"It's Almost Too Intense:" Nostalgia and Authenticity in *Call of Duty 2*

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Introduction

The World War II first-person shooter *Call of Duty 2* was the top-selling game for the Xbox 360 when released in November of 2005. The game was praised in the gaming press for its historical accuracy and realistic gameplay. However, in February 2006, a television ad for *Call of Duty 2* was banned in the UK. Because it used pre-rendered footage that was higher in quality than the actual graphics and the featured characters performed moves not possible in the game, the ad was deemed *too* realistic and misleading by the Advertising Standards Authority.

This anecdote highlights the contradictions of game publisher Activision's marketing strategy of promoting the *Call of Duty 2* as "The Most Intense and Realistic Combat EVER". But what defines the "real" or "authentic" combat experience as framed by game publishers? How can we understand the popularity of the Second World War as a setting for video games, particularly within the context of the West's current military engagements in the Middle East?

Employing the work of extant research into battlefield tourism and World War II films, as well as Fredric Jameson's concepts of nostalgia and pastiche, this paper explores discourses of realism and authenticity in the marketing and gameplay of *Call of Duty 2*. Through a discursive analysis of *Call of Duty 2*'s gameplay, advertising, and public relations efforts, this paper will argue that *Call of Duty 2* reflects an inability to deal with our current historical situation. In the War on Terror and the occupation of Iraq, the West has found itself engaged in a conflict where the enemy is unknown, the moral justification for engaging in conflict is ambiguous at best, and the end is nowhere in sight. The terrifying uncertainty of this situation contrasts with the popular history of the Second World War, a war with clearly defined roles: Allied soldiers versus Axis soldiers, democracy (and communism) versus fascism, with armies of relatively equal size and technological sophistication pitted against each other. While the Second World War was undoubtedly much more complex than these simple binaries imply, the popular understanding of the war, as represented by mainstream films, documentaries, books, and video games, is one of good versus evil.

Games such as *Call of Duty 2* can represent a nostalgic longing for the moral certainty of this conflict, a desire that if we indeed must be engaged in a war, that it be a war that we know is just, against known enemies and with a predetermined conclusion. If, as recent films like *Syriana* suggest, the current state of geopolitical turmoil is indeed too complex for anyone to ever

understand, popular representations of the Second World War offer us a classic narrative of freedom triumphing over tyranny, without any messy distractions such as imperialist or economic motivations. *Call of Duty 2* can be seen as portraying a utopian war, where civilians are never involved, war crimes do not occur, and nobody ever really dies.

"It's Almost Too Intense"

Ads and promotional material use a single reviewer's quote to describe the *Call of Duty 2*: "It's Almost Too Intense". It is quite possible that nothing can be too intense for the postmodern gamer, and *Call of Duty 2* has been very successful, due in no small part to its highly-detailed depiction of combat in the battlefields of Europe from 1941 to 1945.

The Second World War has emerged as a popular setting for video games, with *Call of Duty 2* leading the pack in terms of both critical and popular success. This paper will explore how even in its intense depiction of the chaos of the battlefield, *Call of Duty 2* reflects a nostalgic desire for the simplicity and certainty of the Second World War, particularly in the context of a collective anxiety surrounding our current historical situation. Games such as *Call of Duty 2* can represent a nostalgic longing for the moral certainty of this conflict, a desire that if we indeed must be engaged in a war, that it be a war that we know is righteous, against known enemies and with a predetermined conclusion.

Video Games as Retroscapes

World War II video games attempt to differentiate themselves from other combat games by evoking a recognizable historical setting and narrative. Marketing scholar Stephen Brown (1999) coined the term "retroscape" to describe commercialized environments that either explicitly recreate an historical setting (such as historical theme parks) or merely contain elements of some version of the past (e.g. theme restaurants or Las Vegas casinos). Marketers employ images, lifestyles, and discourses from the past to sell contemporary products and services, using nostalgia to associate them with idealized representations of history.

In his concept of the retroscape, Brown draws upon the theoretical work of Fredric Jameson. Jameson (1983, p. 125) examines how the postmodern condition, which he describes as marked by "the transformation of reality into images, the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents," reinforces the "logic" of consumer capitalism. Consumer society is dominated by what Jameson (1991, p. 18) calls an "appetite for a world transformed into sheer images of itself" and for pseudo-events and 'spectacles'", drawing from Guy Debord's notion of a world where people search for meaning in commodities and increasingly even just *images* of commodities.

This pursuit of spectacle is rooted in our desire to escape the confines of capitalism. Brown (2001) describes Jameson's defense of our utopian inclination, the unending search for something better, arguing that it is inscribed in even the most derided cultural artefacts, from airport art and the *Reader's Digest* to romantic fiction and Las Vegas kitsch. But whereas modernists maintain that utopia resides in the infinite future, postmodernists look to the illimitable past (p. 58).

This "utopian inclination" initially found expression through the production of art, but throughout the past two hundred years art's function as utopian imagining has been subsumed by consumer culture. Mass culture now offers escape into a world of "something better," and with increasing frequency this means evoking the *style and feel* of the past, often through the use of pastiche. Pastiche is a type of stylistic or formal imitation, often incorporating multiple past styles and forms. It is similar to satire or parody, but lacking their political intention; Jameson calls pastiche *blank parody*, a stylistic mask, neutralized speech.

Although initially pastiche was used to refer to the demise of stylistic innovation in mass culture (such as popular films imitating old film styles or recreating television shows), the imitation of dead styles is even more obvious in our consumption of history. Popular representations of history such as feature films or museum exhibits employ aesthetic devices that mimic past representations of history. The use of black and white images, British-accented "Voice-of-God" narration, orchestral music, and narrative development using diaries or letters are still commonly used in cultural forms that deal with historical content. These devices are also used frequently in *Call of Duty 2* in-between gameplay portions.

A stylistic form of pastiche is linked to a desire for nostalgia, a longing for some sense of the past, either real or imagined. Jameson (1983) claims that we are unable to focus upon the present, to produce aesthetic representations of our current experience, as the complexity of everyday life within consumer capitalism is so intense that we crave the simplicity of the past.

It is through this nostalgic impulse that the ubiquity of World War II games such as the *Call of Duty* series may have more to say about current wars than one might originally suspect. While there are numerous games that allow players to enact fantasies of contemporary warfare, including Pentagon-funded *America's Army* and *Full Spectrum Warrior*, World War II games have 60 years of representational work behind them that have fixed certain meanings and values to that historical period. The Second World War has become the supreme legitimating war, as evidenced by the numerous references to it by people like Rumsfeld, Cheney and company in their "War on Terror" apologetics. For them, the Second World War functions to justify current military action in the Middle East, and allusions to "Pearl Harbour", "appeasement" and "fascism" have been used to establish a moral equivalency between *World War II* and the War in Iraq.

Playing *Call of Duty 2*

Call of Duty 2 places players in the role of four different soldiers in three different armies in the European theatre: an infantryman in the British, American, and Soviet armies, as well as a tank commander with a British Armored division. The player fights against German troops in several battlefields across Europe and North Africa, participating in either a single-player campaign mode or against other players online over the Internet or on Microsoft's Xbox Live network. This paper will focus on the single-player campaign mode, and the associated narrative elements that are not present in the multiplayer mode.

The player begins the game as Private Vasili I. Koslov, new conscript with the 13th Guards Rifle Division in the Soviet Army. Private Koslov misses his family and has never even held a rifle before; the narrative is developed through diary entries and short mini-documentaries

in-between missions, but this information is superfluous to actual gameplay. Playing the game does not require any knowledge of the historical context of the conflict, or even the ability to distinguish between enemy and friendly uniforms - the interface displays the name of friendly soldiers when they stray into your firing path. The tutorial, a common device used in video games to familiarize players with the controls, is presented as a crash course in combat for Koslov in the ruins of Stalingrad. Players learn to aim, shoot, throw grenades, and change position in a period of about five minutes before they are swept up into "real" combat.

Game reviewers have praised *Call of Duty 2* for its immersive world (where the player fights alongside dozens of computer-controlled soldiers in various battlefields in the European Theatre) as well as the realism of the audio and visual effects (Colayco, 2005; Lee, 2005; MacNamara, 2005; Marbles, 2005; Pickering, 2005; Tuttle, 2005). The designers have been careful to balance realism with gameplay; while a few bullet wounds or a grenade blast will kill the player, a few seconds under cover is all that is necessary to fully recover from wounds that are less than lethal. It is sufficient that the game looks and sounds authentic – according to the standards of authenticity set by films about the Second World War.

The Second World War in Film

It is in film that many of World War Two video games' intertextual roots can be found. Early commercial British films about the war were produced while it was still being fought, and with many men away fighting in Europe and Africa, these films were targeted at women and tended to deal with the war's impact on the family rather than combat experience. After 1945, as soldiers began to return home, war films shifted in focus to the stories of soldiers as brothers-in-arms at the battlefront rather than as the brothers and sons of civilians on the home front (Harper, 1997, p. 172).

Many of these post-war British films, such as *The Dam Busters* (Scott & Anderson, 1954) and *Bridge on the River Kwai* (Spiegel & Lean, 1957), became popular in the United States and influenced an American cycle of big-budget World War Two films in the 1960s, including *The Longest Day* (Zanuck, Annakin, Marton, & Wicki, 1962), *The Great Escape* (Sturges, 1963), and *Patton* (McCarthy & Schaffner, 1970). World War Two films continued to be produced sporadically throughout the 1970s and 1980s, with the next large cycle emerging in the wake of Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1997). *Saving Private Ryan* continued in the tradition of narrativizing war as male-bonding experience, but used new special effects techniques to recreate the chaos of battle, in particular in its depiction of the Omaha Beach landings in Normandy.

Yet apart from its devastating battle scenes, *Saving Private Ryan* remained rooted in the themes of brotherhood and national sacrifice that characterized previous war films. The film functioned both to address the failure of Vietnam, which its unflattering portrayal in several films of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and deal with the ethics of modern warfare as witnessed in the journalistic coverage of the first Persian Gulf war by invoking feelings of heroism and American triumphalism (Auster, 2002; Hodgkins, 2002). Its box-office success resulted in the release of several World War Two films in its wake, including *The Thin Red Line* (Geisler, Hill, Roberdeau & Malick, 1998), *U-571* (De Laurentiis & Mostow, 2000), *Enemy at the Gates* (Schofield & Annaud, 2001), *Windtalkers* (Woo, 2002), *The Great Raid* (Bender, Katz, & Dahl,

2005), and the Spielberg-produced television mini-series *Band of Brothers* (Spielberg, Hanks, Jendresen, & Ambrose, 2001).

The first video game to recreate the Omaha Beach landing sequence was Electronic Arts' *Medal of Honor*, released in November 1999 for the Sony PlayStation. *Medal of Honor* was developed by DreamWorks Interactive, the video game development subsidiary of Spielberg's DreamWorks SKG. Its in-game representation of the Omaha Beach landing closely follows the events portrayed in *Saving Private Ryan*, even recreating entire scenes such as a soldier getting shot in the head shortly after removing his helmet to remark how it had saved his life, and a sniper dodging enemy fire to reach a bomb crater and shoot an enemy machine-gunner.

Just as *Saving Private Ryan* launched a wave of World War II-themed films, *Medal of Honor* triggered a series of World War Two first-person shooter games, including *Hidden and Dangerous* (1999), *World War II Online* (2001), *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* (2001), *Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30* (2005), and seven *Medal of Honor* sequels and expansion packs. In 2002, twenty-two of the *Medal of Honor* developers left Dreamworks Interactive to form Infinity Ward, the company behind the development of the *Call of Duty* games. The Omaha Beach landing sequences in both *Saving Private Ryan* and *Medal of Honor* can be seen as paradigmatic examples of the "authentic" battlefield experience of the Second World War. As several game reviewers have noted, a Normandy beach landing sequence has become *de rigueur* for *World War II* games (Colayco, 2005; Marbles, 2005; Pickering, 2005). These sequences represent how gamers expect the battlefield to be portrayed in a game: chaotic, immediate, and completely disorienting; in many ways, the D-day landing in games and film perfectly illustrates Jameson's characterization of the postmodern condition.

In addition to its focus on intensity and realism, *Call of Duty 2* also emphasizes its historical accuracy. All military units in the game actually existed and all of the battles portrayed did occur (although not exactly as portrayed in the game). Short black-and-white mini-documentaries, produced by the Military Channel as part of a cross-promotion deal, appear in-between missions to explain how gameplay missions fit into the broader strategy of the Allied war effort.

The Military Channel documentaries, which play like old newsreels, add to the authenticity of the *Call of Duty 2*. They draw upon the aesthetic of historical accuracy associated with war documentaries, utilizing actual World War Two combat footage, newsreel-style music, and of course a British-accented narrator. These characteristics imbue the mini-documentaries with an historical authority - a claim to what Paul Arthur (1993) calls representational facticity. They assert an authenticity for the game, and reinforce the idea that the player is reenacting events that actually took place, *as* they took place.

The Authentic Battlefield Experience

Call of Duty 2's publisher, Activision, has employed a marketing strategy that highlights the game's postmodern verisimilitude. That is, its ability to recreate the *cinematic* representation of the chaos of war rather than attempt to directly simulate the past. Its filmic qualities are associated with realism in the promotional copy for the game, which claim that *Call of Duty 2* "redefines the *cinematic* intensity and chaos of battle".

The choice of using the phrase "cinematic intensity" as opposed to "battlefield intensity" or "historical intensity" is a significant one. This copy highlights the game's ability to simulate war as experienced on the movie screen, recreating the spectacle of battle rather than battle itself, which may in fact be an impossible task. Aspects of the game's development process mirrored feature film production. The *Call of Duty 2* team hired seven former cast members from the World War Two mini-series *Band of Brothers* to provide voices for soldiers in the game, and commissioned a musical score from film composer Graeme Revell.

Call of Duty 2 evokes nostalgic memories of the Second World war drawn almost exclusively from its filmic representations. The game is a pastiche of several *World War II* films: Throughout its various missions and cut-scenes it draws upon several films including *The Longest Day, Enemy at the Gates*, *Band of Brothers*, *The Desert Rats*, and even wartime newsreels. But *Call of Duty 2* is also a pastiche because it appropriates the form and style of these films without any political critique. There is no attempt at irony or satire, no acknowledgement of the shortcomings of its cinematic influences. As *Call of Duty 2* faithfully emulates the chaotic battlefield aesthetic of films such *Saving Private Ryan*, it also recreates the same historical blind spots. The Second World War presented in the game contains no people of colour, women, or civilians. Race, gender and class are non-existent, as are concentration camps, carpet bombing, and collateral damage. Authenticity is limited to sensory immersion – the visual and aural signifiers of combat.

This need not be the case – some games have utilized First-Person Shooter engines to report the social and political effects of war. At the 2006 Game Developers Conference, Cliff Blesinski, lead designer for Epic Games, presented a concept for a game called *Empathy*. *Empathy* would be a different kind of FPS, a first-person *survivor*, where players would take on the role of a father from a civilian family caught up in the chaos of a war zone. The object of the game would be to keep your family alive, with the game design goal of facilitating a more intimate understanding of the actual effects of "collateral damage" on human lives. In *Escape from Woomera*, a modification for the original *Half-Life*, players take the role of a detainee in the Woomera Immigration Reception and Processing Centre in South Australia. *Escape from Woomera* illustrates the possibilities of a World War II game that could portray war as it is experienced by POWs and civilians interned by governments on all sides of the conflict.

However, in *Call of Duty 2,* the complexity of war is muted; all that remains is the hollow shell of stylistic representation based on other products of consumer culture. The Second World War in the game fulfills a nostalgic desire for a simple war, a war we can play out and resolve within a few hours, where the good guys always win and the bad guys really deserve to be beaten. This is war as experienced in a movie theatre. *Call of Duty 2* offers us a sanitized version of warfare. The terrible sights and sounds of the battlefield may have been recreated with meticulous attention to detail, but the social, cultural, and *political* implications of warfare have been completely abandoned.

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