Brutal Games: Call of Duty and the Cultural Narrative of World War II

by Debra Ramsay

Abstract: World War II is the conflict that features most in first-person shooter (FPS) video games, but despite the rapid growth of this sector of the entertainment industry, the way in which the war is recalibrated in this format has been at best ignored, at worst dismissed. Concentrating particularly on Call of Duty: World at War (Activision, 2008), this article establishes how the FPS distills war into its most basic components—space and weaponry—and considers the possibility that the FPS exposes aspects of warfare that have been obscured in representations of World War II in other media.

In The Story of GI Joe (William Wellman, 1945), war correspondent Ernie Pyle gives names and backstories to the otherwise anonymous American soldiers trudging past him on a dusty road in Tunisia. Among them are Joe McCloskey, who used to pull sodas in the corner drugstore; Harry Fletcher, a budding lawyer; and Danny Goodman, who supplemented his income by working at the gas station while studying medicine. “Here they are,” says Pyle (Burgess Meredith), “guns in their hands, facing a deadly enemy in a strange and faraway land.” Explosions fill the sky, punctuating his speech as Pyle finishes talking. Pyle’s description and this scene encapsulate three elements central to representations of World War II in American media. The first is the citizen soldier, the ordinary Joe, Harry, or Danny, forced into swapping civilian life for a “baptism of fire,” as Pyle puts it, in foreign lands far from home. The second is implicit in Pyle’s description—the idea of World War II as not only a necessary war but also a virtuous one in which good and evil are easily distinguishable, and the American GI is unequivocally on the side of the former. The imagery of soldiers, weapons, and their spectacular effects are distinctive aesthetic markers that in turn define the third element—the visual construction of the war. In the past two decades, the citizen soldier has come to epitomize an entire generation, identified as the “Greatest Generation” because of its involvement in a conflict broadly characterized as a “good war.” From the books of journalist Tom Brokaw, who popularized the phrase “Greatest Generation,” to those of historian Stephen Ambrose, through films such as Saving Private Ryan (Steven Spielberg, 1998), U-571 (Jonathon Mostow, 2000), Windtalkers (John
Woo, 2002), and Flags of Our Fathers (Clint Eastwood, 2006), and television series such as Band of Brothers (HBO, Playtone, DreamWorks SKG, 2001) and its recent follow-up, The Pacific (2010), the United States’ popular narrative of World War II situates the GI as both primary protagonist and victim of the conflict.\textsuperscript{1} With a few exceptions (including Quentin Tarantino’s Inglourious Basterds [2009], which adopts a gleeful, revisionist approach to the conflict), the dominant narrative of the war highlights the nobility of fighting for “the man next to you” and celebrates the masculine bonds of brotherhood forged within the faraway and extreme spaces of the battlefield. The visual construction of the conflict is shaped through hypermediated exhibitions of contemporary digital technologies used in both film and television, forming an aesthetic signature based on the combination of a compelling re-creation of the “look” of wartime media and impressive displays of technical virtuosity. But while US citizen soldiers fought to save one another and the world in the World War II books, films, and television series of the past two decades, gamers have been fighting a different kind of war in digital games. I explore the ongoing evolution of the three central components identifiable in Wellman’s film in other forms of visual media elsewhere, but my concern in this article is with how the citizen soldier, the idea of World War II as America’s “good war” and the war as a visual construct, are reconfigured within a digital game form that is part of the fastest-growing sector of the entertainment industry—the first-person shooter (FPS).\textsuperscript{2}

Since the beginnings of the digital games industry, World War II has been the conflict of choice for games set in real-world conflicts. The dominance of World War II is particularly evident in the FPS. A recent study conducted by Johannes Breuer, Ruth Festl, and Thorsten Quandt concentrating only on FPSs, found that of those games set within a clearly identifiable conflict released between 1992 to early 2011, World War II games are in the clear majority, at around 62 percent. Games set in the Vietnam War account for the next highest percentage, trailing in at 16 percent.\textsuperscript{3} Breuer, Festl, and Quandt attribute the dominance of World War II in the FPS to a perceived lack of moral ambiguity and controversy in the conflict, making it commercially attractive to game developers, particularly in the United States.\textsuperscript{4} Games writer Scott Sharkey puts it a little more bluntly, referring to World War II as a “mythical ‘just war’” in which good and evil are easily distinguishable, and the latter can be destroyed without guilt—with Nazis ranking “just above robots and zombies on the list of evil things we can guiltlessly cap in the head.”\textsuperscript{5} However, gamers themselves suggest other reasons


\textsuperscript{2} Debra Ramsay, American Media and the Memory of World War II (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).


\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., 13.

for the dominance of World War II in the FPS. The scope of World War II means that the games can be set in a number of environments, ranging from jungles to beaches to urban cityscapes, thus facilitating different styles of gameplay. Playing as a sniper in the ruins of Stalingrad, for example, offers a different gaming experience from the close-quarters combat of the Pacific islands. In terms of weaponry, the unprecedented array of weapons available during World War II makes it ideal for the FPS, because, as one gamer puts it, “[i]t’s harder for a game designer to translate the subtle differences of modern weapons.” In other words, space and weaponry emerge as the primary components of what makes a “good” FPS in discussions of World War II games. But if World War II is particularly suited to the FPS, what is the FPS doing for the cultural narrative of World War II? What happens when the three elements that define the cultural narrative of World War II—the citizen soldier, the “good war,” and the war as a visual construct—are translated via a media technology that distills war into a series of contested environments explored primarily through the use and deployment of military hardware?

To answer these questions, I focus on one FPS in particular—Call of Duty: World at War (Activision, 2008). I begin with a brief overview of the development of the Call of Duty series to outline the place the series occupies within the mediated milieu of representations of World War II and to establish a context for World at War. Next, I move on to consider how World at War functions as a simulation of World War II, and to examine the impact of gameplay on the citizen soldier, the “good war,” and the visual construction of the war. Unlike representations of World War II in film and television, which have their share of academic champions, the FPS is frequently dismissed as having little to offer the history of World War II. Jerome de Groot, for example, observes that there is “nothing to be learned” from the kind of history presented in the Medal of Honor and Call of Duty franchises.7 Historian Niall Ferguson in turn goes so far as to state that he “hates” both series.8 My purpose in this article is not only to examine how the FPS recalibrates essential elements within the American narrative of World War II but also to investigate the possibility of whether the games facilitate engagement with aspects of the conflict’s narrative ignored or overlooked by representations in other media.

Call of Duty: Making War the Hero. To understand the gaming industry’s version of the cultural story of World War II and to establish what the Call of Duty franchise (Activision, 2003–) contributes to the popular narrative, it is necessary to explore, very briefly, the background to the franchise’s development. The history of Call of Duty is inextricably entangled with that of its principal rival in the FPS market, Medal of Honor (EA Games, 1999–), which is in turn connected to Saving Private Ryan (Steven Spielberg, 1998). Steven Spielberg approached publisher Electronic Arts (EA) with the core ideas

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6 VAN1LLA-G0R1LLA, comment on Sharkey, “Why WWII?,” August 14, 2009, http://www.1up.com/do/feature?cId =3175558,
7 Jerome de Groot, Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture (Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2009), 38.
and mission structures for the first *Medal of Honor* while in postproduction on *Saving Private Ryan* in 1997. As the company that suggested in the early years of its inception that the personal computer was more than “a medium for blasting aliens” and posed the question “Can a computer make you cry?,” EA was particularly compatible with Spielberg’s vision of a game that would allow gamers to enter the same world as the soldiers in *Saving Private Ryan.*

Up until the release of the first *Medal of Honor* in 1999, most World War II games were strategy based, with the notable exception of *Wolfenstein 3D* (ID Software, 1992), which popularized the FPS format and pioneered many of the features of the form. In contrast to the detached perspective of strategy games, or the quirky humor that characterized *Wolfenstein*, the *Medal of Honor* franchise opted for a different level of authenticity by integrating archival footage from the war and quotes from veterans to create a more fully rendered and complex game world. *Medal of Honor* was the first game to demonstrate that the FPS was capable of sustaining meaningful emotional engagement with World War II. As the copy on the packaging for the PlayStation game *Medal of Honor: Frontline* (2002) proclaims, “You don’t play, you volunteer.” Despite the fact that Spielberg’s direct involvement ended with the first game, the influence of *Saving Private Ryan* is evident through all the World War II installments of *Medal of Honor* in their veneration of the citizen soldier and their replication of the film’s trademark desaturated visuals.

Following the release of the franchise’s third installment, *Allied Assault* (2002), however, most of the team responsible for the development of *Medal of Honor*, including all the project leads, broke from EA and developer 2015 Studios after disputes over game design to form their own studio, Infinity Ward. With backing from publisher Activision, they released the first *Call of Duty* in October 2003. The first *Call of Duty* was one of about twenty-three games set in World War II released that year, most of which were strategy games. The only other significant World War II FPS in 2003 was *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun*, which was widely criticized for its weak gameplay. The critical failure of *Rising Sun* is an indication of the industrial pressures on developers to release a game a year, but it is also possible that in the quest for historical authenticity and the drive to venerate the soldier, the developers of *Medal of Honor* lost sight of the importance of *play* to the gamer. In contrast, gameplay was a focus for the first *Call of Duty*, which reinvigorated the FPS format through a series of technical innovations, including regular, automatically saved checkpoints conveniently spaced to forestall the necessity for constant quick saves, thus preventing tedious replays through swaths of gameplay to reach the same point. The importance of this particular innovation for gamers cannot be overstated. Tom Bissell describes the act of saving the game for gamers as “an imperative as biologically intense as food or sleep.”

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10 *Moby Games*, http://www.mobygames.com/game-group/historical-conflict-world-war-ii-offset,425/so,1a/. I have excluded re-releases and expansions from this list.


magazine *Computer and Video Games (CVG)* points out in a special edition devoted to the franchise, making *Call of Duty* easier to play broadened the appeal of the game to include casual players as well as those more proficient.\(^{13}\) Winning more than eighty game-of-the-year awards, including the industry’s first from the British Academy of Film and Television—significant at the time as a belated acknowledgment of gaming as an important part of the general mediascape—the first *Call of Duty* “redefined realism and the concept of war gaming to balance it better with fun . . . the reason we all play games.”\(^{14}\)

But in addition to technical innovation and a focus on the mechanics of gameplay, the first *Call of Duty* also introduced changes to the mainstream narrative of World War II, which continue throughout the franchise. For the most part, *Medal of Honor* reflects the dominant cultural story of the war by concentrating mainly on the actions of the heroic individual American soldier. In contrast, *Call of Duty* refracts World War II “through the eyes of citizen soldiers and unsung heroes from an alliance of countries,” as the Activision website puts it.\(^{15}\) *Call of Duty* serves as a reminder that it was not only the United States that fielded armies of civilians who sacrificed their ordinary lives for the demands of their governments, and faced a “baptism of fire” in foreign lands. As the first game shifts geographic locations or fronts, it forces the gamer to adopt a new “character”—American, Russian, or British—and a different outlook on the war. The Russian campaign, for example, reintroduces the Battle of Stalingrad as a pivotal battle in World War II. The role played by Russia in the defeat of the Germans has been consistently downplayed in the American cultural narrative of World War II since the 1950s. Yet historians such as Norman Davies describe the efforts of the Western powers as a “sideshow” when compared to the war on the Eastern Front.\(^{16}\) Forcing the gamer to switch between soldiers of various nationalities not only broadens perspectives on World War II but also dilutes the possibility of individual heroism. Playing as a single individual allows the gamer to collect weapons and accumulate skills, which in most FPSs, including *Medal of Honor*, means that the gamer’s avatar is practically invincible by the end of the game. Because Infinity Ward made the unusual decision to compel the gamer to switch between characters in the same game, *Call of Duty* counters the archaic notion that the actions of the individual matter on the industrial battlefield and instead emphasizes how the destructive impartiality of mechanized warfare renders obsolete the skill and prowess of the lone soldier.

The dilution of heroic individuality in *Call of Duty* has an additional consequence. In the absence of a central soldier as a focal point for identification, the game shifts attention to the spectacle and magnitude of industrialized warfare. As *CVG* put it, *Call

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\(^{14}\) Ibid.

\(^{15}\) Activision, “*Call of Duty.*” http://www.activision.com/index.html#gamemedia:CallofDuty&brandId:CoD. This page appears to have since been taken down.

of Duty made “war” itself the hero rather than the citizen soldier. The first Call of Duty marshaled cinematic standards of realism to generate a sense of the scale and chaos of total war. The game world created by Infinity Ward for Call of Duty consists of vast backgrounds brimming with visual and sound effects that are far from, and unrelated to, the immediate vicinity of gameplay. The spectacle of industrialized warfare, a key component of the aesthetic signature of World War II in visual media, is thus used in Call of Duty to situate the gamer as a “tiny man trapped in miles of exploding chaos” and to generate an unusual sense of extreme vulnerability in the gamer, as opposed to the feelings of invincibility more common to the FPS in general.

While the first Call of Duty reintroduces soldiers of other nations to the cultural narrative of World War II and redeploy cinematic spectacle to counter the notion of individual heroism, the game nevertheless reconstitutes an aspect crucial to the current configuration of the American soldier in popular narratives of the war—the idea of the soldier as a member of a “brotherhood” forged in the extreme spaces of combat. Call of Duty was the first FPS to feature sustained, plausible behavior in nonplayer characters (NPCs). For much of the game, the gamer fights alongside a squad whose members support one another and the gamer. They provide covering fire and warnings, and even put themselves at risk to save the gamer and other members of the squad. Each individual has a distinct personality that emerges during the course of the game, facilitated by a feature dubbed by the developers as “battlechat,” which allows the NPCs to talk to one another and to the enemy. The creation of a squad that does not require controlling or ordering, and one comprising distinct individuals, contributes to the sense that the gamer is fighting as part of a group and not as an isolated soldier. In deliberate contrast to Medal of Honor’s overriding emphasis on the lone soldier, the first Call of Duty was released with the tag line “In war, no one fights alone.”

The first Call of Duty established the game not only as a franchise but also as a valuable brand within Activision’s suite of properties. As of this writing, the series consists of ten games, four of which are set in World War II, as well as numerous expansion maps and packs. As with the first Call of Duty, the World War II games of the series continue to reconfigure the central elements of the American cultural narrative of the conflict through emphasizing the international scope of the war and reducing the possibility of individual heroism, but at the same time, the franchise features multiple connections and references to the cultural story of the war as it plays out in other media as markers of authenticity. Actors from Saving Private Ryan and Band of Brothers feature in the games, for example, and some moments are deliberately modeled on scenes from war films. The opening cut scene (cut scenes are cinematic-type sequences in the game over which the gamer has no control) for the Stalingrad campaign of World at War, for example, clearly references the opening of Enemy at the Gates (Jean-Jacques Annaud, 2001). Such references place the Call of Duty games not only within the historical framework of World War II but also within the framework of the evolving mediated narrative of the conflict.

17 “Ways Call of Duty,” 120.
18 Ibid., 119.
Call of Duty’s own position within the mediated framework of World War II is outlined in no uncertain terms by Activision’s marketing. Bobby Kotick, chief executive officer of Activision, describes Call of Duty as “one of the greatest entertainment franchises of all time” and as “one of the most viewed of all entertainment experiences in modern history.”

The sales figures and audiences commanded by the series go some way to supporting Kotick’s promotional hyperbole. Releases of new installments of the franchise exceed opening weeks for cinematic blockbusters in terms of promotion, scale, and initial profits. On average, 6.5 million people play a Call of Duty game online per day, making the franchise as much a social networking phenomenon (an aspect of the game that offers a potentially rich area for future exploration) as it is a gaming one. It should be noted, however, that the Modern Warfare installments of Call of Duty, which are set in hypothetical conflicts of the near future, are a large source of the franchise’s overall revenue. Despite the critical and commercial success of the first Modern Warfare (Call of Duty 4, released in 2007), Call of Duty 5: World at War marked a return to World War II, a move that was greeted with skepticism by both gamers and critics alike. Yet despite the initial misgivings of some players and commentators, World at War outsold Modern Warfare by more than two to one in the first week of sales in the United Kingdom. The game eventually went on to sell more than eleven million copies worldwide, ending not far behind the first Modern Warfare in terms of overall sales.

As the last Call of Duty to be set in World War II, World at War continues the franchise’s recalibration of the American cultural narrative of the conflict, but it does so at a moment when the ongoing presence of World War II in the FPS was under scrutiny. World at War expands Call of Duty’s global perspective of the conflict to include not only the Russian campaign, which features in both Call of Duty 1 and 2, but also the war in the Pacific. While there are several games set in the Pacific arena of World War II, most of these are flight simulators or strategy games based on naval battles. The most notable exception is Medal of Honor: Rising Sun, but like many of the previous games in the Medal of Honor series, Rising Sun comprises covert missions, in this case conducted by Joe Griffen, a member of the Office of Strategic Services, which include the infiltration of a top-secret Axis summit in Singapore in


missions were far from the experiences of ordinary marines, who faced an unrelenting series of amphibious landings and pitched battles in attempts to take and hold islands such as Guadalcanal (August 1942), Guam (July 1944), Peleliu (November 1944), and Iwo Jima (February 1945). The makers of World at War therefore suggest that the contribution of the regular US marines in the Pacific has been marginalized. As World at War’s military adviser Lieutenant Colonel Hank Keirsey puts it, “Nobody knows how brutal and tough and gritty and demanding and environmentally challenging the fight in the Pacific theatre was.”

Similarly, Keirsey describes the Russian campaign as having a different level of brutality, because at different stages of the conflict both the Russians and the Germans were fighting to defend their home territories. Because of its choice of theaters, World at War is described by Mark Lamir, head of Treyarch, as a “scarier Call of Duty than we’ve ever seen,” with a “grittiness” that made even the developers “uncomfortable.” As a result, the tension between gameplay (always a focus for the franchise) and context is evident in both the game itself and the discourse that surrounds it. The push-and-pull between exciting gameplay and the viciousness of the war in these two arenas is illustrated through the descriptions of World at War on Activision’s website, which promises that World at War delivers “harrowing” but “dynamic” gameplay with “volatile action” that nonetheless has “added depth.” As a game that supposedly explores the more brutal side of World War II, World at War is an ideal example of what happens to the citizen soldier, the idea of the “good war,” and the war as a visual construct when these three elements are translated via a technology that introduces “play” to the cultural narrative of the conflict.

World at War. Like all games set in real-world conflicts, World at War encourages what Patrick Crogan refers to as a particular kind of play with the mediated past: “[p]lay in and with a reconstruction of historical temporality drawn from the narrative modes of more traditional media such as historical discourse, historical archives, war films and documentaries.” The way in which World at War “plays” with more traditional modes of historical discourse, such as television documentary, is evident from the start of the game. Each campaign is introduced with a sequence of historical facts and statistics that flash on-screen over maps and styled graphics depicting symbols such as the Japanese rising sun or the Nazi swastika, both integrated with archival footage of the war itself. Some of the latter is relatively explicit. The game’s opening sequence, for

26 Ibid.
28 Activision; “Call of Duty: World at War,” http://www.activision.com/index.html#gamelongen_USgamelid:CallofDuty &brandid:CoD. This page appears to have since been taken down.