from masculinity, war, and patriotism to steady income, reputation, and social benefits [23]. Although participation in the U.S. military is of vital interest to high-level talent from a variety of professions, the primary manpower source for enlistment comes from low- and middle-income Americans living in the U.S. as well as non-U.S. residents who have struggled with citizenship [24]. Based on the commercial perspective, the military and mental and physical toll that war takes on the ordinary soldier, including PTSD, bullying, and severe disabilities, are ignored [7]. Enlistment advertisements seem to further lower threshold expectations, such as receiving grueling training for those potential enlistees. Instead of scenes that exemplify those scenarios where hardship goes hand in hand with masculinity and the cult of the uniform, training, and combat, the new advertising narrative features fewer compelling connections between everyday life and military skills constructed using CGI technology. The draft ad campaigns of the past interacted dichotomously with military-political narratives and Hollywood structures; they were much more severe but aesthetically and ideologically indistinguishable from those of war movies. While Super Bowl air shows and patriotic events are still ongoing, the military has made their primary target teenagers who spend a lot of time watching or playing video games each day. Call of Duty and other similar first-person shooting games have been identified as potentially essential motivators for engaging youth in learning about and participating in the military [22].

#### 5. Conclusions

The narrative of the Call of Duty Modern Warfare franchise is shaped by the concept of a new strategic system of homeland defense led by the Bush administration in the post-9/11 era. It revolves around the war on terror and geopolitical disputes. The ideology and aesthetics of CoD: MW are captured by the Hollywood film industry, which has disseminated it widely worldwide through the highly developed Internet and computer information technology. The time, characters, and locations of the game's story strictly follow the "Dangerous Boundaries Theory," with the main characters

preventing and fighting terrorist attacks in the civilized world (capitalist cities), launching large-scale military operations, and accomplishing beheadings in the barbaric world overseas. The cinematic narrative provides public solid opinion support for the operation of the U.S. war machine for two decades and provides a picture of the free world based on capitalism. Finally, as the War on Terror ended, the relevance of modern war stories was intentionally curtailed and gradually shifted to Marvel-style superhero narratives to sustain commercial profitability. This gradual tendency to step into the virtual also spilled over into the more severe realm of military and cultural propaganda with the rise of Generation Z.

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