

**Answering the *Call of Duty*:**  
The popular geopolitics of military-themed  
videogames

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## Abstract

This research is based on a detailed empirical case study of the popular videogame series *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*. Drawing primarily on the field of popular geopolitics, the analysis reveals how imaginations of global politics are represented, consumed and enacted through the virtual worlds of the *Modern Warfare* series. In noting the fixation within popular geopolitics on representation and discourse, however, I argue that popular geopolitics needs to attend to the complex relationships between text, audience, and production, what I define as *popular geopolitics 3.0*. This approach directly responds to calls to examine the connections between popular geopolitics and everyday life, whilst maintaining an understanding of the importance of analysing the visual and discursive ways in which dominant geopolitical imaginaries are constructed and articulated.

The thesis proceeds in three sections. First, by focusing on the videogames themselves I demonstrate the ways the virtual landscapes mirror and reflect contemporary geopolitics and the geographies of military violence. The research thesis reveals the techniques and specificities of the *Modern Warfare* series, in articulating geopolitical discourses.

Second, the thesis adopts a 'player-based' approach which explores the often prosaic ways in which these geopolitical and militaristic virtual worlds are interacted with, understood, and experienced. I draw on in-depth qualitative data, including interviews and video ethnography, and show how cultural and (geo) political attitudes, subjectivities, and identities are shaped through the act of playing *Modern Warfare*.

Third, the thesis explores the practices of production and marketing which influence the 'final' geopolitical scripting and meaning. Using documentary sources, I trace the processes of production exposing the wider political economic structures, alongside the everyday social and material relations, which govern and structure the geopolitical narratives told. Allied with this, the marketing, advertisement and promotion of the series are investigated. This reveals the practices which are manifest 'beyond the screen', and which shape the geopolitical meaning of the game world.

Overall, the thesis provides an important conceptual and methodological contribution to the understanding of the cultural production, circulation and consumption of geopolitical sensibilities. Moreover, in dismissing the populist cliché ‘it’s just a game’, the thesis demonstrates the indivisible relationship between military-themed videogames and geopolitical discourse and practice.

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## Chapter 1. Introduction: Press Start to Begin

“[H]orsing around with games might teach problem solving, but you don’t learn anything about the world”.

(Carleson 2003 cited in Leonard 2004 p.2)

“Videogames are increasingly both the medium and the metaphor by which we understand war”

(Stahl 2010 p.112)

In the run up to the release of the hotly anticipated *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*, eager discussion erupted on social media websites. On *YouTube* the game’s trailer gained millions of views and users deliberated over the details of the clip in the comment section. Segments of the gameplay revealed a dystopic vision of the iconic landscapes of New York, London, Paris and Hamburg under military attack and in the midst of a global conflict. While the clip intermittently flicked from these urban landscapes, a crescendo of alarms and dramatic noise built until an ominous voice stated:

“It doesn’t take the most powerful nations on earth to create the next global conflict. Just the will of a single man” (*Call of Duty* 2011: online).

Building on the story of the two previous iterations of the series, *Modern Warfare 3*’s plot details a global conflict. An Ultranationalist group assumes control of Russia, waging military conflict and terrorist attacks on American, and various other Western European locations. This aspect of the story resulted in people flocking to the comments section of *YouTube*, passionately deliberating and deciphering the promotional video. These comments turned quickly to the geopolitical scenario. One user appeared dissatisfied with the plot:

“This is so stupid. The story isn’t plausible at all. Russia is part of the United Nations and the terrorist attack in mw2 would be answered by diplomacy, not warfare AND Russia would freaking lose against england germany and france combined. So long story short, bad storyline” [sic]

(*YouTube* comment: *Call of Duty* 2011).

Commenting on the trailer's apparent factual inaccuracies, this individual exhibits and draws on their own knowledge in order to discredit the geopolitical script proposed in the game. While it can be understood as outlandish, fictive and even a "comedy geopolitics" (Poole 2012: online), it is nevertheless important to note the ways *Modern Warfare* series stimulates political discussion. As such these online forums are indicative of how conversations "can metamorphose from the apparently trivial (e.g. the exposure of a plot flaw) to a passionate debate about contemporary global politics" (Dodds 2008a p.489). Rather than being viewed as unknowing, unreflective and apolitical, player's comments such as those above, allude to the ability of players to connect the games to their perceived political worldviews. It is a reminder that audiences are not wholly passive, uncritical consumers of the content they engage with, but are capable of more nuanced political readings/ reflections on popular cultural artefacts.

Away from the more everyday ways the franchise shapes politicised discussions, *Call of Duty* has more explicit relations with the formal political world. There are a number of examples to illustrate this: there was Cuba's political outrage of the portrayal of Fidel Castro, or Castro's body double to be more exact, being assassinated by the player in *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (Gabbatt 2010); the attempted legal action brought forth by incarcerated Manuel Noriega. The former dictator of Panama recently sought compensation in regards to his depiction in *Black Ops II* (BBCa 2014); the ways that *Modern Warfare 3* became the focus of political intrigue in the Houses of Parliament over its concerns over the depiction of military violence and terrorism (Early Day Motion 2427: 2011); how the political think-tank the *Atlantic Council* recently approached the writer of *Call of Duty: Black Ops II* Dave Anthony to utilise his creative energy into identifying and predicting possible future threats to global security (Parkin 2014: online).

While popular stereotypes often present videogames as the domain of a solitary, adolescent player, these examples begin to illustrate how they are implicated and constitutive of the everyday mechanics, performances and practices of international politics. Furthermore the videogame medium itself has become increasingly utilised for the purposes of military training, recruitment and, more recently, for the treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

(Corey 2013). Videogames are thus becoming an integral part of not just invoking popular imaginations of military violence, but are becoming intimately connected to its enactment. As the lines increasingly blur between war, play and politics, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain the populist sentiments that 'it's just a game'. Instead, the virtual worlds are not just reflective of the global political world, but, as I will argue throughout this thesis, actively contribute to, shape and constitute the unfolding nature of contemporary international politics.

The central objective of this thesis is to consider the relationship between global politics and popular culture, performing a detailed case study analysis into the social, cultural and political significance of the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series. Taking this forward, I turn to the conceptual framework of popular geopolitics – a strand emanating from critical geopolitics that is sensitive to the ways popular culture shapes imaginations of space/ place, identity and statecraft. Popular cultural items such as films, cartoons, music and videogames are argued to have the capacity to reinforce, but also disrupt, commonsensical understandings of global politics.

The *Modern Warfare* series is a key popular cultural vehicle which shapes understandings of contemporary geopolitics. The campaign mode<sup>1</sup> in the *Modern Warfare* series, as alluded to in the opening vignette, develops a fictitious narrative pitching a global conflict in which the player is presented with a Manichean worldview. A malevolent Russian Ultranationalist organisation threatens the global balance of power forcing the American and British Special Forces to react. The player moves swiftly around the world and is deployed to a variety of 'real' world locations and regions, including the Middle East, Central Asia, Russia, USA and Europe. Despite its fictitious plot, Gagnon (2010 np) argues that:

*“Call of Duty resonates with and reinforces a tabloid imaginary of post-9/11 geopolitics when it tells players that “we” are constantly on the brink of war with international actors such as Arab terrorists and Russia, who will not hesitate to invade “our” countries and attack “us” with nuclear weapons”.*

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<sup>1</sup> The campaign mode, in the case of *Call of Duty*, is played by a single player, where they navigate the virtual landscape through a first-person perspective, completing a variety of mission objectives. The gameplay is largely pre-structured and is interrupted by narrative devices, such as cutscenes, which contextualise the game's storyline.

Employing a case study approach provides an opportunity to perform a detailed and in-depth study of the social, cultural and political significance of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*.

Research falling under the rubric of popular geopolitics has evolved in a number of directions. This includes studies interested in; the representation of global politics in popular culture (Sharp 2000; Power 2007; Rech 2014), audience consumption, understanding and experience of popular geopolitical narratives (Dodds 2006; Dittmer & Dodds 2008; Woon 2014), and the production of geopolitical narratives (Megoran 2006b; Dodds 2007; Coulter 2011). Research into these different aspects has advanced unevenly and a great deal of attention has been spent on first area of interest, deconstructing the geopolitical meaning of a variety of popular cultural items. So far, there has been a lack of investigation into the wider negotiation of geopolitical meaning, whether this is considering how popular geopolitical texts are produced, or the way they are appropriated in everyday life by consumers. Further contextualised insights are needed to consider the wider implications of popular cultural items.

This thesis argues in order to shed light on the significance of popular cultural items, such as the *Modern Warfare* series, there is a need to go beyond a singular emphasis on the item itself, but to also consider the different actors and processes that are involved in their production and the ways they are interpreted and experienced by their audiences. As such I argue for a holistic analytical framework that considers the representation, production and consumption – an analytical framework I term popular geopolitics 3.0.

Popular geopolitics 3.0 provides a heuristic framework to help further consider the wider circuit in which geopolitical meanings are established and negotiated. While it helps to move away from purely an analytical reading of the text itself, these three aspects are considered as interrelated. The three empirical parts of the thesis therefore undertake different forms of analysis. Firstly, I undertake a detailed analysis of the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series campaign-mode and discuss the ways the gameplay and representational worlds come to reinforce dominate geopolitical discourses. Secondly, the thesis considers how these geopolitical discourses presented in the virtual worlds are interpreted by players. In attending to calls for studies into audience reception, I explore the

ways geopolitical meaning is consumed, rejected and negotiated. Turning to the audience demonstrates an intimate insight into how popular imaginations of global politics are perceived and internalised. I also explore the immersive and experiential aspects of playing virtual war illuminating the everyday diffuse nature of popular geopolitical discourses and its entanglement between bodies, technologies and environments (Dittmer & Gray 2010). Finally, I consider the key actors, social-material relations, and the political economic contexts that influence the final geopolitical narrative. In addition to this I consider the practices of marketing, and the ways the geopolitical meaning extends beyond the screen. Popular geopolitics 3.0 therefore offers a multiperspective approach that moves away from singular, grand narrative understandings, but offers an approach that evokes the complexity of popular culture. The thesis therefore offers an important contribution to the understandings of how geopolitical sensibilities are produced, circulated and consumed vis-à-vis the virtual worlds (re)presented in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*.

### **1.1 Military-Themed Videogames**

The motivation of turning to military-themed videogames in this thesis emerged out of a frustration with the way in which videogames have been insufficiently understood and discredited by academics. Media texts, such as film have received a wealth of contributions that have examined the visual reproduction of war and military violence (Suid 2002; Robb 2004; Alford 2010; Kellner 2010). Yet, as scholars have noted, audience's general appetite for viewing contemporary storylines of war in its cinematic form has declined (Carruthers 2008; Philpott 2010). While the numbers *viewing* war have been shown to shrink, those interacting with military violence have grown exponentially. The videogame industry has gone from strength to strength with the global industry worth approximately £80 billion. Within the UK alone, the sector employs over 12,000 people and produces annual revenues of £2.5 billion (BBCb 2014: online). Yet, despite their significant growth, videogames have long struggled to escape the shackles that plague and stigmatise videogames as socially and academically irrelevant.

While the term videogames encompass "a plethora of technologies, genres and materialities" (Ash & Gallacher 2011 p.352), this thesis is concerned with

military-themed videogames, and more specifically the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series (the rationale of this decision I will justify in the next section). Military-themed videogames encompass a variety of videogame titles that allow players to operate an avatar in a historical, contemporary and futuristic militaristic setting. While military-themed videogames can take on numerous properties, such as strategy-based,<sup>2</sup> these games often fall into the genre of the First-Person Shooter (FPS). This involves “[t]he player’s navigation of space, the primacy of obstacles overcome by the act of shooting, and the first-person perspective...” (Voorhees *et al.* 2012 p.6). These particular videogames have seen an unprecedented rise in popularity. Yet despite this academic scholarship has been limited.

One area that has stimulated interest is the relationship between violence and videogames. Wider media representations of videogames and military-themed videogames in particular, have drawn connections and vindications on their influence on a range of societal issues and events (see *Figure 1.1*).



**Fig 1.1:** A headline that suggests the influence of the *Call of Duty* videogame series on a gunman who shot and killed 12 people at a Navy Yard in Washington D.C. 16th September 2013 (Source: Daily Mirror 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Strategy videogame genre involves skilful thinking and planning which can be based around military conflict, such as the *Command and Conquer* series (1995- ). These games often provide a godlike view of the world (see Salter’s 2011 discussion of the strategy videogame *Civilisation*).

This has been a controversial and much disputed subject within academic circles. Drawing on the 'media-effects' tradition, scholars have investigated the role of violent videogames on individual physiological behaviour (Carnagey *et al.* 2007). The experimental data produced from these studies are rather controversial, and there is no general agreement as their methodological approaches have come under scrutiny (see *Chapter 3* for further discussion). Moreover, such approaches fail to address and consider the broader social, cultural and political ideological implications found in these virtual worlds (King & Krzywinska 2006). Military-themed videogames often draw on real world references which have political ideological resonances. This has stimulated a range of critical analysis raising questions about the blurred lines between war and play (Der Derian 2003), the militarisation of everyday life (Robinson 2012; Martino 2012), and the medium becoming an exemplary facet of the 'military-entertainment-complex' (Turse 2008).

For geographers military videogames are important artefacts for critical enquiry. Salter (2011 p.359) suggests they "allow us to reflect on social and cultural processes of militarisation and the construction and contestation of the popular international geographical imaginary". Videogames are argued to script, frame and spatialize the world, and its inhabitants, in particular ways. They mirror, and envisage the world through a Western – predominately American – perspective (Power 2007). The virtual world becomes framed around "real U.S. military policy" and, increasingly reflects the methods, techniques and "ways in which the U.S. fights its wars" (Thomson 2009 p.96). Moreover, military-themed games map out current American geopolitical intrigues and action within contemporary theatres of conflict, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, the wider Middle East region and Central Asia. These places of conflict are imagined and schematised via orientalist logics (Shaw 2010a). Similar to cinema, military-themed videogames can be argued to shape popular notions of militarism, a cartographic imagination underlining spaces and places of danger and threats, and provide "*explanatory narratives*" (Power & Crampton 2005 p.193-194 italics in the original) of global politics.

While scholarship has been critical towards the purported effects of military-themed videogames on the militarisation of society, such critiques largely remain unfounded, and are generally void of empirical investigation. More

recently, these critical insights into military videogames have been challenged. Schulzke (2013a) argues that the claims made against 'military games'<sup>3</sup>, are often misguided, misplaced and overly assumptive about the actual societal and political implications of these videogames. He suggests that these critiques can be categorised into three themes: structural/institutional, instrumental, and ideological. Structural/institutional critiques are suggestive of the perceived harmful link between civil-military cooperation. As a result, by virtue of their relationship with the military, these videogames are understood to be harmful to society. Instrumental critiques are concerned with these games making players or soldiers more violent. Finally, ideological critiques are concerned with the game's effect on players and society; in this case the games are suggested to promote militaristic values and ideologies.

For Schulzke critics have been quick to problematize videogames, such as *America's Army*, because of its origins as an American military recruiting and PR tool. But for Schulzke (2013a p.72), merely demonstrating "this connection does not tell us what ideological message the games promote or [how] military games are actually experienced". These sorts of 'ideological' critiques are, in some ways, unsatisfactory in that they overlook the practices and experiences of the millions of people who come to interact and engage with videogames and who, in turn, generate the meaning of the game itself. This is not to suggest that such critiques are redundant – they remain important in revealing forms of popular militarism. The point remains, however, that by turning our focus to the players themselves, we can start to understand in more detail how, exactly, militarism enters into and is reproduced as part of the everyday. In this case players should not be seen as passive dupes, and as Gagnon (2010 np) crudely puts it, playing virtual war "will not necessarily make you want to join the military or support the wars waged by your country". Further empirical investigation is needed to unpack the role military videogames have in shaping geopolitical and military imaginations.

What I have demonstrated here is that despite the clear popularity of military-themed videogames and their salience in reinforcing geopolitical sensibilities, further empirically driven studies are needed to explore their wider significance.

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<sup>3</sup> By military games Schulzke (2013a) refers to videogames that are designed by the military and are used for military functions, such as *America's Army*.

Taking the framework of examining the videogame, players and production offers a way of providing contextualised insights into the role of videogames in everyday life. In order to do this, this thesis endeavours to rectify these absences by providing a rich account of the commercial videogame series *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*. The rationale behind this choice will be outlined below.

## 1.2 Case Study: *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*

In this thesis rather than consider a wide-ranging sample of FPS military-themed videogames, I focus my attention on a case study analysis of the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*. There are currently 11 videogames published under the *Call of Duty* franchise (see *Figure 1.1*), the thesis focus will predominately focus on the mini-series *Modern Warfare*. This includes the titles *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007), *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (2009), and *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (2011).

| Title                                 | Year | Publisher  | Developers                                                               |
|---------------------------------------|------|------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Call of Duty</b>                   | 2003 | Activision | Infinity Ward                                                            |
| <b>Call of Duty 2</b>                 | 2005 | Activision | Infinity Ward                                                            |
| <b>Call of Duty 3</b>                 | 2006 | Activision | Treyarch and Pi Studios                                                  |
| <b>Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare</b> | 2007 | Activision | Infinity Ward                                                            |
| <b>Call of Duty: World at War</b>     | 2008 | Activision | Treyarch                                                                 |
| <b>Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2</b> | 2009 | Activision | Infinity Ward                                                            |
| <b>Call of Duty: Black Ops</b>        | 2010 | Activision | Treyarch                                                                 |
| <b>Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3</b> | 2011 | Activision | Infinity Ward, Sledgehammer Games, Raven Software and Neversoft Software |
| <b>Call of Duty: Black Ops II</b>     | 2012 | Activision | Treyarch                                                                 |
| <b>Call of Duty: Ghosts</b>           | 2013 | Activision | Infinity Ward, Raven Software and Neversoft Software                     |
| <b>Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare</b> | 2014 | Activision | Sledgehammer Games                                                       |

**Fig 1.2:** Videogames currently within the *Call of Duty* series (2003-2014).

There are a number of reasons and motives for focusing on the *Modern Warfare* series. Firstly, the *Call of Duty* franchise, and in particular the *Modern Warfare*

*Warfare* series, is a hugely popular cultural product. *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*, for instance, generated record-breaking profits of \$1 billion within the first 16 days of its release, surpassing profits generated by blockbuster films. As such the series has been suggested to compete with iconic franchises, such as *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars*, and *Lord of the Rings* (Activision 2011: online). Furthermore, the number of players online was suggested to “exceed the combined populations of the cities of New York, London, Tokyo, Paris and Madrid” with over 30 million globally playing (Activision 2011: online). The global popularity was seen to be beneficial in order to obtain a sample of potential interviewees within the UK who knew about the series and where the research was based.

Secondly, the emerging academic interest has been skewed towards ‘military games’ – games that are explicitly used by military institutes and for military functions and purposes (Schulzke 2013a). For example *America’s Army*, a game produced and financed by the American military, has been an exemplary target of academic critiques of the relationship between the videogames and the military (Li 2003; Neiborg 2004; Haynes 2006; Stahl 2006; Power 2007; Delwiche 2007; Robertson 2009; Dittmer 2010; Nichols 2010; Allen 2011; Salter 2011). Commercial military-themed videogames, such as *Call of Duty*, on the other hand have been lamentably absent from discussions (*but see* Gagnon 2010; Baron 2010; Welsh 2012; Andersen 2014). This is not to undermine the important work and issues those insights into *America’s Army* reveal, but to show that more efforts are needed to unpack how civil-military relations are fashioned by entertainment industries, and their capacity to shape militaristic ideas, values and imaginations and to circulate mass audiences.

Thirdly, the *Modern Warfare* series is an important popular cultural product which reinforces contemporary popular geopolitical sensibilities. Previous videogames in the franchise were concerned with historical conflicts, such as World War II. The *Modern Warfare* series broke from these conventions, turning to the contemporary theatres of warfare. Reviewers proclaimed that the “storyline could be pulled from today’s headlines” (Mastrapa 2009: online). The popularity of the franchise dramatically soared and other major titles followed suit in bringing war into a more contemporary setting, such as *Medal of Honor* (2010) and *Battlefield 3* (2011). The series provides an opportunity to analyse

this turn to portraying contemporary military conflicts and how they come to be represented in the realm of the videogame world.

Finally, on a personal level, I have experience interacting with the videogame series. This knowledge was seen to be beneficial in undertaking a detailed case study of three different videogames. Moreover this was seen as valuable in allowing me to connect with and access other players and possible contacts, being a relative insider offered insight into how these games operate and knowledge of the overarching narrative.<sup>4</sup>

### **1.3 Research Questions and Thesis Structure**

The purpose of this thesis is to provide a detailed analysis of the *Modern Warfare* series, empirically exploring the virtual world, its production and how players come to interact, understand, and experience the militaristic and geopolitical content. The thesis is driven by three research questions:

- 1) In what ways does the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series represent, visualise and shape understandings of geopolitics and the military?**
- 2) How is the geopolitical and militarised content of *Modern Warfare* consumed, interpreted, and experienced by audiences?**
- 3) How do the processes of production and various actors, institutions and organisations shape the geopolitical narrative of the series?**

In order to begin to answer these research questions, the thesis is structured as follows. *Chapter 2* critically assesses the field of popular geopolitics. As I will argue, the sub-discipline has yet to adequately engage with the videogame medium. Moreover, the skewed emphasis on the textual, representative and discursive properties of popular culture conceals the practices of production, and audience reception. As such, I will argue for a popular geopolitics which engages a multiperspectival approach, what I define as *popular geopolitics 3.0*. This approach draws out the relationship between production, text and

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<sup>4</sup> My positionality is discussed further in *Chapter 3*.

audience. As a result, this provides a heuristic framework for investigating the ways in which geopolitical meaning is produced, circulated and consumed.

*Chapter 3* details the methodological approach taken in this research. The chapter explains the qualitative methods adopted to collect data focused on the videogame, its audience, and production. This includes a range of methods including discourse analysis, interviews, autoethnography, 'gaming interviews', video ethnography and documentary analysis. The chapter offers an original contribution that can help to advance methodological approaches to studying the complex ways geopolitical meaning is negotiated at different phases.

Turning to the analysis of the *Modern Warfare* games, *Chapter 4* examines the representative and visual virtual worlds and their geopolitical significance. Here, I explore the games' landscapes, characters and narrative. However in also considering the specifics of the medium, I explore the ludic device of the cutscene. Used to progress the games' narrative, I argue that the cutscene is a popular geopolitical device *par excellence* – using global satellite imagery to inculcate a particular imaginary of American global political and military power projection. Overall this chapter contributes to understandings of how the videogame medium shapes geopolitical ideas.

In developing the nascent scholarship that seeks to bring closer audience studies and popular geopolitics together, *Chapter 5* turns to an exploration of the ways players experience, internalise and interpret the geopolitical and militaristic worlds they interact with. Here, I focus specifically on three themes; i) players' everyday practices and engagements with *Modern Warfare* ii) players' attitudes to the geopolitical and militaristic content, and iii) players' identification of the Western military identity they virtually assume.

In *Chapter 6*, however, I attempt to promote an understanding of what players actually do, rather than what they say they do. In noting the limitations of the methodological approach in the *Chapter 5*, I adopt a video ethnography in order to capture playing war *in situ*. Here, I turn to Non-Representational Theory (NRT) in order to consider what I define as a 'more-than-representational geopolitics'. In total five videos of participants playing on the multiplayer option of *Call of Duty* in the domestic setting to the experiential, emotive, affective and embodied practices of playing virtual war.

In *Chapter 7* the processes of production that shape the series' geopolitical content is critically explored. Using documentary evidence, this chapter explores the process, relations and actors involved in the series production. Split into two sections, I firstly examine the wider political economic structures noting the issues concerning the power relations between publisher (*Activision*) and Developer (*Infinity Ward*) and the creative control over the series' geopolitical narrative. Secondly, I examine the individuals who are involved in fashioning the game's geopolitical scripts. Using interviews with designers and producers, obtained through documentary analysis, this focuses on the negotiation of socio-material relations which determine the virtual geopolitical worlds that are created.

In furthering knowledge of its production, *Chapter 8* explores the way the *Modern Warfare* series is marketed, advertised and promoted. Marketing is an integral component to the commercial success of a popular cultural product. As such, this chapter uses first-hand ethnographic data of the videogame launch of *Modern Warfare 3* located in London, November 2011. The chapter argues for the need to attend the ways geopolitical meaning of the game world is negotiated 'beyond the screen' and in particular places.

*Chapter 9* will offer concluding remarks reflecting on the thesis and its contributions. It will emphasise the importance of a multidimensional approach in order to advance the field of popular geopolitics. Potential future theoretical and methodological trajectories will be outlined in order to further provoke scholarship that explores the intersections of popular culture, world politics, and the military. In the following chapter I elucidate this further by introducing the conceptual and guiding framework of popular geopolitics.

## **Chapter 2. Conceptual Framing: Popular Geopolitics**

This thesis owes its conceptual framing to the field of popular geopolitics. Couched in the wider sub-discipline of critical geopolitics, popular geopolitics legitimises the analysis of popular cultural items as outlets which represent, reflect and constitute the political world (Carter & Dodds 2013). This chapter will outline the foundations of popular geopolitical enquiry. Moreover the chapter will argue for a multiperspectival approach which expands analysis to different, but interlinking, sites of media representation, consumption and production. I argue that this provides a holistic approach and an understanding of the everyday, complex and contingent ways that popular geopolitical ideas are produced, circulated and consumed.

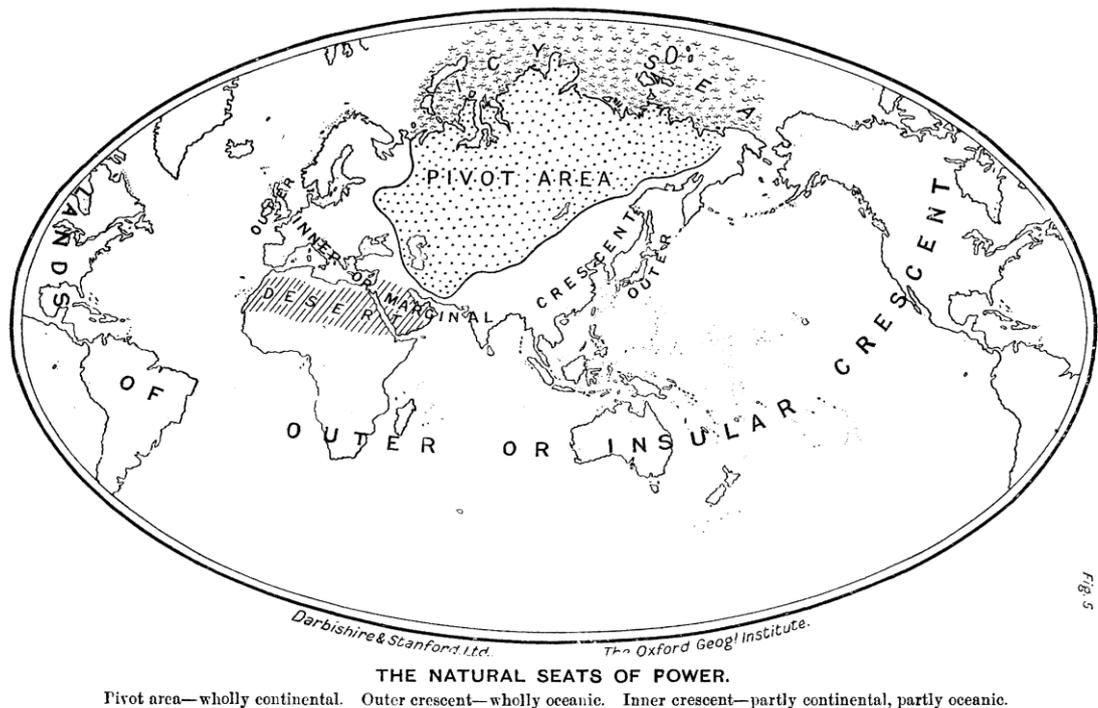
The chapter is structured as follows. Firstly, I draw attention to the ideas of geopolitics within the discipline of human geography. Secondly, drawing attention to the critical perspective that has captured political geographers, I will discuss how this has moved attention towards the everyday ways media and popular cultural items depict and circulate geopolitical knowledge. Thirdly, I will illuminate the ways in which popular culture shapes particular political identities and subjectivities, represents space and place, and portrays statecraft and state relations. Finally, I will argue, the scope of popular geopolitical inquiry has not only overlooked the lived, everyday experience of popular cultures, but also the multiple actors and relations involved in its production, circulation and promotion. In order to rectify this I propose a holistic approach that considers the text, consumption and production of popular cultural texts – a framework I call popular geopolitics 3.0. Let us first begin by unpacking what geopolitics is.

### **2.1 Geopolitics**

This section will discuss geopolitics' emergence and its appropriation by different actors, and the critical theoretical and empirical concerns which have since evolved within the disciplines of Human Geography and International Relations (IR). To understand the problematisation of this term we need to consider its historical development and the ways it has subsequently been critiqued.

We can trace the origins of geopolitics to a number of scholars who adopted the term in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The term is largely associated with and emanated from a number of European intellectuals who used geopolitics as an objective method for defining their nation state's position in the global political order (Dodds & Atkinson 2000). During this period intellectuals were using scientific epistemologies to understand how the political world operated. Thus geopolitics was based on naturalised systems of thought which helped to explain how nation states act, and should act in the world (Agnew 2002). In this respect geopolitics was based on and defined around ideas of environmental determinism.

A prominent early figure of geopolitics was Halford Mackinder. A British geographer, Mackinder became an influential figure in shaping the geopolitical tradition in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Knutsen 2014). At a time of British imperial decline and amid growing concerns over the shifting balance of global control, Mackinder's work (1904: 1919) exemplified the ways in which geopolitics was used to explain, to predict and to prescribe advice on interstate relations.



**Fig. 2.1:** The Geographical Pivot of History (2004 (1904) p.312).

*Figure 2.1* is a visualisation of the ‘pivot thesis’ expanded on by Mackinder. For Mackinder, the ‘pivot area’ was of central importance to the maintenance of British imperial power (Mackinder (1904) 2004). This crudely marked area on the world map would define global political ordering based on the pivot’s wealth of natural resources. This, for Mackinder, was the area that was central to maintaining British hegemonic interests and required geostrategic contemplation. Geopolitics thus can be seen as a way in which the world was “actively spatialized, divided up, labelled, sorted out into a hierarchy of places of greater and lesser importance...” (Agnew 2003 p.3). Central to this cartographic strategic prophecy was the elevation of the physical environment over the social and cultural ways geopolitics was understood. Ignored here were the situated contexts and biographies of these geopolitical intellectuals and the particular ways they came to (re)present the world. Politics and culture is thus defined and determined by its geography.

This example illustrates the ways intellectuals, such as Mackinder, at the time professed to be producing objective, impartial accounts of the global political system premised on geographical reasoning and proclaimed geographical ‘truths’. In this respect, geopolitics was regarded as a scientific practice that “promise[d] uncanny clarity and insight into a complex world” (Ó Tuathail 1999 p.113). Cartographic practices became a means of reducing and simplifying the world in order to control and act upon it. In other words, geopolitics became a strategic accessory, reducing and explaining global politics through the classification of space, and being intimately connected to the foreign policy directives of the state (Kearns 2009). As such geopolitics adopts what Ó Tuathail (1994 p.259) suggests a ‘Cartesian Perspectivalism’ which “operates through assumptions about the faculty of *sight* to produce the *siting* and *citing* of global politics”. Cartography was seen as an objective and neutral practice, providing an omniscient ‘god’s eye’ view of the world making it knowable which could be acted upon. Geopolitics as a tool of statecraft therefore accentuated geography and the physical environment as determining factors in the practice and enactment of state relations within global politics.

However, the term geopolitics was not without its critics. Post-World War II, it fell out of usage, tarnished through the work of German geographer Karl Haushofer (1942) and synonymous with Nazi expansionist policies at the time.

Haushofer was influenced by the earlier work of Friedrich Ratzel and developed on his ideas relating to 'organic state theory', which drew on the natural sciences in order to explain and account for the perceived innate necessity for states to grow and expand (Agnew 2003). What was termed as 'lebensraum' became a justifying force of territorial expansionism of Nazi Germany. The result saw geopolitics subsequently abandoned and neglected by intellectuals due its loaded meaning (Bach & Peters 2002). However, the term's revival came during the Cold War (Hepple 1986; Sloan & Gray 1999; Dodds 2003a). Geopolitics regained prominence through elite strategists and agents of statecraft who were seeking to explain and account for the global struggles of power impacting on national interests at the time.

Coinciding with its re-emergence, and the resulting aftermath of the Cold War, we begin to see a nuanced academic approach and interest in geopolitics. Here an interest in the spatiality of power entered into the social sciences and more specifically political geography (Hepple 1986; Dalby 1988). With this came an interest in the power relations involved in the construction of political space and a problematisation of foreign policies based on militaristic and imperial agendas. In counterpoint towards this revival of the term encouraged by strategic thinking during the post-cold war, academic energies sought to dispel the seductive power that geographical claims, assumptions and reasoning had in the conduct and practices of international relations.

## **2.2 Critical Geopolitics**

In essence critical geopolitics problematizes the geographical reasoning, assumptions and designations that classical geopolitics espoused. This mode of critical enquiry can largely be credited to the arrival and prominence of post structuralism and postmodernism within the social sciences. Postmodernism proclaimed "incredulity towards metanarratives" (Lyotard 1984 p.xxvi). In other words, metanarratives that sought to explain international relations, such as those proffered by orthodox geopolitical intellectuals and texts, were scrutinised and their simplistic, assumptive and 'gods-eye' representations of the world. Instead a central tenant of a critical approach to geopolitics is to reveal the politics behind the production of geographical knowledge (Dalby 1991; Ó Tuathail 1996a). In this sense, rather than there being a pregiven stable and

innate body of knowledge, scholars turned their attention to the messy formation of geopolitics made apparent through a range of cultural practices and representations.

Concentrating on the production of knowledge highlighted the ways geopolitics was socially constructed and bound within social and cultural practices. This disrupted the notion of representations and language as stable forms that simply mimic reality. Following the work of Michel Foucault, the foundational works with critical geopolitics sought to define geopolitics as a “discursive practice”. As such it became “the study of the socio-cultural resources and rules by which geographies of international politics get written” (Ó Tuathail & Agnew 1992 p.193). Indeed, the deconstruction and unpacking of the ways of which global politics is written continues to be of central concern for critical geopolitics. Scholars are thus inherently suspicious of totalising, normative, commonsensical, essentialist language and practices that come to define territorial identities and how they constitute global politics.

Scholars targeted the classical geopolitical texts, contextualising their authors within their historical setting (Ó Tuathail 1994; Megoran 2004) and challenging those who professed geopolitics to be a neutral, objective practice. However, as Haraway (1988) suggests in relation to questions of objectivity, these imaginations of global politics were not a professed ‘view-from-nowhere’. Rather these geopolitical assertions were subjective – imbued with particular power relations, situated in particular contexts, while maintaining interests which often adhered to colonial, imperialistic and state interests of the time (Agnew 2002). The arrival of critical scholarship contextualised and situated geopolitics, divorcing it from its pseudo-scientific status.

In recent years the proliferation of work and scholarly interest under the banner of critical geopolitics has expanded dramatically. This is attested to by the array of research trajectories and prefixes now assigned within critical geopolitics. This includes work defined as; alter-geopolitics (Koopman 2011), subaltern geopolitics (Sharp 2011a; Sidaway 2012), anti-geopolitics (Ó Tuathail 1996b; Routledge 2003; Drulák 2006), progressive geopolitics (Kearns 2008; Sharp 2011b). Instead of defining a specific identity bounded by theoretical or

methodological procedures, Ó Tuathail (in Jones & Sage 2010 p.316) suggests that:

“Critical geopolitics is no more than a general gathering place for various critiques of the multiple, geopolitical discourses and practices that characterize modernity”.

However, an enduring framework has been constructed from an analysis of different forms of geopolitics. The categories of formal, practical, structural, and popular geopolitics were identified by Ó Tuathail (1998). Scholarship attending to formal geopolitics focuses on key elite actors including institutions and elite intellectuals, such as Halford Mackinder, and their political and cultural contexts. Practical geopolitics draws attention to the practices of statecraft. Here, scholars focus on the common sense ideas of geopolitics and how they encroach on and direct foreign policy directives. Structural geopolitics speaks to the structural conditions which inhibit and enable how states practice foreign policy. Popular geopolitics moves attention to the everyday role of the media and entertainment industries in the construction of imaginations of national identity and distant locations. This moves interest beyond specifically the state and to the role of popular culture and entertainment industries as actors which shape geopolitical logics.

These categorisations and the structuring of critical geopolitics scholarship has not come without its criticisms, especially concerning the ways these forms crossover and intermingle (Ciută & Klinke 2010). Online spaces and the social media, for instance, unsettle the neat categorisations of geopolitical discourses offered above (Pinkerton & Benwell 2014). However, it is important to acknowledge these blurring categorisations, but not to abandon them so readily. Popular geopolitics, for instance brings attention to a wider variety of popular forms in which the geopolitical enters and is a flourishing strand of critical enquiry.

### **2.3 Popular Geopolitics**

There is a growing literature which takes popular culture seriously within International Relations and Political Geography (Grayson, Davies & Philpott 2009; Dittmer 2011; Neumann & Kiersey 2013; Carter & Dodds 2014; Sachleben 2014). Grayson *et al.* (2009 p.156) have argued that rather than

being conceived as apolitical, popular culture is intimately linked to the way “power, ideology and identity are constituted, produced and/or materialised” in everyday contexts. Here media texts and popular cultural items offer outlets in which politics is understood, reinforced, and contested. While IR studies have begun to reveal the relationship between world politics and popular culture, human geography has drawn specific attention to the ways in which the world is spatialized within popular culture.

Beyond our actual embodied experiences, the media and popular culture engender particular geographical imaginations and thus provide a resource through which people can make sense of the world (Dittmer 2010). For Burgess & Gold (1985 p.1) geographical analysis of popular culture enables us to understand popular culture’s role “in moulding individual and social experiences of the world and in shaping the relationship between people and place”. Popular geopolitics has taken this forward expressing concern with the role of popular culture in constituting political identities and geographical imaginaries.

Turning to popular culture has highlighted the role of non-state actors in representing, defining and shaping the global political map for mass public audiences (Sharp 2000). Sharp (1993, 1996, 2000) moves the analysis into the role of popular mediated forms of geopolitics, in this case the American magazine *Reader’s Digest*. Her study of the role of *Reader’s Digest* in US culture remains a crucial intervention and laid the foundations for much subsequent popular geopolitics analysis. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, Sharp (2000, p.31), shifts the focus from elite discursive formations of geopolitics, to institutions, such as the media, that “ensure the reproduction of cultural (and thus political) norms”. Popular culture thus becomes an important site in which dominant ideologies, values and world views are perpetuated and challenged. In *Reader’s Digest*, this national identity was continually negotiated and constituted through the pages of the magazine by scripting the values of the Soviet Union in direct contrast to those of America. This process of differentiation “both resonated and reinforced Digest readers’ sense of national identification” (Sharp 2000 p.165). *Reader’s Digest*, for Sharp (2000), became an artefact in the everyday writing of American national identity and promoted a sense of place in the world to its readership.

In foregrounding the importance of popular culture, studies have examined a plethora of objects, practices and artefacts including, but not limited to; social media (Pinkerton & Benwell 2014), comic books and cartoons (Dodds 2010; Dittmer 2012; Manzo 2012; Rech 2014), radio and music (Gibson 1998; Boulton 2008; Pinkerton & Dodds 2009; Weir 2014), newspapers (McFarlane & Hay 2003; Falah, Flint & Mamadouh 2006) the internet (Mamadouh 2003) and children's toys (MacDonald 2008; Carter, Kirby & Woodyer *forthcoming*). These examples highlight the vibrancy and diversity of the field.

On the other hand, scholars have noted the often 'elite' and more spectacular forms of popular culture have been addressed, overshadowing often resistive and 'less-popular' geopolitical articulations (Dittmer & Gray 2010; Holland 2010), such as artworks (Ingram 2011, 2012; Williams 2014). Film, for instance colonises much of popular geopolitical analysis and intrigue (Sharp 2002; Dodds 2003b, 2008; Ó Tuathail 2005; Power & Crampton 2005; Carter & McCormack 2006; Dalby 2008; Carter & Dodds 2011; Saunders 2012a; Löffmann 2013; Kirby 2015). Despite their popularity and mass appeal, videogames have received less scrutiny from critical geopolitical scholars (Salter 2011). It is the purpose of this thesis to rectify this omission and emphasise the geopolitical significance of military videogames.

Marcus Power's (2007) paper set the key foundations of a popular geopolitics based approach to videogames. Acknowledging the explosion of videogames based on the military, Power (2007 p.272) notes how they follow closely and "mirror 'real' world conflict scenarios". Power uses the example *America's Army* and of the freely downloadable game *KumaWar* which provides downloadable content based on "real-world events", allowing players to experience "critical current events soon after they happen" (KumaWar website 2014: online).<sup>5</sup> Post 9/11 America's global war on terror has thus come to play a central narrative arc in a wide selection of military style games (Stahl 2006; Schulzcke 2013b).

Similar to the concerns of cinematic representations, recent literature has drawn attention to the role of video gaming in the social and cultural production of geographical imaginaries (Power 2007; Longan 2008; Schwartz 2009; Salter 2011; Ash & Gallacher 2011). In exploring these contestations scholars have

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<sup>5</sup> Mission 107, for instance, entitled "The Death of Osama Bin Laden" recreates and allows the player to relive the American Navy SEALs killing of Osama Bin Laden.

considered gaming as texts, unpacking the geopolitical codes and the spatialisation of military violence narrated in the virtual worlds. Salter (2011 p.360) explains that “war games represent a militaristic, masculinist, Western geopolitical frame of violence”. They matter geopolitically in their depictions of a global conflict and for the greater part allow players to be placed virtually in the boots of Western military. Despite the geopolitical resonances of military videogames, they have largely been under theorised and empirically under studied. A popular geopolitical framework is argued to be important as it firstly, reveals how space and place are represented in various popular cultures. Secondly, it attends to the role popular culture has in projecting and defining (geo)political identities and subjectivities and thirdly, it focuses on the ways statecraft is portrayed, and in the case of videogames, the ways state sponsored violence is prioritised. In the next section I will critically elucidate on these key themes and reveal the ways these can be understood in relation to military videogames.

### ***Space/Place/Representation***

At the heart of popular geopolitical studies has been the attempt to uncover the ways space and place are represented within popular cultural forms. While we have briefly noted the ways classical geopolitics used cartographic representations as an explanatory method for envisioning global politics, popular geopolitics on the other hand has focused on the mass visual appeal of popular culture. Indeed, growing attention has been given to visual cultures and its relationship to geopolitics (McDonald 2006; Campbell 2007; McDonald, Hughes & Dodds 2010; Foxall 2013). For McDonald *et al.* (2010 p.15) cultural “representational practices – such as film, photography and digital games – enact geopolitical formations”. What Dodds (2003, 2005) clearly shows, for instance, is how film plays an integral role in narrating and representing places. Earlier James Bond films for instance coincide with Cold War geopolitical anxieties which cultivated particular geographical imaginations through utilising “place-based imagery to convey intrigue, mystery and danger” (Dodds 2005 p.272). More contemporary films have reflected the post 9/11 geopolitical anxieties of the time and the complex geographies associated with the war on terror (Dodds 2008a, 2008b, 2008c; Dodds & Carter 2011). These popular

representational practices come to characterise places with certain behaviours, people and dramas which inform notions of place and politics.

For popular geopolitics the depictions of places and the identities attached to them are a key area for critical exploration. The places, spaces and landscapes articulated in videogames often run parallel to contemporary geopolitical conflicts and “military landscape imaginaries” (Woodward 2014 p.45). The Middle East, for instance, has become a focus for American foreign policy agendas which has equally been conveyed through the realm of popular culture. In mapping the war on terror, these videogames come to draw on oriental tropes, conventions and logics which uphold what Gregory (2004) has defined as the ‘colonial present’. As such the spaces and places recreated, including the *Call for Duty Modern Warfare* series, are productive of:

“a simplified Islamic world, in which cultural and ethical differences are flattened. The ‘Middle East’ becomes an anonymous topography of floating signifiers that are tied to nothing and nowhere, and serve only to feed an oriental imagination” (Shaw 2010a p.796).

The cultural representations conceived in these virtual worlds are complicit in the wider geopolitical logics upheld by America’s militarised vision of the world. Drawing on Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (2003), scholars have noted the specific ‘othering’, of the inhabitants of these virtual worlds through stereotypical orientalist traits (Šisler 2008a), reducing Middle Eastern cities to targets of American military ammunition (Graham 2009) and as spaces and places defined by perpetual warfare (Höglund 2008). As such videogames entertain an imagination of the geographies of contemporary military violence that are understood through a simplistic cartographical framework premised on a morally righteous ‘us’ and barbaric and uncivilised ‘them’.

However if we focus purely on the depiction of place and space we risk overlooking the matter of play and the structures and rule-based logics that govern how geopolitics is made sense of. Ian Bogost (2007) suggests how videogames offer a form of ‘procedural rhetoric’. He suggests that they act persuasively on the player by allowing them to interact with real-world social, economic and political systems. Taking the title *America’s Army* for example, Bogost (2007) suggests how the game “creates[s] an accurate representation of procedure and policy for army engagement”. It does this through the ways the

game rules mirror disciplinary procedures present in the US Army. For example, the game enforces the Rules of Engagement (RoE). If the player breaks from these logics embedded in the game world, they are punished by being virtually incarcerated or continual violation means that the player can be removed from the game. As such, interacting with the game world and logics persuades and “encourages players to consider the logic of duty, honor, and singular political truth as a desirable world view” (Bogost 2007 p.79). The videogame medium presents not just its own visual particularities, but offers rule-based structures which allow and foreclose particular interactions with geopolitical and militarised logics and sensibilities. Examination of these representational worlds needs to be combined with an awareness of the specificities of the medium, acknowledging how the games are played and practised rather than simply viewing them through their representations.

### ***Identity***

A key part of popular geopolitics is exploring how identity is shaped, negotiated and constituted through popular culture. Billig’s (1995) concept of ‘banal nationalism’ has remained a key concept for analysing the everyday, often unspectacular, ways a collective national identity is evoked through a range of mundane practices, objects and materials. This has influenced work which has examined the role of quotidian material objects such as stamps (Raento 2006), car license plates (Leib 2011) and road signs (Jones & Merriman 2009). Rather than revere the more spectacular manifestations of nationalism, this work has noted the more ordinary and commonplace items experienced in everyday landscapes as pertinent to ideas of national identity formation. These objects and wider cultural items play their part in constituting what Anderson (2006) defines as ‘imagined communities’. In this case, the nation is an imagined construct in the sense that it is drawn around a community based on perceived shared ideologies, beliefs and identity. The nation and ideas around nationalism are thus based around social constructivist perspectives.

The concept of sameness and difference plays an integral role in this construction of national identities and geopolitical sensibilities. As Sharp (2000 p.27) states:

“the essence of identity is not somewhere deep within territory - at its “heart” - but it is constantly being re-created at its boundaries to mark off the identity of that territory from what it is not, from what lies beyond the boundary”.

In constructing national identities popular culture plays an integral role in perpetuating these ideas of inclusivity and exclusivity (Edensor 2002). This reiterates the conception that identity is not inherent, but it is constantly (re)negotiated by considering the state’s relations within the global political system. Through popular culture, the nation becomes a common-sense and taken-for-granted phenomenon which is resultantly underpinned by a geopolitical order (Penrose 1994). Spatial references such as ‘us’ and ‘them’ are promoted by a range of discourses and state institutions that constitute national affiliations and an understanding of place in the world political system.

However, more recent work within political geography has questioned the fixity of identity. As such scholars have turned to the concept of performativity to examine how spatial identities are constituted (Bialasiewicz *et al.* 2007; Jeffrey 2013; Williams 2014). By turning to performativity, scholars deconstruct the state as an ontological given. For instance, Jeffrey (2013) suggests that the state is improvised. Thus identity is a product of an assemblage “of practice[s], materials and imaginaries that convey particular understandings of the state” (Jeffrey 2013 p.7). These practices are not just propagated via the realm of official state institutions, but circulate through the realm of the media, and popular culture (Campbell 1998).

While popular geopolitics reveals the ways popular culture represents collective identities, it has been less concerned with grounded understandings of the role the media and entertainment industries have in shaping these national and geopolitical identities and subjectivities. Billig’s (1995) concept of banal nationalism has been critiqued for its perceived simplistic ‘top-down’ approach (Skey 2009). The ways individuals relate to the content of the media and how banal nationalism is received is based on assumptions rather than empirical understanding. Instead, as Skey (2009 p.338) contends, Billig’s thesis ignores the:

“complexity of particular socio-political contexts, the differing levels of identification and categorization that might operate therein (national or

otherwise) and the degree to which such forms are made meaningful through everyday expressions by both elites and 'ordinary' people".

While popular geopolitics has begun to utilise audience studies (Dittmer & Dodds 2008), further emphasis still needs to be placed on the role of popular culture in the shaping of national collective identities, thinking beyond the analysis of representative and discursive structures, to how they come to be made meaningful by individuals within different situated contexts.

### **Statecraft**

The military and their actions are increasingly legitimised and justified through varying popular cultural appropriations (Birkenstein, Froula & Randell 2010; Stahl 2010; Martin & Steuter 2010). Post 9/11 there has been a range of Hollywood films that have come to address geopolitical themes and issues usually sympathetic to contemporary and historical American military operations. The film *Behind Enemy Lines* was hastily released in 2001 and provides a view into to American geopolitical culture post 9/11. Providing a narration of America's involvement in the Bosnian conflict, the film comes to celebrate unilateral action, morally righteous violence and post 9/11 American militarism (Ó Tuathail 2005). Similarly post 9/11 counterterrorism narratives have grown within the videogame medium. For Cassar (2013 p.334):

“Games like Call of Duty attempt to leverage players' patriotic feelings by placing the former in situations where military interventions become the most obvious course to undertake. By creating clear and identifiable (external) threats to the Western way of life, they reinforce the myth of the superiority of Western civilization and political system while maintaining a high level of consent toward particular policies enacted by Western governments such as the “War on Terror””.

Videogames, such as *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*, are thus worthy of study because of the ways they “legitimize and justify US military interventions” and “are implicated in the production of geopolitical discourses of war and security” (Power 2007 p.274). These representative practices within popular culture offer powerful mediations in which the military and their activities are normalised, naturalised and legitimised (Woodward 2004, 2005).

Less observed by popular geopolitics are the ways that American military agendas, values and ideologies are further implicated in the processes of

production. What has emerged is the explicit relationship between the US Department of Defense and the entertainment industries which is defined as the 'military-entertainment-complex' (Lenoir 2000). In this complex, scholars have noted the historical and current synergy between the Department of Defense and Hollywood (Der Derian 2009; Bronfen 2012). The state thus regularly involves itself in the processes of production providing military personnel, expertise and equipment while editing and altering film scripts to remain sympathetic both to current and past US military ventures (Ó Tuathail 2005). It is not just the cinema that the Department of Defense has infiltrated, but videogames as well (Herz 1997; Der Derian 2009). Further work needs to address the different actors and the processes that go into the production of popular geopolitical texts.

Outlined in these sections is how popular geopolitics has been concerned with the ways space, place, identity and statecraft have come to resonate within popular culture. However, as discussed the current scholarship has been overly attentive to deconstructing the meanings behind geopolitical texts (Thrift 2000; Megoran 2006a; Müller 2008) at the expense of perspectives such as the different texts and mediums, the production of texts, and how they are understood in everyday contexts. This aspect of the everyday has begun to grow interest within popular geopolitics.

#### **2.4 Popular Geopolitics 2.0: The Everyday**

Thrift (2000) has argued that the continuing interest in geopolitical discourse, in and of itself, has been to the exclusion of lived, embodied and everyday practices. Thrift (2000) argues that critical geopolitics needs to attend to the 'little things' that are often overlooked and have "consequences for understanding how (and therefore why) geopower is actually practised" (Thrift 2000 p.380). Such a perspective could consider the everyday spatial practices in which video gaming takes place, and the subsequent practices that extend beyond the screen in which the videogame's geopolitical meaning is negotiated.

Taking these criticisms forward, Dittmer and Gray (2010) have argued for the need to ground geopolitical analysis in terms of everyday life in what they term popular geopolitics 2.0. Moving beyond the field's textual deconstructive tendencies, popular geopolitics 2.0 advocates "using qualitative methods to

focus on the everyday intersection[s] of the human body with places, environments, objects, and discourses linked to geopolitics” (Dittmer and Gray 2010 p.1673). To achieve this Dittmer and Gray (2010) suggest that popular geopolitics needs to expand its theoretical, conceptual and methodological horizons. Here, audience studies, Non-Representational Theory (NRT) and feminist interventions offer productive ways of advancing popular geopolitics towards the realm of everyday.

Recent advances under the banner of feminist geopolitics have reoriented the focus towards the embodied and everyday scales in which geopolitics is experienced. It remains critical of the overtly state-centric nature of critical geopolitics and its apparent methodologically myopic scope (Hyndman 2001; Secor 2001). These connections are beginning to emerge through the lens of feminist geopolitics and through grounded accounts of the prosaic spaces in which the geopolitical is situated and experienced. As such a feminist approach provides:

“theoretical and methodological attention to the materialities of everyday life as they constitute the substantive formations - the bodies, the subjectivities, the practices and discourses – of constantly unfolding geopolitical tensions and conflicts” (Dixon & Marston 2011 p.446).

By over-stressing the scale of the state, critical geopolitics has omitted the people who occupy particular places and consume geopolitical texts from analysis (Dowler & Sharp 2001; Hörschelmann 2008). Although a variety of studies are emerging through these methods and values attuned to the personal, it has yet to gain credence within the scholarship of popular geopolitics. This lacuna has stimulated the necessity for grounded approaches within critical geopolitics, approaches centred on the everyday, embodied performances and practices which are sensitive to the multiple scales in which they operate. Hörschelmann (2008) addresses these concerns in a paper aptly entitled ‘populating the landscapes of critical geopolitics’. Through providing a multi-methods approach including brief questionnaires, structured diaries, mental maps, self-directed photography and film analysis, Hörschelmann (2008) considers the political agency exhibited by young people concerning the Iraq war. Rather than being dismissed as apolitical, this research encountered numerous everyday practices in which youths can be seen as social actors

participating, resisting and challenging geopolitical logics (Hörschelmann 2008; Benwell & Hopkins *forthcoming*). These multi-scalar linkages are pertinent in developing a more insightful and transgressive critical geopolitics which proposes alternative futures.

Dittmer & Gray (2010) have noted opportunities in which feminist insight could inform future popular geopolitical research. Firstly, feminist geopolitics disrupts the binary between the 'public' and 'private'. The 'private' has frequently been rendered as passive and disconnected from political structures, when on the contrary it has been argued to be a highly active politicised, contested and resistive space (McLarney 2010). Secondly, attention towards the personal has advanced calls to focus at the scale of the body (Fall 2006; Nicley 2009). Finally, this work has legitimised research into the roles of emotions and affect (Pain & Smith 2008; Pain 2009). This feminist geopolitical intervention diverts attention to the array of scales at which geopolitics operates. Furthermore, it reinforces the highly political role of popular culture as embedded within the daily lives of consumers. Rather than seen as passive agents, individuals can be rendered politically active in and through their consumptive practices.

These methodological concerns, rooted in feminist epistemologies, reconnect the scale of the body with geopolitical research. These offer multiple perspectives which deviate from the critical textual deconstruction of academic authors, and instead focus on the quotidian practices in which popular geopolitics is experienced and practiced.

### **2.5 Popular Geopolitics 3.0: The Whole Equation**

Turning towards the everyday by attuning to feminist interventions and considerations of audience based methodologies, helps promote a popular geopolitics that goes beyond the text. On the other hand, it has been argued, by turning attention firmly to the everyday other scholars have shown concerns of diluting the defining ethos of critical geopolitics and its endeavour to unpack the construction and circulation of geopolitical discourses, scripts and imaginations of the world. As such switching emphasis towards the 'little things' within geopolitics, it is claimed that the 'bigger things' lose focus (McDonald 2010 in Jones & Sage 2010). For Dalby (2010) critical geopolitics' identity has strayed from a focus on the problematisation and critique of the application of military

violence and is thus “in danger of diverting attention from military matters, grand strategy and the geographies of resistance” (Dalby 2010 p.281). How in a popular geopolitics 2.0 for instance, do we still account for the text and the medium and furthermore, the political economic structures in which cultural industries operate and propagate these geopolitical logics?

A way of overcoming these diverging trajectories within popular geopolitical scholarship is to incorporate a framework that is sensitive to both of these concerns. To do so I argue for a *popular geopolitics 3.0*, a framework that considers the text, its production, and its audience. Rather than engaging with them separately, one way of uniting these different perspectives is to consider a framework that brings attention towards the ways popular cultural items come to represent particular world views, while also acknowledging the ways that these world views are imagined, understood and experienced in an everyday setting. Where scholars concerned with popular geopolitics have called for similar approaches in the form of acknowledging the ‘cultural economy’ (Dittmer 2011), or tracing what Carter (2008) calls the ‘whole equation’, there has been little systematic, or critical development of pushing forward a holistic approach. Recent work by Adams (2013) has identified actor-network theory as a means of considering the complex social-technical flows of media production, distribution and consumption. He argues that to:

“expand geopolitical critique by addressing not just media content but also the various social-technical contexts of communication – the particular space-times and sensory modes of mediated encounter, as well as the corresponding audiences and participants and the social institutions enacting regulation, administration and control, production and distribution” (Adams 2013 p.266).

By drawing on actor-network theory, Adams (2013) identifies the complex social-technical flows of media production, distribution and consumption. While previous studies have focused on purely the content, this approach identifies a more complex understanding in the mobilisation of geopolitical discourse. Adams (2013) briefly discusses possible wider considerations of the media which include: *infrastructure; audiences and participants; rhythms and temporality; sensory modes; regulation, administration and control; production and distribution networks*. These heterogeneous elements and actors reveal the distributed agency as well as the circuits and conditions in which geopolitical

meaning is negotiated. While Adams' model (2013) outlines the manifold socio-cultural contexts his work offers less of a framework to implement. It is therefore useful to turn to scholars within cultural studies have drawn attention to the complexities of culture.

Johnson's (1986) foundational paper and model advocate an approach that is considerate of the production, circulation and consumption of cultural products. Moving beyond a focus on meaning found in the cultural item itself, by considering the wider processes such as production and consumption, provides a contextualised understanding and the ways cultural meaning is negotiated at different phases. Such a framework is valuable in examining the production and consumption of meaning in media texts, as professed by Burgess (1990 pp.145-146):

“the production of the text by media personnel, operating within the constraints of particular economic formations; the text itself, which transforms the production process into a system of symbols—both linguistic and visual, depending on the conventions of the particular medium ; the consumption of the text by audiences who will inevitably produce different readings of the same text—readings which will reflect gender, class and ethnicity, for example; and the incorporation of those meanings into people's daily lives”.

This has been taken forward further by du Gay *et al.* (1997) whose study traces what they define as the 'cultural circuit' of the *Sony Walkman*. The meaning of the product is not determined, nor definitively defined by the producers. Instead the model is based on “the articulation of a number of distinct processes whose interaction can and does lead to variable and contingent outcomes” (du Gay *et al.* 1997 p.3). These processes include an examination of the *representation, identity, production, consumption* and *regulation* of cultural items. While revealing important sites for consideration, the model has been open to modification. As the proposed categories “can overlap and are quite hard to separate” (Bollhöfer 2007 p.167), therefore practically difficult to employ as a definitive framework. Instead, scholars have adapted the model to centre around three sites of representation, consumption and production (Bollhöfer 2007; Scherer & Jackson 2008; Rose 2012). I use this framework as a heuristic device that sheds light on the complexity of geopolitical meaning. It is these three broad categories that are utilised in this thesis, exploring the ways the

videogame represents geopolitics, the processes that go into the production of these geopolitical representations and how they are consumed by players.

### ***Representation, Audience and Production***

I argue that popular geopolitics 3.0 offers a useful framework in understanding the ways geopolitical meaning is produced, represented and consumed. Firstly, it offers an escape from a textual determinism that has dominated popular geopolitical scholarship (Müller 2008). As such it complicates the notion of a stable and fixed geopolitical meaning to be found purely in the text. Instead such an approach sees meaning as a process, negotiated by other actors and needs to be also considered in their production and their consumption (Champ 2008). By attending purely to textual deconstruction based on an author's critical position we fail to attend to the multiple ways that media texts are read outside of the field of critical enquiry, nor the processes that go into their production (Kellner 1995). Popular geopolitics 3.0 considers these different aspects where geopolitical meaning is communicated and negotiated.

Secondly, while illustrating the different sites of text, audience and production it is important to note their interrelated nature. Within the current popular geopolitical scholarship the text, production and audience become partitioned, isolated and separated as different empirical sites of investigation. Previous studies within popular geopolitics have thus far addressed one, or at the most two, of these sites in their analysis (Dittmer 2011) and therefore provided a limited understanding of the interconnections between these different sites. For instance, while remaining sensitive to the cultural, economic and political context of their production examining audiences helps disrupt an understanding of a simplistic linear transference of meaning between producers and audience. The framework allows a greater understanding of the complex relationship between agency and determining factors. As Dittmer & Larsen (2007 p.738) argue "neither a purely structuralist position, locating meaning in the text alone, nor a strictly poststructuralist position, locating meaning in the audience alone" can sufficiently address the complexity in which geopolitical meaning is established.

On the other hand, concerns have been raised over the applicability of the model and that focusing on all three aspects has the potential to dilute the

critical purchase of research into popular cultural artefacts. However, I am sympathetic to Deacon's (2003 p.209) suggestion that:

“empirical divisibility should not become a pretext for theoretical isolationism, in which the attendance to the complexities of one phase is used to justify disregard for the other”.

Popular geopolitics needs to further consider the interrelations forged between the different actors and sites of meaning.

Thirdly, I want to argue that such a framework is founded on a multiperspectival approach to cultural studies (Kellner 1995) which presents a more holistic account which is attentive to wider practices of cultural phenomena. While Kellner (1995) admittedly states his dislike of the term 'multiperspectival', it “draws on a wide range of textual and critical strategies to interpret, criticise and deconstruct the artifact under scrutiny” (Kellner 1995 p.98). Such an approach draws on a range of critical perspectives such as Marxism, feminism, structuralism and post structuralism in order to provide a more complex appreciation of cultural items. Opening up to these different sites promotes theoretical and methodological pluralism. Despite the interventions of feminist scholars and the promotion of more qualitative minded approaches (Dixon & Marston 2011), there has remained a more conservative methodological approach within the strand of popular geopolitics, often centred on textual and discursive analysis and deconstruction (Müller 2010). Opening up critical enquiry into other sites encourages the use of varied appropriate methodological techniques and practices that reinvigorate the critical and political purchase of popular geopolitics (see the next chapter). A more sustained focus on particular case study items, I argue, generates insights into the myriad relations in which a popular geopolitics becomes possible. Granted this requires adequate time and resources often unavailable however, the thesis offers a format, and the time, in which to explore the wider popular geopolitical significance of a particular popular cultural format, in this case the *Call for Duty: Modern Warfare* series.

For popular geopolitics, analysis has often been skewed towards the representation of cultural artefacts and less frequently on the audiences and producers. Overall these existing accounts fail to address the complexities and power relations in which geopolitical meaning circulates. If we are to explore

and trace the power in which geopolitical meaning is constituted and negotiated, a more pluralist approach is required. By doing this I will expand the geopolitical focus which will help move focus beyond popular cultural items as discrete objects, to reveal the complex relations and sites in which geopolitical meaning is generated.

## **2.6. Concluding Summary**

This chapter has explored the foundational work of critical geopolitics which reveals and problematizes the ways various actors employ geographical reasoning in the global political arena. This strand of literature under the banner of popular geopolitics, I argue, offers a productive framework to critically explore the ways in which space, places and identities are constituted in military-themed videogames. Yet, as I have also argued popular geopolitics has yet to explore sufficiently the wider sites and relations in which the geopolitical is encountered. To do this I argue for the need to adopt a 'multiperspective' approach which draws on a range of critical theories and focuses on representation, consumption and production. I define this as popular geopolitics 3.0. This approach is sensitive to different sites in which geopolitical meaning is constituted, within the everyday, but also wider political economic structures that affect the production of geopolitical knowledge. The next chapter explores the methods adopted when implementing a popular geopolitics 3.0 framework.

## Chapter 3. Methodology

As noted in the previous chapter, a major criticism of critical and popular geopolitical enquiry has been its obsessive focus on text, representation and discourse. While these are important in revealing the cultural constructions of place, space, identity and power, there is a danger of methodological and empirical stagnation. As recent feminist interventions have passionately argued, theoretical and methodological approaches need to consider the situated, embodied, and everyday ways geopolitical power operates (Massaro & Williams 2013). A key argument of this thesis is for a multiperspectival approach within a popular geopolitical analysis. Accounting for these different perspectives a mixed-methodological approach that is sensitive to the local, and broader contexts and sites of geopolitics in case study research is required (Habashi & Worley 2009). This chapter will critically discuss and expand on the methods undertaken during the research. These include; discourse analysis, semi-structured interviews, gaming interview, (video) ethnography, and documentary analysis. In doing so, it pushes forward popular geopolitical methodological enquiry, by moving beyond textual analysis.

### 3.1 Studying Videogames

Geopolitics is a key backdrop to the storyline of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*. Whilst *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* is a fictional story, the series uses ‘real’ place settings and claims of military authenticity to “designate a world and ‘fill’ it with certain dramas, subjects, histories and dilemmas” (Ó Tuathail & Agnew 1992 p.194). How these ideas about global politics are portrayed in the virtual worlds of the game can be understood as geopolitical discourse.

Discourses are articulated in various visual and textual forms. Rose (2012 p.142) notes that they offer “particular knowledge about the world which shape[s] how the world is understood and how things are done in it”. Popular geopolitics has thus examined the ways discourses of space, place, politics, power and identity are embedded in a variety of popular cultural forms. As a result the method of discourse analysis has become the “bread-and-butter business of critical geopolitics” (Müller 2013 p.49). Yet, as we have previously discussed, there is a growing concern that critical geopolitics has elevated

discourse, text and representation over practice (Müller 2008). However, while I am sympathetic to the need to move beyond discourse, it still remains integral to the critical geopolitical project for a number of reasons.

Firstly, understanding and critically investigating discourses remains rooted in the ethos of critical geopolitics. Woodward and Jenkins' (2012) analysis of military memoirs, draws attention to the continuing need for critical geopolitics to remain attentive to texts and how they shape civilian understandings of the geographies of military violence. They suggest that rather than moving beyond the text, there still remains a need to attend to understandings of "how rationalisations of military power and the legitimization of military action are articulated" (Woodward & Jenkins 2012 p.498). In this case, military videogames are rife with prominent themes, representations and discourses concerning the application of state-sponsored violence. Despite the expansion of the critical geopolitical project, discourse is still considered fundamental in shaping and constituting the political world.

Secondly, there is need to consider specifics of the medium itself and how this influences and shapes the projection of geopolitical discourse. Dittmer (2007) gives the example of the comic book and the 'tyranny of the serial'. Put simply the majority of comic books are structured in terms of a continuous serial narrative. In attending to the specifics of the medium we can begin to attend to the ways different mediums limit and propagate particular geopolitical discourses. This raises questions concerning the videogame medium and how we see the structuring of geopolitical discourse. In this respect we can note how the game actually orders and spatialises global politics. This can involve an analysis of the game narrative, the characters, and the landscapes and how they represent forms of statecraft, establish particular identities and geopolitical orderings. However, although these are important aspects of the game, this ignores the fact that players are not just observing, but are actively engaged in navigating and interacting with the game world. Therefore, we need to also consider how the game rules and logics predispose players to particular geopolitical sensibilities. We need to consider the ways the game structures define how we engage with the virtual world and geopolitical discourse.

While discourse analysis remains a staple part of the critical geopolitics project, there lacks methodological discussion or transparency on how authors conduct discourse analysis (Müller 2011). This remains true beyond critical geopolitics literature, and there is argued to be no universal or systematic approach to undertaking discourse analysis. Instead, discourse analysis should be attuned to the materials researched, the researcher's motives and the conceptual framework used (Howarth 2005). As these points have demonstrated further work and engagement is needed to understand the discourses, texts and representations of geopolitics. In this section, I draw on the methods employed in considering and analysing the three videogames in the series *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*.

### ***Discourse Analysis and Videogames***

Methodological approaches to the analysis of videogames have been debated and contested within a number of disciplines. Indeed, the nature of the medium and its relatively recent arrival into academic discussions has stimulated questions in regards to what methodological approaches are best suited to analysing the medium (Ensslin 2012). This methodological pluralism and openness has raised concern for scholars, such as Aarseth (2003 p.1), who candidly suggests that “[videogames] are analysed willy-nilly, with tools that happen to be at hand such as film theory, or narratology”. This reveals one of two different schools of thought that have emerged in the academic study of videogames, that of ‘narratologists’ and that of ‘ludologists’. Both these approaches provided different ways of considering and studying the videogame medium.

Aarseth (2003) can be considered a proponent of the ‘Ludological School’ of thought. This approach suggests that videogames require their own theoretical and methodological toolkits, which take into consideration the medium's unique properties. For many, there has been an overbearing attempt to colonise videogames by adopting methodological approaches that are misplaced and misguided (Aarseth 2004; Eskelinen 2004). For them there is a tendency to consider videogames in the same vein as film, thus overlooking the unique properties of the videogame medium such as the rule-based logics which players interact with.

Counter to this, the 'Narratological School' suggests that videogames can be considered using the vocabulary, methods and theories of other disciplines. Narratological approaches are important especially if we are to consider that videogames tell stories. As Atkins (2003 p.10) attests, videogames can be considered a "fictional text" and while ludologists may consider the unique properties of the medium i.e. the game's rules, it is yet to offer a radical break in the ways we tell stories (Atkins 2003). For instance, videogames often utilise techniques and technologies that mirror cinematic and filmic conventions (King & Krzywinska 2002). If we consider the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series, the gameplay is interspersed with cutscenes. These cutscenes are the "narrative phases of the game" (Neitzel 2014 p.615) and often mirror cinematic conventions in their appearance and form. They are often short non-interactive segments that contextualise the player's objectives, the overall narrative and the time and place within the virtual world.

However, there is a need to be sensitive to the issues of play and representation and how they intermingle in the event of playing a videogame. Many have questioned these schools of thought and their arguments, and more recently questioned whether these debates have actually occurred (Frasca 2003). Ash and Gallacher (2011 p.354) suggest these debates can be seen as counterproductive if we are to consider that "when playing a game many users experience the game as a story with a narrative as well as a complex rule-based system". Therefore methodological toolkits from different disciplines are productive in revealing the complexities of the medium and various ways they can be studied and understood.

In the case of this research, the central aims and objectives were to apply a discourse analysis to the *Modern Warfare* series. But with the aforementioned issues concerning the specificities of the video game medium, we need to consider:

"the complexity of applying discourse analysis to videogames and gaming is mostly due to the fact they are 'played' rather than 'read', 'watched' or 'listened' to" (Ensslin 2012 p.25).

Furthermore videogames are multimodal, in that they communicate meaning through their visual images, audio and interactive interfaces. There are numerous approaches to consider when applying discourse analysis in

exploring the geopolitical discourse of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series. If we are to consider the way geopolitical discourse is generated in the game world we must consider not just the representative features, but also how the rules and structures define how players engage with the game. This suggests that players of videogames are not sedentary observers but active contributors and participate in shaping in the meaning of the videogame. Overall the research attempted to take into account these tensions and particularities of the medium.

### ***Research Design***

In endeavouring to examine the ways geopolitical discourse emerges out of the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series, I adopted two forms of analysis as outlined by Mäyrä (2008); *structural gameplay* and *thematic gameplay*. *Structural gameplay analysis* is attentive to the structures and rules which govern player's interactions with the virtual world. A *thematic analysis*, on the other hand, is "sensitive to the symbols and messages conveyed by the game's operation as a cultural medium" (Mäyrä 2008 p.166). Therefore specific attention was given to the mechanics of gameplay alongside the visual, audio and narrative schemes depicted in the virtual worlds.

In this case, guided by the research aims and objectives, the campaign modes of all three *Modern Warfare* videogames were analysed. The campaign mode offers predefined moments of gameplay which are narrated through the use of cutscenes. Here, I used a *thematic analysis* and considered the gameplay narrative, the characters and the virtual landscapes. This was attentive to the ways space, place and identity inscribed particular cultural and political meanings. A *structural analysis* was used to focus on the in-game rules that governed how players interacted while playing the campaign mode. For example, here the focus was on aspects of the game, such as cutscenes, and how they are unique and key structuring devices in how videogame narratives are conveyed. These forms of analysis were guided by a number of research questions which directed the research data collection (see *Appendix A*).

Central to understanding the ways in which geopolitical discourse and meaning is constituted, play is required to understand the videogame and its content. This is integral in order to understand the representative features and how

these can be interacted with, and to gain knowledge of, the narrative and its evolution throughout the series. Attention to the game content also exposes the intertextual nature of the medium. For instance, videogame cutscenes strongly mirror the conventions of cinema and enrich the fictional story. Furthermore, the landscapes, characters and narrative in videogames draw on other texts. Playing the game provides an insight into intertextuality in terms of the game's content. Beyond a specific emphasis on the content, playing also provided the comprehension of the game's particularities, how the game world unfolds and how the rules both enable and foreclose playing possibilities. Put simply, playing permits the researcher to understand how the imagined worlds and rules based logics interact and shape player engagement and the subsequent meaning of the game world.

### ***Positionality and Researching Videogames***

Rarely discussed in undertaking critical studies of videogames are the actual procedures, methodological practices and issues concerning subjectivity of the researcher. These concerns are shared by feminist geographers who have called for greater attention to the complex power relations and structures prevalent in the research process and which have varying degrees of implications on knowledge production (Rose 1997; England 1994; Gold 2002). Indeed, as discussed in *Chapter 2*, critical geopolitics has scrutinised the notions of 'objectivity' professed by earlier intellectuals work. However, critical geopolitics can also be challenged for perpetuating the same apparent detached gaze of the intellectual and the texts that they so readily criticise (Sparke 2000). Questions concerning the subjectivity and positionality of researchers with critical geopolitics scholarship have been largely absent (c.f. Benwell 2014). These questions become more pertinent when studying videogames, as I shall discuss.

For Jennings (2015 p.2) games studies need to consider the subjectivity of the critic as "central, unavoidable, and necessary". As a player of the *Modern Warfare* series games prior to the PhD project, I had to negotiate a position of "playing for fun" to "playing for analysis", with the latter requiring the ability "to communicate and critically examine one's experiences with the subject of study (Mäyrä 2008 p.165). As I have outlined, the purpose of the research was to

undertake a critical geopolitical reading of the series. Compared to “playing for fun”, I had to make a series of choices and considerations which were based around how the games propagate geopolitical discourses. This is not an objective reading, rather “a selective reading” (Keogh 2014 cited in Jennings 2015 p.4). It is important to recognise that the interpretation offered is entangled in my own positionality and motives to undertake a particular reading of the series which focuses on the ways it represents geopolitics.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, this reading was enabled via play, which shaped my analysis and understanding of the game.

Unlike critical readings of film *per se*, videogames require the researcher to interact, and thus influence and shape the meaning of the game itself. Malliet (2007 np) elaborates:

“a researcher not only makes an interpretation of the audio-visual output that appears on the computer or console screen, but also contributes actively to the messages conveyed”.

Rather to be seen as an objective pursuit, the researcher actively makes decisions, choices and interactions that transform and actualise the text they are engaging with. Different playing styles, changing play configurations and engaging with different aspects of the gameplay are not trivial factors, but can change the game’s meaning and understanding and thus need to be carefully considered (Aarseth 2003).

For many scholars, to fully comprehend and critically analyse videogames requires the researcher to play the game. This provides a first-hand comprehensive understanding and experience of the logics of the game and how it functions, alongside an engagement and observation of the virtual worlds themselves. In a similar vein to Šisler (2008a np), I “played the [Modern Warfare series] while taking notes and screenshots of relevant visual signifiers, recording the narrative and analysing the structure of gameplay”. However, unlike Šisler (2008a) who played through the videogames once, I played through the campaign mode of each of the games multiple times. Indeed this was important in noting down the narrative, noting the exchanges between characters, and performing a detailed analysis of the virtual landscape.

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<sup>6</sup> In *Chapters 5* and *6*, I consider other player’s readings of the geopolitical content of the *Modern Warfare* series.

Replaying the games allowed me to return to particular aspects of the videogame and also to consider the different playing styles, such as playing to unlock achievements, or playing different difficulty settings and how this affected the gameplay and narrative.

However, while multiple 'play-throughs' give a greater ability to appreciate the game, the fleeting, fast-paced nature of the gameplay made it difficult to record notes. To overcome this, the use of a Dictaphone allowed me to record relevant thoughts without disrupting the flow of the game. Additionally, the use of "non-playing sources" (Jennings 2015 p.11) also proved helpful in recording the game's narrative. *YouTube*, for instance, have a number of clips of players completing 'play-throughs' of the games. This gave me an opportunity to examine not only different styles of play performed by different players, but importantly gave myself time to note down the dialogue in cutscenes which, unlike during the actual gameplay, cannot be paused thus allowing me to take notes. The *Call of Duty Wiki* website (2015) also disclosed a wealth of information relating to the Modern Warfare series, offering detailed information on the storyline, the characters, the weapons and the locations. However, the ability for anyone to upload and edit information presented issues of reliability and therefore these were not considered as primary sources of information. Nevertheless, these "non-playing sources" became valuable resources in recording the game's narrative.

### ***Data Analysis***

The data was collected, transcribed and stored in NVIVO. In order to uncover the geopolitics of the videogame itself an "intensive deconstruction of [each of the videogames] was then undertaken to uncover and analyze the myths, discourses, stereotypes, metaphors and narrative structures" (McFarlane & Hay 2003 p.215-216). As such the videogame transcripts were analysed, which required playing back particular moments of gameplay. Taking into consideration the thematic content, the game narrative was analysed and coded under the broad headings of *space/place*, *identity*, and *statecraft*. For *space/place* attention was given to the use of place and space within the game narrative and the visual and representational aspects of each of the individual missions engaged with. *Identity* focused on the identity of the military avatar

assumed by the player and also other non-player characters (NPCs) within the game such as how the enemies were represented. In terms of *statecraft*, I focused on the role of military violence and how this was presented in the game's narratives. A *Word Document* was used to colour code the game's narratives while screenshots were also added and annotated. In adopting a *structural analysis* focus was given to the game's rules and how the game narrative was structured. This involved a detailed analysis of the game rules and logics and the ways cutscenes were used and deployed in the game.<sup>7</sup>

### **3.2 Studying Players**

A key part of the research was to understand how players interact, experience and understand the geopolitics of the *Modern Warfare* series. Within popular geopolitics a number of empirical studies have begun to analyse the ways individuals interpret popular geopolitical texts. Both Dittmer (2008) and Dodds (2006) have explored online forums and websites where individuals discuss and debate various forms of popular culture. Further popular geopolitical led audience studies have also included analysis of comments made by individuals on the video sharing website *YouTube* (Purcell *et al.* 2010) and questionnaires and surveys distributed to film audiences (Anaz & Purcell 2010; Dittmer & Dodds 2013; Anaz 2014; Woon 2014). Whilst useful these particular methods have limitations in respects of how we come to understand the relationship between audience and geopolitics.

The use of web-based or survey methods, although enabling a potentially wide sample, depersonalises the consumption experience. They obscure the finer details of how popular culture is actually consumed and limits the expression of people's attitudes towards their social, political and cultural engagement with the text in question. For instance, the acknowledgement of background information and the subject positions of participants are lacking in these accounts. Also, online forums are not just restrictive in terms of knowing identity but along with questionnaire surveys, they can also be seen as limiting in regards to what information participants disclose. Escaping such research accounts are the audience's detailed insights into the everyday engagements with the media in question and negotiations of popular culture, further detailed

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<sup>7</sup> Notes and annotations were made around the questions as outlined in (*Appendix A*).

expressions of identity and subjectivity formation, and extended commentaries towards the content itself. Instead, an interview-based approach can allow extended discussion and response from participants to develop an understanding of the relationship between media text and audience. This can help provide detailed accounts of audience consumptive behaviours and audience interpretations of the game's geopolitical and militaristic content.

### ***Player-Centred Methodological Approaches***

Investigations of players in the wider videogame literature, according to Egenfeldt-Nielsen *et al.* (2013), can be divided into two perspectives: that of the 'active user' and that of an 'active media'. Active user perspectives focus on what players actually do with videogames, adopting qualitative methodological approaches to explore the individual's experience of videogames. Whereas an 'active media' approach, rooted in a media-effects tradition, examines the role of videogames in influencing a mostly passive recipient. Such studies tend to be informed by the theories of behaviourism and social psychology, which engage predominately with quantitative methodological approaches. There are a number of important differences between these two approaches, both of which shape how we come to understand and define the relationship between players and military-themed videogames.

Within 'active media' approaches there remains a critical interest in academic and media commentaries on the supposed effects of military-themed videogames on individual behaviour. Commentaries have positioned such games amidst debates around the effects of videogames on violent and psychological individual behaviour (c.f Greitemeyer & Mügge 2014). A good example of this approach is Festl *et al.*'s. (2013) study of German gamers. This research sought to assess the extent to which individual engagements with videogames might be associated with a greater development of militaristic attitudes. In total 4,500 gamers were questioned through a telephone survey about their attitudes to the military vis-à-vis their engagement with videogames. These were measured alongside various social demographic data. These were measured against what Festl *et al.* (2013) define as the New Militarism Short Scale (NMSS), which is based on three thematic lines of enquiry; i) soldier admiration; ii) army necessity; and iii) terrorist threat. Individuals were asked to

respond to six statements relating to these themes using a Likert-type scale. Overall, the research led to the conclusion that the type, frequency of play and whether or not the individual played military first-person shooters did not appear to influence and shape militaristic attitudes. Instead, stronger militaristic attitudes were suggested to be attributable to age (with older persons being more militaristic), to lower educational attainment and to incidences of authority-orientated aggressive personalities.

While quantitative approaches are suitable for collecting factual aspects of people's engagements and purport to provide large representative samples, the methods and conclusions provided can be considered limiting. These studies can often overlook the "micro-reality of confusingly kaleidoscopic everyday experiences" (Schrøder *et al.* 2003 p.31) in what it is to play and engage with virtual war. The formal conditions under which this sort of research often takes place can also be readily criticised on methodological grounds as it arguably overlooks the context in which video games are actually played (see Egenfeldt-Nielsen *et al.* 2013; Elson & Ferguson 2014 for more detailed discussion). Put simply, the finer details of the multifaceted and contingent ways in which military videogames are consumed, understood and internalised, and how this relates to the individual's attitudes and understandings of the military, is masked by/in 'active media' analysis.

Qualitative methods offer alternative ways of gaining detailed accounts of players' engagements, and are increasingly being used to explore audience reception of popular and visual cultures (Schrøder *et al.* 2003; Rose 2012). By moving beyond a purely academic reading to studying everyday audience engagements, it can reveal "how players connect their war-themed video game experiences with their real-life understandings of war and politics" (Penney 2010 p.194). These sorts of studies suggest a far from unequivocal relationship between play and militarised attitudes, however. Huntemann's (2010) study, for instance, explores and discusses players' interactions, experiences, and practices and demonstrates the complexity of this relationship, concluding that "while players clearly do not wholly accept the ideology about militarism embedded in these games, they do not wholly reject it either" (Huntemann 2010 p.232). These qualitative approaches enable individuals to respond on their own terms and to clarify and expand on particular practices and thoughts (Bertrand

& Hughes 2005 pp.74-82). Thus talking to, and opening up a dialogue with players, enables them to define their experiences, engagement and understanding of military-themed games.

A number of methodological approaches were adopted in order to try and gain a detailed understanding of playing *Modern Warfare*. These included short informal interviews, at places such as the game's launch night; face-to-face interviews; gaming interviews; interviews via email, and as I will discuss later in the chapter video ethnography (see *Appendix B* for list of interviews).

### ***Sample: Recruiting Participants***

Sourcing willing participants for the research played an important part in the research process. While these were important considerations for the research, I was less concerned with achieving a 'representative sample' as sought by Festl *et al.* (2013). This study was based on a relatively small group of individuals, which "offer reflections, insights, and understandings" of the *Modern Warfare* series "that will be increasingly convincing although never conclusive" (Egenfeldt-Nielsen *et al.* 2013 p.271). The study thus acknowledges that individuals will generate multiple experiences and an array of different meanings in their interaction with the series.

In total 32 interviews were completed between 2010 – 2013 (see *Appendix B*). It is important to note that in this thesis I will also use unpublished data collected from my Master's thesis where I conducted interviews with 10 players concerning their engagements with a range of military-themed videogames. The data used refers to when a player discussed their interaction with the *Modern Warfare* series and this will be acknowledged in the text.

To begin with I used a variety of recruitment techniques in order to gain willing participants. This focussed on attempting to recruit individuals by advertising on video gaming website forums. I also engaged with the multiplayer option of the *Call of Duty* series using Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP)<sup>8</sup> system asking individuals while playing the game. This was often met with an indifferent or hostile response (see Hudson & Bruckman 2004). These obstacles led me to

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<sup>8</sup> Voice Over Internet Protocol allows players to connect and talk while playing via the use of a headset. This is usually found in multiplayer options of the videogame and requires an internet connection.

consider an alternative approach which would allow me to meet players and to conduct face-to-face interviews.

A convenience sampling approach was adopted (Corbin & Strauss 2008 p.153). This specifically sought players of the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series in the vicinity of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK. In order to advertise and recruit potential participants, leaflets and posters were left at a local LAN gaming centre<sup>9</sup>, local videogame stores and the two university campuses in the city. I suggested that participants were welcome 'with any level of experience' as it was my intention to attract a spectrum of players with varying engagements.

The majority of participant responses were attracted as a result of a poster campaign around the two university campuses; Newcastle University and Northumbria University, UK (see *Appendix C*). The campaign attracted a range of students who, by virtue of their academic disciplines and level of seniority, presented me with a range of different critical interpretations. However, not all respondents were students. Participants who worked in the two universities in non-academic positions, or who had been notified by a student friend, also volunteered and participated in the research. Advertising on campus also encouraged international students to participate in the research which offered geographically contextualised understanding of a player's interaction and understanding of the game's content.

### ***Interview Approach and Questions***

Initially, the individual interviews took place face-to-face at a variety of locations depending on the participant's schedule. The interview questions themselves were designed in order to advance a wider understanding of consumptive behaviour, alongside player reflections on the militaristic and geopolitical content (see *Appendix D*).

A semi-structured interview approach was adopted. This approach is defined by Bertrand and Hughes (2005 p.79) who suggest that:

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<sup>9</sup> A LAN gaming centre is a business primarily used for the purpose of video gaming. Computers are setup to allow users to play videogames individually, or through a Local Area Network (LAN) which allow individuals to connect and compete with other players.

“Acting as moderator, the interviewer guides the interview, but permits the various aspects of the subject to arise naturally, in any order, and can allow digressions if they seem likely to be productive”.

The semi-structured interview allowed a degree of flexibility. The interview process began with the participants being given a brief introduction to the research and the structure of the interview. Important ethical procedures were outlined in terms of obtaining informed consent and stating clearly how the interviews would be used (see *Appendix E*). All interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and subsequently transcribed while anonymity was also assured in the transcription process.

The interview questions themselves were based around three themes. Firstly, a set of questions examined the player’s background and biography as a gamer. Answers to these questions provided an overall picture of how video gaming, and more specifically military-themed gaming, was situated (temporally, spatially) amidst the individual’s everyday life. These initial questions helped create a rapport and were aimed at easing the participant into the interview (Fielding 1993; Latham 2003; Hay 2010). The questions determined the domestic setting in which playing war took place, the level of engagement with the series and why they played.

Secondly, questions were developed which centred on individual attitudes and reception towards the militaristic and geopolitical content, and on how the *Modern Warfare* series represented global politics and the military. These questions focused on the single campaign mode of the game, discussing the game’s geopolitical narrative, representations of the military and identification with the avatar.

A third theme of questions sought to examine the affective, emotive and embodied experiences of playing war. Videogames encourage a range of affective states and individuals are rarely passive in their interactions with the virtual worlds. Allied with the recent interest in acknowledging the individual experiences of war (Sylvester 2011), the questions aimed to consider and push understandings of *what it is to play war*. In these instances players were asked to recall the experiential aspect of playing virtual war.

The latter themes of questions were difficult for participants to engage with, especially away from the context of play; endeavouring to solicit responses concerning the experiences of play proved difficult. Many players found it difficult to articulate clearly their experiences of playing virtual war away from the game. For instance, in considering how military-themed videos might influence recruitment, one participant responded:

“It is really weird playing them. There is a weird feeling there. It does tap into something, but I don’t know what it is classed as”

(*Malcolm*)

Indeed, when asked to reflect on experiences of the gameplay players were hesitant and found it difficult to recall their experiences. As a consequence, I decided to adopt another approach, a ‘gaming interview’ in order to capture playing war *in situ*.

### ***Talking and Playing: The Gaming Interview***

In an attempt to overcome the detachment felt by some participants during the interview process, I adopted a ‘gaming interview’ approach. This approach is implemented by Schott and Horrell (2000) as a method to explore specific instances in which female gamers engage with the technologies of video games and how they attribute meaning to their everyday experiences of play. This technique involved the researchers interviewing female players at their home while they played on videogames. This, as Schott and Horrell (2000 p.40) claim:

“provided direct access to the girl gamers’ playing style and habits, generated new questions and permitted the girl gamer to express their views on gaming whilst engaging directly with the technology”.

Adopting this technique offered a means of situating questions and responses in the context of playing war and of questioning players as they were immersed in militarised virtual environments. Participants were given the freedom to select a game to play from the *Modern Warfare* series and while they played, I observed and asked interview-style questions similarly as I would have in a face-to-face interview. This style of interview encouraged players to think and explain their gameplay practices and reception of the militaristic content.

By playing the game during the interview, players were able to reflect on the gameplay and the videogame’s visual content. While playing, one participant

paused as the cross hair of the gun he was controlling settled on a virtual enemy combatant:

“This guy hasn’t got a name, not a house, or a job, or a wife or anything. If you can simulate that then you probably wouldn’t want to kill them. Then you might turn around to your commanding officer and have a button that says ‘why’ and just keep hitting it until you’re court marshalled and then you get sent home as a disgraced soldier that wouldn’t kill...”

*(Simon: unpublished MA data).*

This moment of play enabled the participant to demonstrate, in the context of the game, the moral conundrum faced - or not - when killing enemy avatars. This drew attention to the game mechanics which allow only certain actions from the player, mainly the enactment of military violence. Through playing the game, particular landscapes, characters and militarised content were discussed which alluded to how players navigate and generate meaning from the virtual worlds.

As well as acting as a useful rejoinder to the face-to-face interview, the gaming interview also assists in producing a more informal or “play like atmosphere” (Schott & Horrell 2000 p.40). Here player responses could be contextualised in terms of actually playing. The interview process required players to critically think and engage with their interactions in the military-themed videogames, verbalising their thoughts, practices and interpretation of playing virtual war.

While the gaming interview offered an insight into a player’s actual reflections and gaming practices into playing war, it still removed the player from their ordinary setting of play. What became evident, for instance, were the particularities of individual’s set-up and organisation towards playing war. There were practical instances when players were unable to engage with the gaming interview. One participant mentioned that they were a “PC gamer” and they suggested they could not use the Xbox 360 which was set-up for the purpose of the interview. Lost from the interview process was the idiosyncratic nature of player’s own technical and hardware set-up which enabled them to engage in virtual war.

The contrived nature of the interview process was also evident as one player mentioned the fact that the volume of the videogame was reduced in order for me to effectively record the interview. For the player, this removed them from

being immersed in the virtual battlefield and instead meant they were more conscious of the actual setting they were in. Engaging people in the interview process was also difficult as one individual suggested that they were unable to talk and play at the same time. These exchanges alluded to the complex, banal everyday encounters of playing war which are difficult to address and capture.

While the gaming interview offered further insights into the actual relationship between player and military content, it did so by taking it out of the everyday context of playing war. It thus forced the participant into a reinterpretation of their interaction with the game, focusing specifically on the militarised and geopolitical elements of the game. As indicated by the responses it is difficult to account for how players actually engage with the militarised content away from the intrusion posed by the interview process. In order to gain further detail in the actual moments of play another approach was adopted which would examine playing virtual war *in situ*.

### **3.3 Studying Play**

A reoccurring discussion that came out of the interviews was the inability of participants to recount their experiences, performances and emotional states during play. Müller (2015 p.417) suggests that rather than overlooking these hesitations and difficulties, the absence of words or the struggle to articulate is indicative of “the different, more-than-representational registers at work that disrupt the smooth sheen of meaning production”. In order to further unpack the significance of what it is to play in these virtual worlds alternative methodological approaches need to be considered (Dewsbury 2010). For Garrett and Hawkins (2014 p.146), video ethnography offers methodological potential through its ability to record “iterations of the non/more-than-representational through the affective, the atmospheric, the material and the relational”. Here, the use of video camera was utilised as a technology to aid the capturing of the complex and contingent relations between environment, technologies, bodies and the geopolitics. Moreover, it was an approach which captured virtual war in its situated context and the embodied experience of geopolitics.

## ***Using Video Based Methods***

Video based methods and technologies have increasingly been incorporated into geographical methodologies (Laurier & Philo 2006; Woodyer 2008; Simpson 2011). The use of a video camera differs in a number of instances in geographical research, from a technology used to disseminate research, to capturing social phenomena and data, and through providing creative ways of bridging the researcher/researched divide by encouraging participatory approaches to recording and analysing data (Garrett 2011). More recently, the video camera has played an increasingly integral role in capturing playing videogames (Ash 2010a; Thornham 2011; Laurier & Reeves 2014). These approaches have moved attention away from what players say they do – as through purely interview-based methods - to what players actually do while playing videogames (Boellstorff 2006). In this research I was interested in capturing what it is to play virtual war and to focus on the embodied experiences of those entering these militaristic and geopolitical worlds. Indeed, the video camera offers a way of capturing the complex relations and encounters between screens, bodies and environment which can evade the sensory capacity of the researcher or the event of play (Giddings 2009; Ash 2010a). The deeply embodied and experiential videogames world and its complex, dynamic contingent relations are in a constant flux and so difficult to capture.

For Payne (2010 p.208 italics in the original), methodologies need to be sensitive to the context, in what he defines as ludic war<sup>10</sup>, takes place:

“...the *where* (i.e., social setting) and *how* (i.e., social relations) must be considered alongside the *what* (i.e., video game text) of gameplay, as well as its connection to the culturally dominant symbolic regimes...”

The use of video ethnography enables us to capture the setting in which virtual war is played, and the ways the place of play is prepared and organised. While virtually placing players in distant locations, gameplay itself occurs in specific places and through an assemblage of social, technological and material relations. By attending to the social relations and situated context, Payne (2010 p.208) remarks how “power hierarchies in fictional, war-torn synthetic worlds

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<sup>10</sup> Ludic war – “the activity of playing war or military-themed video games alone or with others” (Payne 2010, p.207).

[become] reified and replayed in the real world”. As such the observations reveal the ways the ideological and militarised content pervades into the social spaces of the gaming centre.

Initially an experimental pilot study was undertaken. This allowed the testing out of appropriate technological arrangements and an indication of the data. I filmed myself and other participants in a studio space at Newcastle University. As *Figure 3.1* shows, the set-up involved a camera facing the individual, and a camera recording the ensuing game play, along with *X-Box 360*, *Modern Warfare* games and seating.



**Fig 3.1:** Video camera set-up at Newcastle University Culture Lab Studio (Source: Author).

Issues became evident in this approach, drawing people into a prescribed environment which takes away from the everydayness of play. Despite undertaking pilot studies, the artificial set-up had its limitations. Namely it overlooked the importance of place/space in the research process (Jones 2008), and the actual situated geographies of media consumption (Adams 2009). Playing virtual war usually takes place as participants noted, in the domestic setting which was organised in particular ways. Subsequently, the design changed to gain insight in to the situated practice of gaming, which was sensitive to the location in which people played. Situating play in its context

offers further insights in to how geopolitical discourses emanates and is constituted in place. This resulted in a number of changes to the research design.

### ***Researching Virtual War in the Home***

In total five participants were approached to film at the location they played videogames. This comprised of sessions of 1 - 2 hours of video recording while the game was played. In this case the set-up involved just one video camera due to practical issues such as space and also to avoid the video camera having an obvious presence within the room.<sup>11</sup> The chose was given to the participant what games and game-mode were chosen. Here the multiplayer option became a popular choice (*Chapter 5* and *Chapter 6*).<sup>12</sup>

An important point to mention is that the participants used were my friends who I had known for a number of years and I have played videogames with in the past in a non-research setting. Besides being a 'safe' location to conduct research, the established relationship between me and the participant was also advantageous. A rapport was already established. In this case I was not a new-comer to the situation knowing the people and place of play (unlike Brooker 2002). I agree with Taylor (2011) that assuming what she refers to as an 'intimate insider' position offers a number of benefits including the generation of in-depth details and understandings compared to non-friend participants, the ability to remain in regular contact, and an increased level of perception concerning intended meanings.

However, this is not to ignore that the negotiation between researcher and friend had effects on the research process. Throughout the video ethnographic process I felt a tension concerning my identity in terms of the personal – as in my relationship with friends, and professional – as in my position as a researcher (Taylor 2011). This was a difficult position to negotiate and was tested in a number of ways. I felt that my relationship with the friends and their

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<sup>11</sup> See *Chapter 6* for photos of the set-up.

<sup>12</sup> While the game's chosen were largely from the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series. Other games from the franchise were chosen by participants such as *Call of Duty: Black Ops II*. The multiplayer option is largely similar throughout the franchise and moreover, as *Chapter 6* will detail, the main emphasis was considering the everyday contexts of play.

knowledge of my research objectives had implications for how they understood and performed in the recordings. As one friend jokily commented while playing:

“Awwww! Diving kill! Did you see that? Did you see that a bit of aggression coming out there?!” [Laughs – points and looks at the camera]

(Gary: Video Ethnography).

While a flippant remark, it showed awareness of the research process and alluded to a particular understanding of the research. There was also a concern that the very fact we were friends may have exerted pressures to participate (Browne 2003). In attempts to alleviate this, all friends were made aware of the research, something which had been outlined and discussed prior to the research.

The process was not only complicated by the negotiation of the power relations between subject and researcher but also the physical presence of the video camera. Indeed, the object of the video camera became a key actor, not just in its ability to capture data, but in its presence eliciting what has been termed ‘camera consciousness’ (Pink 2013). Here, the presence of a video camera is seen to encourage subjects to regulate their behaviour and comments due to the recording. Certainly the video camera was an object that was a noticeable feature in recording sessions. Setting up the camera in the room was met with flippant remarks, while continual glances towards the camera by the participants were observed throughout the recordings and remarks and comments were made about the camera’s presence. On the other hand, one friend mentioned becoming accustomed to the situation:

“See, I always thought about *Big Brother* and I thought... I thought I’d never like be totally relaxed with all the cameras around but you get used to it. I’ve been here an hour and I totally forgot about it”.

(Dean: Video Ethnography)

During the initial recording, I followed Brooker’s (2002 p.35) guidance, “join[ing] in the discussion rather than leading it or, on the other hand, deliberately keeping quiet”. Yet, I also found it useful in gaining clarification of comments and participant involvement in shaping what was happening on the screen. As such when they made choices and interactions I asked them to expand on

them. The footage also allowed me to play back and act as a cue to seek to clarify certain situations.

The final video was watched while undertaking a preliminary categorisation transcribing the “basic aspects of the activities and events that have been recorded” (Heath *et al.* 2010 p.64). This included annotations that referred to embodied movements, particular situations and noted the context and how things were said i.e. through gestures and other reactions, such as laughter. Emergent themes were coded which were based around comments on the environment of play, the visual content of the videogame, the competitive aspect of play, and embodied reactions.

### **3.4 Studying Production**

Arguably the most underdeveloped aspects of studies of popular geopolitics have been the processes and practices that occur within the development of a ‘final product’. While cultural and media industries are argued to have defining “role in shaping the knowledge, values and beliefs of people and institutions in modern societies” (Hesmondhalgh 2006 p.1-2), there has been little empirical attention to these actors within popular geopolitics. In focusing on producers we turn to the importance of marketing, advertising and promotion of popular cultural artefacts.

To make sense of this I turn to Rose’s (2012) seminal work on visual methodologies to demonstrate the range of production sites. Rose suggests that the site of production of visual images can be seen through three different modalities; *technological*, *compositional* and *social*. *Technological*, in this case, refers to the visual technology used and the medium itself which has an overall effect on how the image is made, presented and consumed. *Compositional* notes how the notion of genre guides, conditions and governs the production. Thirdly, Rose identifies *social* relations as key in regards to the final production. This encompasses economic, political and cultural circumstances and the situated contexts in which visual images are produced.

This modality itself produces a number of further frameworks, from Marxist perspectives considering the organisation of the economy, to fine-grained analysis of particular organisations and the cultural contexts of visual

production, and to the scale of the individual producer as central to the meaning of the final product.

How might we consider and come to research these complex and multifaceted processes that go on into the production and marketing of the geopolitics? In considering these interactions, I initially endeavoured to arrange and conduct in-depth interviews with key people involved in the series production. It was anticipated that these interviews would help to reveal the economic, political and social contexts and conditions that govern the game's production, alongside the creative decisions behind the geopolitical scripting of the campaign mode. However, what quickly became apparent was the guarded and cautious nature of videogame development and production, and issues of gaining access to the people involved.

### ***Access Denied***

An enduring issue for conducting research into the cultural and media industry is the ability to gain access (Berger 2012). The lack of research within these organisations can be directed to the often enigmatic nature and difficulties in communicating with media and cultural institutes. Sharp (2003) alludes to the difficulties of gaining access to companies, noting a number of failed attempts to gain access to people and data relating to her study on *Reader's Digest*. Similar to studies that have focused on elite interviews, the ability to access people of authority within particular media institutes and organisations can prove problematic (see Richards 1996). Finding appropriate people and the contact details of relevant individuals was a significant challenge in gaining access to the producers of the *Modern Warfare* series.

In the first instance, web searches were performed in order to locate email addresses of the game developers and studios. However, generic email address was advertised on the website. As experienced by Vallance (2009 p.115), using these emails meant there was a high level of uncertainty whether they would be read or if they would even be acknowledged. I gathered further information around key individuals involved in the single campaign mode of the games. This involved searching the end credits for individuals involved in the script writing. Both social media websites *LinkedIn* and *Twitter* were potential options for gaining individual contact. However, this was problematic for various

reasons. Firstly, only certain people had set-up these accounts and it was difficult to locate particular individuals involved in the scripting of the videogames. Secondly, these outlets have restricted ‘private message’ capabilities<sup>13</sup>. Finally, there was on-going legal action between publishers *Activision* and game designer *Infinity Ward*. This culminated in a mass walk out of employees from *Infinity Ward* in March 2010, and the subsequent restructuring (see *Chapter 7*) which meant it was difficult to locate the whereabouts of individuals.

What became evident was how certain research subjects “are hard to reach and are surrounded by numerous gatekeepers” (Mickey 2012 p.483). As I later found out with informal discussions with other people within the videogame industry, employees of the studios will be contractually bound to avoid directly speaking about the games to the media and other persons. Instead, appropriate access needs to be granted by the publisher – *Activision*.

To coincide with attending a conference in Los Angeles, I tried to gain contact with the game studios and publishers in order to arrange a visit where I could conduct interviews. After eventually getting through via telephone I was directed to the PR department. Here I emailed a proposed plan, which declared my identity, a research schedule, and also cited how the research would be of interest to the company. Yet, after waiting and making repeated attempts over the following months, I eventually received an email declining access and interviews. The email outlined a protectionist stance, stating the refusal was due to the:

“confidential nature of our development process, an interview of this sort isn’t a viable option” (email from *Activision* PR, April 2013).

The competitive nature of the military videogame genre and the rivalry it generates between other companies meant the development process is highly guarded. Also, I feel my identity as a university PhD researcher played a role in the rejection (Stokes 2003 p.107). What became evident in this process was how these companies limit their public accessibility which creates issues in attempting to research into them. While gatekeepers can be a key to help gain

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<sup>13</sup> *Twitter* requires the person to follow you in order to be able to ‘private message’ the person. *LinkedIn*, on the other hand, requires a payment in order to gain access. This also restricted the amount of messages that could be sent.

access to interviews they also have the ability to “erect barriers” (Mickey 2012 p.483) making the companies and their workers appear unapproachable and inaccessible.

This lack of accessibility can lead researchers to conclude that “without gaining access, there can be no research” (Cochrane 1998, p.2124 cited in Mickey 2012). Admittedly, these unsuccessful attempts were disruptive to the overall research aims and objectives, yet this overlooks other sources and potential avenues available to the researcher. To overcome these complications I turned to what Stoke (2003) has identified as ‘documentary evidence’ as a means of exploring the processes and practices of the production of the *Modern Warfare* series.

### ***Documentary Evidence***

Kuus (2008) points to publicly available sources as alternatives to providing closer engagement of the production of geopolitical knowledge. For example, archival records, newspapers and company produced literature can provide an insight into institutions and the people that work for them (Bertrand & Hughes 2005). In the case of the *Call of Duty Modern Warfare* series due to its popularity and global coverage, articles regularly featured in magazines, newspapers, and websites which included interviews with the game’s developers and designers. These accounts begin to reveal the processes of production and the knowledge, practices and relations involved in the design of the games. This presents both an opportunity to understand the wider structures and organisation of *Modern Warfare* production as well as individual accounts of the motives and creative choices in regards to the game’s landscapes, characters and narrative.

The search was conducted online because of ease of accessibility, time and financial considerations, and breadth of available material (see *Appendix F*). Furthermore, *YouTube* videos also proved useful as there were often videos involving interviews with the production team. These were located and transcribed.

The articles all ranged in style and content and thus the process involved continually checking that the materials were appropriate. In this case I was

interested in articles relating to the wider organisational structures involved in the production, alongside a focus on the creative processes that went on into the single campaign mode. Irrelevant articles were excluded from the analysis. The resulting articles and transcriptions were stored in NVIVO and were coded in the emergent themes which included: *role of technology and the videogame medium, military-entertainment-complex, videogame industry, game publisher and studios, campaign mode, realism/authenticity*. These themes considered the details of the geopolitical meaning produced in terms of the game, while sensitive to the broader structures affecting the game and its production, such as the influence of military advisors.

While offering a suitable alternative to interviews, this approach still requires the researcher to consider the reliability and validity of the material (Flowerdew & Martin 2005). *Appendix F* indicates the sources that were consulted and every attempt was made to ensure their reputability and reliability. The fact that the data used was not produced by the researcher means there is a level of uncertainty of the accuracy of the source. It is also important to consider what information is actually disclosed. Kuus (2008 p.2073) mentions how face-to-face interviews with elite actors can often “yield only highly generic statements”, and this was evident in a number of the articles. Interviews in the articles were usually undertaken in the lead up to the videogame’s release and were mainly connected to promotional and advertisement purposes.

Particular ‘buzz words’, key anecdotes, and facts and figures relating to the gameplay featured regularly in the interviews. In this sense, the franchise can be seen to be carefully managed and supervised in relation to the image they are presenting of the game in the public domain. This poses questions and issues in regards to the veracity and the value of the information volunteered by these cultural intermediators “trained to give charming interviews that do not reveal information but feed it” (Kuus 2013 p.118). Despite the issues and limitations faced the sources presented a useful lens through which to explore organisations, institutes and actors involved in the production of the *Modern Warfare* series. Furthermore, these sources did provide insights into creative choices that went into the geopolitical content of the game.

### 3.5 Studying Marketing

An essential part of all popular cultural products is their advertising, promotion and marketing. Along with immersing myself in the virtual worlds of *Modern Warfare*, I collected a plethora of objects and promotional materials related to the franchise. While these collected materials offered insight into the ways the franchise was marketed and promoted, the *Modern Warfare* series also found expression through a number of organised promotional events.

As a result I attended various events, related and unrelated to the *Modern Warfare* series (see *Appendix G*).<sup>14</sup> Initially these events provided the opportunity to recruit and interview participants for the player-based research. On the other hand, they also provided a situated insight into the practices of players and how the *Modern Warfare* world, and its meaning, extends beyond the screen. Events such as the videogame 'launch night, organised for the night of the game's release, aimed to promote and gain wide media visibility and publicity through creating a celebratory spectacle.

The most significant events that I was able to gain access to, and which I will focus my attention on in *Chapter 9*, were the launch nights for both *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* and *Call of Duty: Black Ops II* in London. These launch events are highly exclusive and were nights where the videogame was unveiled to invited guests and celebrities. I attended these events in order to understand how the geopolitical meaning extends and is negotiated beyond the screen. In the following sections I discuss the approach of gaining access and the methods used to study the launch night of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* in November 2011.

#### ***Ethnography and the Modern Warfare 3 Launch Night***

Popular geopolitical scholarship has arguably been less attentive to the material places in which popular culture is situated and how it is experienced and expressed in place. This has encouraged Megoran (2006) to argue passionately for a reinvigoration of methods in the broader political geography discipline, namely that of ethnography which turns towards "people's experiences and

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<sup>14</sup> While the focus was on the *Modern Warfare* series, I also attended promotional events for other military-themed videogames such as *Battlefield* and *Medal of Honor*. This allowed me to initiate contact with potential participants and also provided further context into how military-themed videogames are promoted.

everyday understandings of the phenomena under question” (Megoran 2006a p.622). Such an approach can present grounded and situated understandings of the ways geopolitical discourse is enacted in particular circumstances and places. Adopting an ethnographic approach at the videogame launch night provided a means of examining the ways the videogame’s meaning is experienced and expressed in particular places. Brewer (2000 p.11) suggests, ethnography allows the researcher to:

“understand the social meanings and activities of people in a given ‘field’ or setting, and an approach, which involves close association with, and often participation in, this setting”.

Importantly this recognises and prompts a focus beyond the screen, into the ways geopolitical meaning is constituted and expressed in specific places. An essential part of the research was to consider the ways the game’s militaristic and (geo) political meaning materialises in actual places. To do so required me to gain access to the highly exclusive launch night.

Similar to the experience of contacting individuals within the company, gaining access to the event was fraught with difficulties. The details of the events were not made public due to its exclusive nature. After trying to gain access through online competitions and emailing the game’s publisher, I discussed the difficulties with a friend who was a journalist. By chance he was offered the opportunity to attend the launch night of *Modern Warfare 3* in order to interview various celebratory attendees. As part of this invitation he was able to get me into the event.

### ***Access Granted: Attending the Launch Night***

On 7<sup>th</sup> November 2011 I attended the launch night of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* based in London at Old Billingsgate. In attending, I aimed to experience every aspect of the launch night which included musical performances, a number of interactive stalls, and had the opportunity to talk to and watch others play the videogame itself.

While traditional understandings of ethnography emphasise “establishing a place in some natural setting on a relatively long-term basis” (Emerson *et al.* 2001 p.352), the nature of these one-off promotional events means the ability to collect data was temporary. With time constraints and the contingent nature of

these events, I adopted practices from ‘focused ethnography’ (Knoblauch 2005). While not departing completely from ‘conventional’ notions of ethnography, a ‘focused ethnographic’ approach is sensitive to practicalities in dealing with temporary research fields.

| <b>Conventional ethnography</b>       | <b>Focused ethnography</b>     |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| long-term field visits                | short-term field visits        |
| experientially intensive              | data/analysis intensity        |
| time extensity                        | time intensity                 |
| writing                               | recording                      |
| solitary data collection and analysis | data session groups            |
| open                                  | focused                        |
| social fields                         | communicative activities       |
| participant role                      | field- observer role           |
| insider knowledge                     | background knowledge           |
| subjective understanding              | conservation                   |
| notes                                 | notes and transcripts          |
| coding                                | coding and sequential analysis |

**Fig. 3.2:** Comparison between conventional and focused ethnography (Source: Knoblauch 2005 np).

A process of intense data collection was undertaken and the use of photography and video recording was helpful in capturing the event. This intensive data collection at the launch night (and the other events) involved a multi-methods approach and a focus on the research questions and objectives.

Firstly, a participant observation approach was essential in exploring the place of the launch night and the spontaneity of its multiple happenings and activities (Kearns 2010). This also included attempted informal interviews with participants in order to understand people’s perceptions of the launch night. Within the event space itself interviews were problematic due to the noise of the venue. Therefore, more personal observations of how people were interacting with spaces of the launch night were also noted.

Secondly, these observations were noted in a fieldwork diary. Personal reflections were made along with my experiences. Maps of the spaces were

also sketched and general comments made about the layout and organisation of the event itself. Due to the temporary nature of the event and issues of engaging fully in the field, the experience of the launch night was largely accounted for through my own experience. Thus the process steered towards autoethnography defined as an:

“approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)” (Ellis *et al.* 2010 np).

Autoethnography has similar traits to ethnography yet its distinguishing focus is on the notions of self within a specific social context (Butz & Bessio 2009). In this respect notes from the fieldwork diary were written into more substantial and reflective commentaries, drawing on my particular interactions within the field site. As Ellis *et al.* (2010) suggest autoethnography is not only a process, but a product and the reflections were integral and integrated into the written analysis.

Thirdly, photographs and video clips were taken during the proceeding launch night events to provide a visual account. This involved the practice of ‘walking and photographing’ used to “both represent the experience of, and issues related to, particular environments” (Pink 2013 p.86). This also provides a “visual research diary” (Emmel & Clarke cited in Pink 2013 p.86) to complement additional notations and provided documentation of the event and the multiple happenings and visualisations that were difficult to articulate in written form. This proved invaluable when writing-up the analysis as it provided further essential detail to a fleeting and temporary event.<sup>15</sup> Other sources and materials were also consulted after the event itself. These included video footage and newspaper reports and television footage, which were transcribed and stored.

Fourthly, materials and objects were collected where possible. The celebration of the franchise meant that a variety of objects that the attendees came into contact with, were adorned with references to the *Call of Duty* and embellished with militaristic designs. These included food boxes, drinking cans, menus, stickers, umbrellas. These were evident throughout the venue of the launch night and were duly noted in my fieldwork diary.

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<sup>15</sup> Photos are displayed throughout *Chapter 8*. Additional photos and videos can be found on CD.

### **3.6 Concluding Summary**

Examining the videogame, audiences and production of popular geopolitical texts has required engaging with a number of methods and techniques. Nevertheless, the process of data collection has encountered numerous practical issues and limitations. By exploring the site of text, audience, and production can stretch the resources and time available, especially for an independent researcher. Furthermore, I have noted issues such as accessibility that have been a recurring feature when attempting to examine the processes of production. However, what has become evident throughout are the messy, complex and ever-changing processes involved in research and data collection. The challenges I faced during the process required adaptability, flexibility and innovation in order to open up the possibilities of studying popular geopolitics. The following chapters go on to discuss the empirical findings achieved through the aforementioned methodological approaches.

## Chapter 4. The Popular Geopolitics of *Modern Warfare*

“Your world as you know it is gone. How far would you go to bring it back?”

(Captain Price: *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*)

The aim of this chapter is to perform a critical geopolitical ‘playing’ of the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series. I will be specifically exploring the geographies of conflict presented in all three campaign modes of the series. By this, I am referring to the single player option, where players engage with a number of missions through a set, predefined storyline. The player needs to complete in-game objectives in order to complete missions and therefore advance the game’s narrative.<sup>16</sup> In this chapter, I will firstly investigate the ‘real world’ locations portrayed in the series’ narrative. In the series, geopolitical imaginations of fear and danger are played out in both distant locations and in urban locations considered the ‘homeland’. Secondly, I will turn to the characters in the series, in particular the American and British Special Forces that the player assumes control of. I argue that these can be considered ‘warrior figures’ which have become prominent in the contemporary popular geopolitical imagination (Dalby 2008). Finally, I will consider the medium itself and the geopolitical narrative it conveys. In doing so, I explore the series’ use of the cutscene in providing a geopolitical imaginary *par excellence*. Overall the chapter provides a detailed insight into the important ways that *Modern Warfare* (re)presents a popular geopolitical imagination of the contemporary world.

### 4.1 *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare: The Story*

In the *Modern Warfare* series geography plays a key role in the overall narrative. Similar to other military-themed games, the world is divided into ‘friendly’ and ‘hostile’ territory, the latter susceptible to military intervention.

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<sup>16</sup> In each of the videogames, there are around 15 missions which last between 10 and 30 minutes. After every mission a cutscene, a short non-interactive narrative device, is displayed which provides context to the game’s narrative.

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**Fig 4.1:** Map shows the location of enemies used in military-themed videogames since the year 2000 (Source: Complex Website 2011).

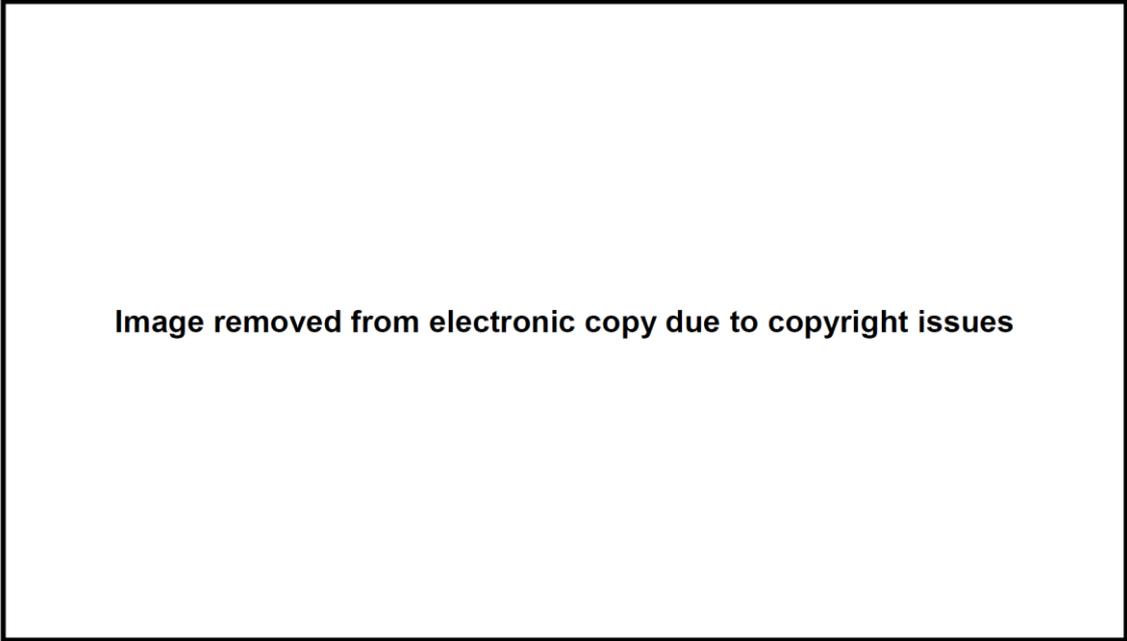
*Figure 4.1* illustrates the recurring ‘enemies’ portrayed in ‘military shooters’ since 2000. It reveals a number of real countries that are understood as hostile and are portrayed as a threat to the wider geopolitical status quo. What is evident from this map is a specific spatialisation of enmity. These threats are largely seen through the eyes of western protagonists. Unsurprisingly, with the vast majority of these videogames produced in the US, the storylines reflect both the historical and contemporary geopolitical fears of the US. Unlike previous games from the *Call of Duty* franchise which concentrated on historical events, such as World War II, the *Modern Warfare* series, first released in 2007, was set in the near future of 2011. As such, the series can be defined as a proleptic game – “set in the present or near future, and present[ing] possible future interventions into present-day ‘hot-spots’” (Smicker 2010 p.113).

Throughout the *Modern Warfare* series there are numerous contemporary and historical geopolitical scripts that come to pervade the narrative. Using Debrix’s (2008) notion of ‘tabloid geopolitics’, Gagnon (2010 np) identifies how *Modern Warfare* and *Modern Warfare 2* utilise imagery and language that “(re)writes post 9/11 fears and anxieties and insecurities” and which “elicit[s] consent for the U.S. military, militarism and the wars the U.S. and its allies wage abroad”. The game’s narrative conveys a sensationalised and simplified world which develops historical and contemporary notions of geopolitical reasoning. These

scripts rekindle fears concerning the possibilities of nuclear warfare, terrorist attacks, post 9/11 domestic and international securitisation, and the utility and necessity of military violence in a dangerous, unstable and 'realist' world. These themes and scripting, amongst others, run throughout the series. In this next section I will outline the narrative-arc of the *Modern Warfare* series, noting the geopolitical context.

### ***Call of Duty: Modern Warfare (2007)***

In the opening scenes of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare (2007)* we are introduced to two ongoing international scenarios. Firstly, we understand there is a civil war in Russia between the Loyalists and Ultranationalist forces. The Ultranationalists are headed by Imran Zakhaev, a Russian arms dealer who used his profits to support a militant group that was intent on Russia reverting back to the Soviet era. The Russian Loyalists, on the other hand, seek to thwart any advances by the Ultranationalists, and to maintain the current Russian Federation. Secondly, a figure in the Middle East named Khaled Al-Asad who we come to know as the 'second most powerful man in the Middle East' is gaining notoriety. From the narrative we understand that his presence requires vigilance from the international community.



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**Fig 4.2:** Al-Asad about to execute the president Yashir Al-Fulani. The Russian ultranationalist leader Imran Zakhaev is in the background (Source: Activision 2007).

Within the opening narrative, Al-Asad is revealed to be planning a coup to overthrow Yasir Al-Fulani, President of an unnamed Middle Eastern country. We come to learn that the coup in the Middle East has been funded and supported by the Ultrationalist group as a means of diverting attention away from the Russian civil war. Rather than drawing attention to the Ultrationalists' plans to take over Russia, the coup is anticipated to preoccupy America and the rest of the international community. Both Russia and the Middle East are quickly identified as places which threaten the global order of which America and her allies are deemed the key custodians. These locations remain ingrained in the American consciousness especially, through past and present cultural plays on national difference which continue to render them as menacing, devious and places of intrigue. These places require constant surveillance, vigilance and, as we come to learn through the gameplay, military intervention.

Despite the series' clear affiliation with an American worldview and perspective, the player is introduced initially to the British SAS who remain both a separate force, yet also united in aiding American interests. One of the main characters in the games is John 'Soap' MacTavish. Soap is part of the SAS team headed by Captain John Price, among other Non-Playable Characters (NPCs) including Gaz, Wallcroft and Griffin. We quickly learn, through the team's interception of a suspicious package on a cargo ship in the Bering Strait, of the relationship between Al-Asad and the Ultrationalists. The player continues to assume the role of the SAS whose mission is to free the incarcerated Nikolai, an informant who supplied the information about the ship, in the Caucasus Mountains, Russia.

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**Fig 4.3:** British SAS on board a ship attempting to gain intelligence (Source: Activision 2007).

After learning that Al-Asad has executed President Al-Fulani, American ground troops are deployed to the region to search for the now rogue Al-Asad. Here, the player assumes the role of American 1<sup>st</sup> Force Recon, taking control of Sergeant Paul Jackson with other NPCs including Lieutenant Vasquez and Staff Sergeant Griggs. The team enters an unknown Middle Eastern city in order to locate and capture Al-Asad. The campaign missions include locating a television broadcasting station from where Al-Asad is suspected of transmitting propaganda. Upon realising that Al-Asad is not at the television station, the group are ordered to help a stranded American Abram tank as it comes under heavy fire from opposing forces. As the team works through various objectives, in what is simply known as 'Capital City', there is a sudden detonation of a nuclear device. The helicopter the playable protagonist (Paul Jackson) is in becomes overcome by the blast and crashes to the ground. We learn that the subsequent nuclear blast kills most of the 1<sup>st</sup> Force Recon division, along with 30,000 American troops.

**Image removed from electronic copy due to copyright issues**

**Fig 4.4:** Nuclear denotation in 'Capital City' (Source: Activision 2007).

The main suspect thought to have detonated the device, Al-Asad, flees to an apparent safe house in Azerbaijan. Under the information supplied by Nikolai, Al-Asad is located by the SAS forces who question his knowledge of the nuclear device. During the interrogation Al-Asad receives a phone call from which we learn about the relationship between himself and Imran Zakhaev. Upon learning of this, Al-Asad is immediately executed by Captain Price and the team's attention is now directed towards Imran Zakhaev.

During a flashback mission, it is revealed that Captain Price had been ordered to assassinate Imran Zakhaev 15 years earlier in Pripyat when he attempted to trade spent nuclear fuel rods for money. Although shooting Zakhaev and removing his arm, the mission failed to kill him.

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**Fig 4.5:** A flashback mission where the player attempts to assassinate Imran Zakhaev. However the player is unable to kill Zakhaev, instead shooting and removing his arm (Source: Activision 2007).

Moving back to the present day, a plan is devised to capture Zakhaev's son Viktor as a means of ransom. However, when the SAS team corner Viktor, he turns a gun on himself. The death of his son enrages Imran who declares war on the western world. As a result, Zakhaev takes control of an Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBM) compound in Northern Azerbaijan and threatens to launch missiles towards the American east coast. As they reach the facility two nuclear warheads are launched towards America. The SAS team infiltrates the facility in order to abort the in-flight missiles. After successfully aborting the missiles, the team flees the area with the Russian Ultranationalists and Zakhaev in pursuit. The final scene sees the player kill Zakhaev.

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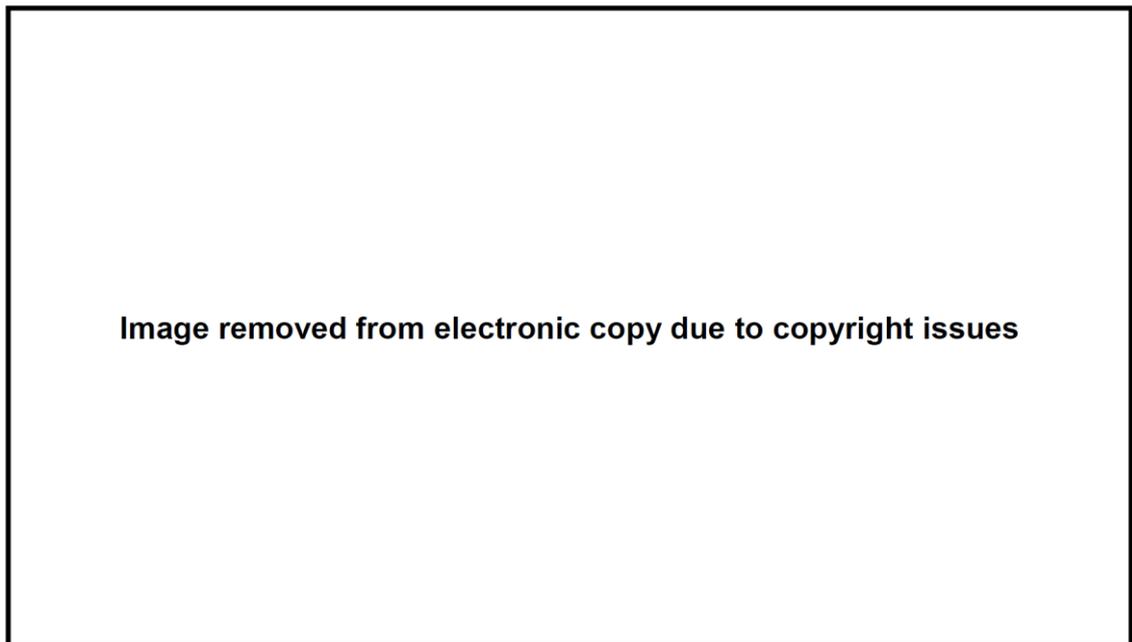
**Fig 4.6:** The final mission where Imran Zakhaev is killed by the player (Source: Activision 2007).

### ***Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 (2009)***

*Modern Warfare 2* was released in 2009 and develops the story five years after the events of *Modern Warfare* (2007). It is set in 2016. Despite the efforts of the international community, the Ultranationalist group has seized control of Russia and Imran Zakhaev has been immortalised as a martyr to the Ultranationalists' cause. An associate of Zakhaev, Vladimir Makarov, an extremist member of the Ultranationalist group, begins a terrorist campaign in Europe.

In the game the player assumes the role of Joseph Allen, a U.S. Army Ranger. After helping to take an Afghan city in the hands of a militia group, Allen is promoted by American Lieutenant General Shepard, who assigns him to a new multinational special operations group, referred to as Task Force 141. The British SAS characters Captain 'Soap' MacTavish and Sergeant Gary 'Roach' Sanderson also become members of this Task Force. The player takes control of 'Roach' as they infiltrate and seek to locate a package in a Russian base in Kazakhstan.

Shepard assigns Joseph Allen to an undercover operation which sees him gain access to, and befriend, Vladimir Makarov. This leads to the infamous mission<sup>17</sup>, where to remain undercover, the player witnesses and takes part in a terrorist operation in a Moscow airport participating in the killing of civilians in the lobby. At the end of the mission Makarov turns the gun on and kills Joseph Allen, revealing Makarov's awareness that Allen was an undercover operative. The body is left in the airport in order to make America appear as the perpetrator and orchestrator of the terrorist attack.



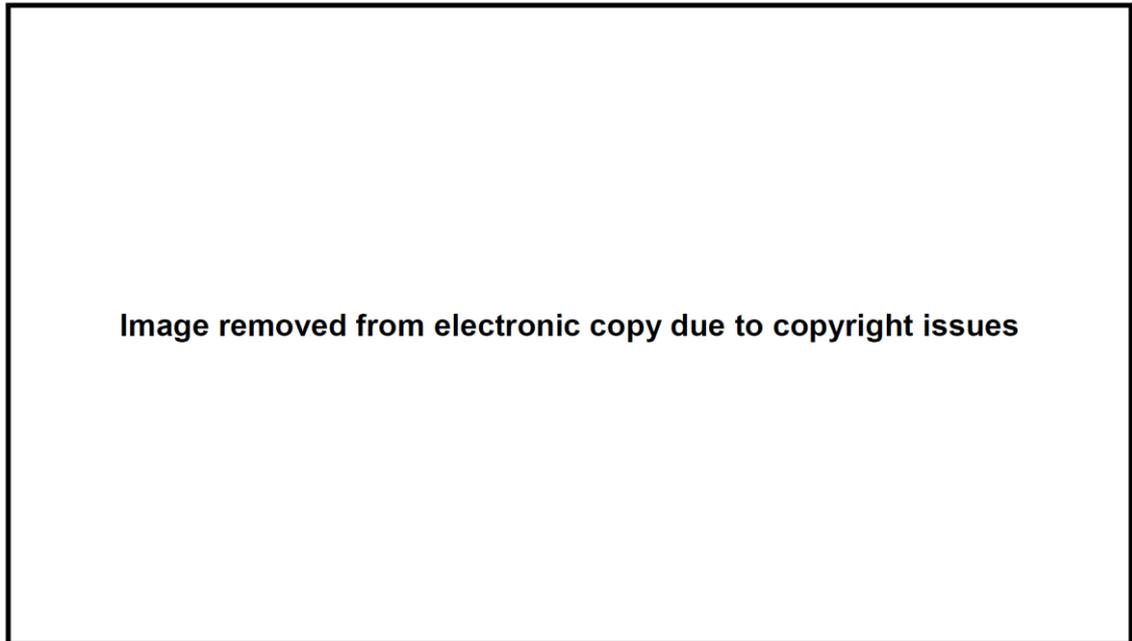
**Fig 4.7:** 'No Russian' mission (Source: Activision 2009).

This subsequently provides the catalyst and motivation for a Russian invasion of mainland USA. Task Force 141's objectives are to locate information that would implicate Makarov in the terrorist attack. This takes them to the favelas of Rio de Janeiro to locate Alejandro Rojas, known as Makarov's arms dealer. After Rojas is found and subjected to torture he reveals information about the location of Makarov's 'worst enemy' – Prisoner 627 held in a Russian Gulag. The team then moves to the Gulag where the prisoner is revealed to be Captain Price who, after the previous game, we come to learn had stayed in Russia and had been captured and imprisoned by the Ultranationalists.

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<sup>17</sup> The "No Russian" level enrolls the player in a terrorist attack on an airport and allows players to kill off unarmed civilians. It resulted in the publisher *Activision* removing the mission from the Russian PC version of the game, in Japan and Germany the game objectives were modified so that the game was ended if players killed civilians, and in the UK the mission was discussed in the House of Commons (see Welsh 2012).

As the hunt for Makarov continues, America becomes overwhelmed by Russian forces who invade the east coast of USA. The player takes control of Private James Ramirez, a member of the 1st Battalion 75th Ranger Regiment who is serving alongside Sergeant Foley and Corporal Dunn. The regiment is located in suburban northeast Virginia as they attempt to counter the Russian advances on American soil. The team moves to the capital, Washington D.C. under increasing pressure from the advancing Russian forces.

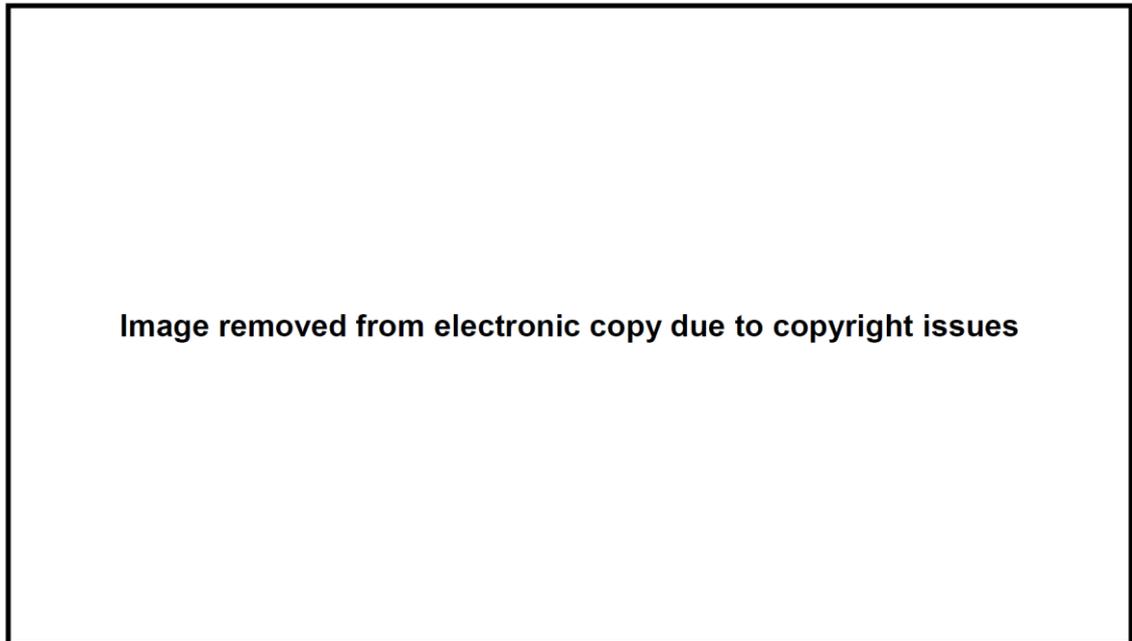


**Fig 4.8:** 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion 75<sup>th</sup> Ranger Regiment in Washington D.C. (Source: Activision 2009).

Meanwhile Captain Price, going against the orders of Shepard, attempts to help bring an end to the conflict. Price leads Task Force 141 to a Russian base, which is setting off nuclear warheads in the direction of Washington D.C. However, the missiles are detonated in the atmosphere above the Capital resulting in the destruction and disruption of electronic equipment – including vehicles. This gives the American ground troops a slight advantage over the Russian forces. The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion 75<sup>th</sup> Ranger Regiment make their way to the White House in order to set off flares to prevent the imminent carpet bombing of the Capital by U.S. forces.

Returning to Task Force 141, the team discover intelligence that suggests Makarov is in one of two places, either Afghanistan or in a safe house on the Russian-Georgian border. The team split into two. Price and Soap head to the Afghanistan location, while 'Roach' and 'Ghost' go to the safe house. Upon

reaching the safe house, the duo are unable to locate Makarov but do find evidence regarding Makarov's strategic plans. Captain Shepard arrives by helicopter in order to receive the intelligence and then, surprisingly, kills both Roach and Ghost.



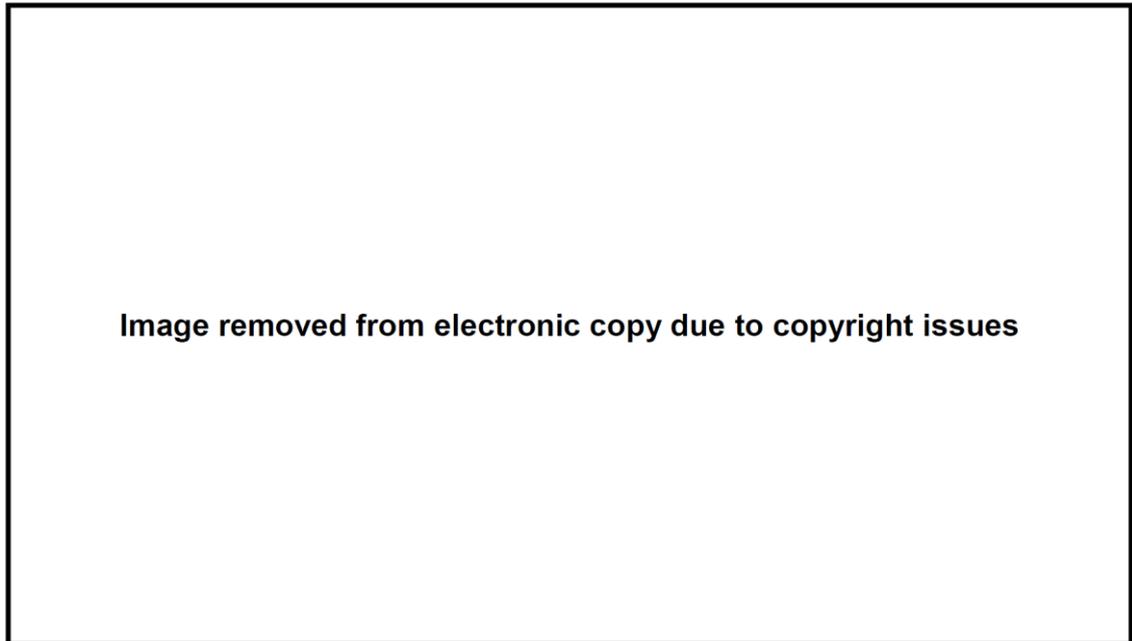
**Fig 4.9:** Captain Price shoots and kills Ghost and Roach obtaining the intelligence in the process (Source: Activision 2009).

Price and Soap, meanwhile, come to learn of the betrayal by Shepard and turn their attention to avenging the deaths of their comrades. The two trace Shepard's location to Afghanistan, where the final scene sees Soap manage to kill Shepard although becoming gravely injured in the process. They are both escorted from the scene by Nikolai who suggests a safe house where the two, now wanted criminals due to the death of Shepard, can hide.

### ***Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 (2011)***

*Modern Warfare 3* (2011) carries on from the previous game with Task Force 141 now disavowed by Western governments and labelled as criminals. The team arrive in Northern India, at a supposed safe house, however this is quickly surrounded by Ultranationalist forces. Within this game, the player assumes the character Yuri, a former Russian Loyalist with a hatred for Makarov, who now works to help the denounced Task Force. Soap remains in a critical condition and the team have to fight their way out.

Meanwhile, it is understood that Russian forces have invaded New York. The player is introduced to an American Delta Force headed by Sandman and, taking the role of Derek 'Frost' Westbrook, the team attempt to disable Russian 'jamming systems' that have blocked American communicative devices. By destroying a jamming system on the roof of the New York Stock Exchange, the team's actions allow an American offensive, which forces the Russians to retreat.

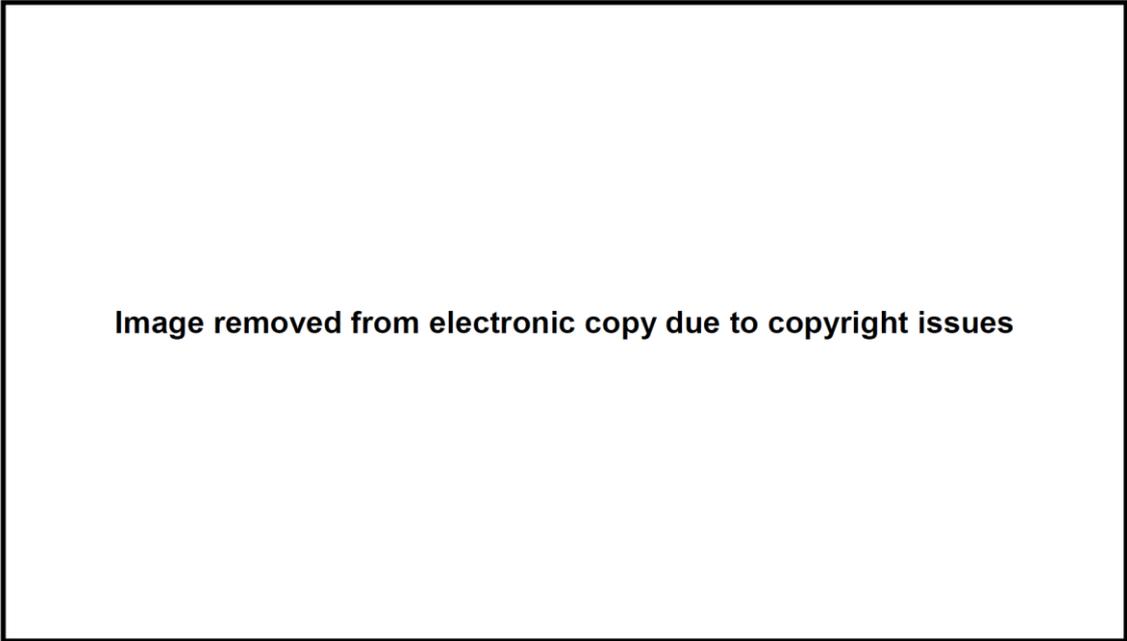


**Fig 4.10:** Russian forces overrun New York City (Source: Activision 2011).

Two months later we discover that the President of Russia, Boris Vorshevsky, wants to agree peace terms with America. However after the plane he is on is attacked by men loyal to Makarov, Vorshevsky is taken hostage. The president refuses to disclose the nuclear launch codes to Makarov, who takes the President and demands his daughter, who was also on the flight, is taken hostage. However, the daughter, Alena, is safely secured by the American Federal Protective Service (FPS) and taken to a safe house in Berlin.

With 'Soap' recovered from his previous injuries, Yuri discloses information about an arms deal involving Makarov in Sierra Leone. After arriving at the location and fighting their way through the town, Price discovers that three unknown packages had recently left for London, Berlin and Paris. Captain MacMillan, now in command of the British SAS, is contacted by Price who gives information of a suspect in Somalia.

Upon gaining the intelligence, the British SAS led by Sergeant Wallcroft, set out to intercept the package entering the UK. After chasing the forces through the London underground, a suspected vehicle is taken down only for it to be discovered that it is a decoy. At the same time as this operation a chemical weapon is set off within the proximity of Big Ben. Dozens of other attacks simultaneously occur in major cities across Western Europe.



**Image removed from electronic copy due to copyright issues**

**Fig 4.11:** The Houses of Parliament, London (Source: Activision 2011).

Meanwhile Task Force 141 attack the Somali target and gain information on a suspected bomb maker called Volk. This information is used by the American Delta Force who have teamed up with the French Special Forces Operations, GIGN (*Groupe d'Intervention de la Gendarmerie Nationale*) who fight through Paris, destroying the Eiffel Tower in the process. They eventually capture the suspect Volk who gives information about a meeting held by Makarov in Prague, Czech Republic.

Yuri, Price and Soap, along with the help from the Russian Loyalist Kamarov, seek to kill Makarov at the meeting. However, Makarov is aware of their presence and captures and kills Kamarov, and after rigging the church with bombs that they have set up overlooking the meeting, Soap is also killed.

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**Fig.4.12:** The church explosion in Prague old town square (Source: Activision 2011).

The two left, Price and Yuri, both head to a Russian Fortress in order to locate Makarov. Instead they discover that President Vorshevsky is held captive in a Serbian mine and that his daughter is in a safe house in Berlin. Subsequently, the Delta Force, acting on this intelligence head to Berlin to stop the daughter's imminent capture by the Ultrationalists, but they arrive too late. The team then join with Task Force 141, heading to the Serbian mine where both the President and his daughter are held captive. After finding and saving both, the team exits only for the members of Delta Force to be killed as they stay behind to protect the escaping helicopter. War between Russia and USA is averted as Makarov is unable to gain access to the nuclear codes. The last mission sees both Yuri and Price, who the player now takes control of, head to a hotel somewhere in the Arabian Peninsula where they find and finally kill Makarov.

Central to the narrative and the gameplay is an exploration of spaces and 'real' world countries that are enveloped in the global conflict in various ways. What Derek Gregory (2011) has termed "everywhere war" is *played out* and evident in the various and complex interrelations between places as expressed through the games' campaign mode.

Although the series is fictionalised it none the less "can be seen as a reaction to real world events" (Breuer & Quandt, 2011 p.14). Breuer and Quandt (2011) in a content analysis of a collection of Military FPS, noted that certain thematic

traits were typified including conflict, location, protagonists, allies and enemies and shown to change over time. In order to conduct this analysis, however, Breuer and Quandt (2011) used only reviews of the videogames and thus used simplified categorisations based on a limited dataset that fails to explore the intricate details in which narratives are conveyed. In the proceeding sections, I seek to develop an understanding of the ways in which the ideas of place, statecraft and politics are understood through the representational aspects of the landscape, in-game characters and also through the use of the narrative device the cutscene.

#### **4.2 The Geographies of *Modern Warfare***

For many videogames the setting plays a fundamental role in the overall game, whether they are fantastical places, or depictions of 'real' world locations. As illuminated in the plot description, the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series relies on the latter, providing a (re)writing of global politics with 'real' world locations as the backdrop (see *Figure 4.13*).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The series depicts a variety of 'real' world locations which are announced during the cutscene and textual information is provided at the start of each mission indicating the location.

## Locations in *Call of Duty Modern Warfare Series*

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### ***Call of Duty: Modern Warfare (2007)***

Credenhill, England  
Bering Strait  
Middle East  
Caucasus Mountains, Russia  
Komi Republic, Western Russia  
Iran  
Pripyat, Ukraine  
Altay Mountains, Russia  
Kuwait  
Northern Azerbaijan  
Southern Russia

### ***Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 (2009)***

Fire Base Phoenix, Afghanistan  
Tian Shan Range, Kazakhstan  
Moscow, Russia  
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil  
Northeastern Virginia, USA  
Vikhorevka 36 oil platform, Russia  
40 miles E of Petropavlovsk, Russia  
Washington D.C., USA  
14 miles SSE of Petropavlovsk, Russia  
Georgian Russian border  
160 miles southwest of Kandahar, Afghanistan  
Site Hotel Bravo, Afghanistan

### ***Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 (2011)***

Northern India  
Manhattan, New York, USA  
Himachal Pradesh, India  
Sierra Leone, Africa  
Canary Wharf, London, England  
Hamburg, Germany  
Bosaso, Somalia  
Montmartre Hill, Paris, France  
Prague, Czech Republic  
Berlin, Germany  
Eastern Siberia, Russia  
Arabian Peninsular

**Fig 4.13:** A table detailing the list of locations in the *Modern Warfare* series – based on information provided at the start of each mission.

The locations include specific localities, but also vague and ambiguous references are made to larger regions such as the Middle East, or undefined places that are only made understandable through their proximity to other locations. As the table demonstrates, the series begins to map out a geography which focuses primarily on the Middle East, Central Asia and Russia. In *Modern Warfare 2* (2009), Russia and Central Asia still play a pivotal role in the game narrative, however the conflict quickly moves to the American homeland with missions set in Northeastern Virginia and Washington D.C.

Whereas *Modern Warfare* situates the conflict beyond the boundaries of the protagonists' perspective, *Modern Warfare 2* and *Modern Warfare 3* both see military action take place in the heart of Western Europe and mainland USA. A particular geographical imagery is evoked through the ensuing narrative which positions conflict in places of familiarity which ultimately resonate with western, and more specifically, American audiences (Dodds 2003b). The games provide a means for the player to navigate and interact with these landscapes, predominantly through the forms of practising military violence.

How these spaces and places are virtually rendered and represented in the *Modern Warfare* series is inherently geopolitical. Within the *Modern Warfare* series a place of military violence is made knowable through a variety of modalities, including the use of visual satellite imagery, textual referential information, and finally through the virtual landscapes that players navigate. It is this aspect which I want to turn to now.

#### **4.3 The Landscapes of *Modern Warfare***

Turning to the discipline of geography and its canonical interest in landscapes, Rech *et al.* (2015 p.52) suggest that examining the popular cultural manifestations of landscapes is an important aspect of critical military studies, revealing “the ways in which the spaces and places in which military forces operate have been represented” and revealing “how, exactly, militarization operates at a range of scales”. These create particular geographical imaginations which situate military violence in specific places and spaces.

Questions of landscape and its representation have been an enduring topic within the wider discipline of Geography. Landscapes have long been understood through their physical and morphological appearances, as a natural entity. However the 'new cultural geography' movement in the 1980s saw an enquiry which moved beyond an understanding of landscape appearance to considering the ways landscapes are imbued with social and cultural meanings attached to various actors and viewing positions (Cosgrove 1984; Barnes & Duncan 1992).

For Duncan and Duncan (1988) landscapes can be understood as 'texts' in a sense that they are authored. They are invested with particular meaning which is subsequently interpreted and understood through particular cultural frameworks. In this sense landscapes are considered as ideological constructs, "supporting a set of ideas and values, unquestioned assumptions about the way a society *is*, or should be, organised" (Duncan & Duncan 1988 p.123). Landscapes are therefore not natural entities but are invested with meaning and power relations that shape cultural, political, and economic realities.

In this respect videogames offer explicit landscapes to be explored through play. They draw on and model 'real' landscapes mirroring the world, or providing alternative visualisations of landscape. Longan (2008 p.24) argues that these virtual landscapes are an "integral part of many video games" and work "to enhance gameplay, communicate useful information, and help tell a story". The virtual landscapes within the *Modern Warfare* series seek to represent 'real' places and plausible geopolitical scenarios. Longan (2008 p.23) goes on to argue:

"Video games not only incorporate representations of landscapes, they are themselves a form of landscape representation that communicates ideas about how the world is and how it should be."

The landscapes that players engage with in videogames are significant as they are invested with cultural and political meaning. Through this interaction with the virtual landscape players come to interact with a particular idea of how the world works. This is important for popular geopolitical enquiry as the virtual landscapes are imbued with societal, cultural and (geo)political meaning. As we

see in the *Modern Warfare* series and other militarised virtual worlds, they project and articulate imaginations of the geographies of military activities and violence (Woodward 2014). Distanced locations and regions, such as the Middle East, Central Asia and Russia are places of intrigue and military action throughout the series. It is important to examine how these virtual landscapes are rendered and what geopolitical imaginations they communicate.

The geographies, and playable landscapes, of *Modern Warfare* are wide and varied. As noted by reviews of *Modern Warfare 2*:

“[t]here’s no place in the world where a skirmish can’t go down, from airport security lines to the neighbourhood burger joint to your own backyard” (Mastrapa 2009: online).

Noticeable in the progression of the series is the emphasis on urbanised spaces and locations, where urban streetscapes and infrastructures become the scene of military conflict. This turn to the urban is no coincidence, as Graham (2006 p.271) suggests:

“extremely strong resonances exist between the dialectical constructions of urban places in official US ‘war on terror’ pronouncements and those in ‘popular geopolitical’ domains, most notably the news media and video games”.

In this respect, as Western militaries and forces have begun to increasingly target and enter urban terrains, military-themed videogames have followed suit. In *Modern Warfare* players enter a number of urban locations, whether it be the metropolitan areas in America or the distant ‘othered’ cityscapes of Afghanistan. This next section begins to draw attention to the landscapes, more specifically, urban landscapes, in which the players are repeatedly located in over the course of the *Modern Warfare* series and will explore the stylistic and visual tropes and the representations they use.

### ***Distant Landscapes***

The landscapes in the *Modern Warfare* series draw on real world locations and in doing so provide a particular imagination of distant places. A central notion of geopolitics is the demarcation of boundaries that render particular places as ‘home’ and others as distant, foreign, and other (Dalby 1991; Megoran 2005; Ingram & Dodds 2008). In the *Modern Warfare* series these distant locations

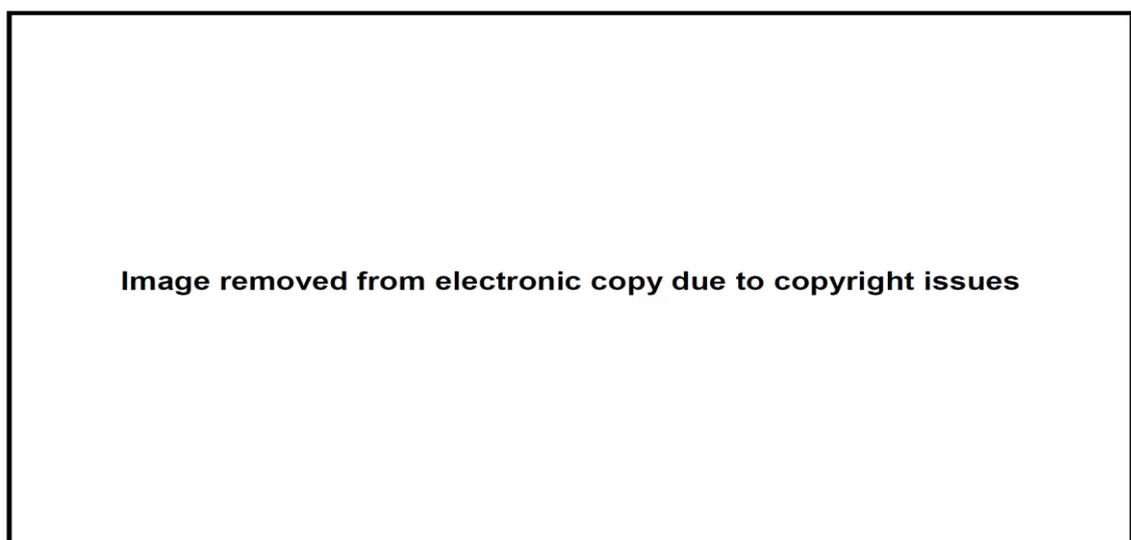
run in parallel with contemporary geopolitical conflicts and reinforce ideas about these places as explained below.

In the second mission of *Modern Warfare 2* 'Team Player', the player is introduced to United States Army Ranger PFC Joseph Allen. Allen assists in a military operation to overtake a militia stronghold in an unknown town located in the Red Zone, Afghanistan. The reference to the 'Red Zone' immediately evokes an imagination of danger. This is exemplified as the player is placed into the heart of an ongoing fire-fight occurring at the bank of a river, as US Army Rangers attempt to secure a bridge in order to access the inner city. Across the river, high-rise buildings dominate the skyline. At the beginning you are pulled to your feet by Colonel Shepard who beckons "Get up Private Allen! Rangers lead the way!". Armed, you make your way to the river bank while under heavy fire.

At this point the player is given directives, which are usually announced through the Non-Player Characters (NPC). As you move forward to the river bank, the objective and purpose is given:

*Sergeant Foley*: "Keep up the pressure on those RPG teams. If that bridge layer gets hit, we're swimming, hoorah?"

Another instance where the player is given instructions is when the player is told to "switch to the M203!". Meanwhile, as the fight continues, a Wolverine Heavy Assault Bridge is seen spanning across the damaged bridge.



**Fig 4.14:** 'Team Player'– a firefight over the river. The damaged bridge is shown to the left (Source: Activision 2009).

Upon successfully suppressing the fire the player enters a Humvee and takes the position of operating the mini-gun on top of the vehicle. As we move over the bridge, we hear discussions concerning a proposed missile strike on a high-rise building:

*Ranger 1:* "Which building is it sir? The one at one o'clock. The tall one...Hey which one is it?! The one on the left, or the right?"

*Ranger 2:* "Hey isn't this danger close for the Task Force?"

*Corporal Dunn:* "C'mon, since when does Shepherd care about danger close?"

The player can watch on as a missile strike hits and levels the high-rise building and is met with collective adulation and celebration, with shouts of "Hooah!" and "come get some baby!" being heard. Furthermore the visual spectacle is confirmed when Rangers are overheard saying:

*Ranger 1:* "The network's gonna pay huge for this one!"

*Ranger 2:* "Keep dreaming, Spielberg!"

*Ranger 1:* "No, man, seriously; that was extreme!"

*Captain Dunn:* "All right! We're Oscar Mike."<sup>19</sup>

Here, the background chatter and discussions are seen to mirror militarised phrases and terminology. The in-game communication replicates military terminology and jargon (see *Chapter 7*).

As the vehicle moves into the city the urban environment is revealed to the player. However the player's vision is engaged only via the manoeuvring of their avatar's field of vision through rotating the mini-gun.

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<sup>19</sup> Oscar Mike, from the phonetic alphabet indicates, 'on the move'.

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**Fig 4.15:** The player enters the unnamed city taking control of a turret gun atop a Humvee (Source: Activision 2009).

We are given information that the location is in Afghanistan, but little further information of the exact location is given. The urban Afghan landscape is depicted as a “dark, exotic, labyrinthine and structureless place” (Graham 2006 p.256). Upon entering the city we are faced with side streets filled with burnt out cars, multiple baskets, market stalls and the walls adorned with graffiti. As many have contended, oriental tropes pervade the military videogame genre and engendering an ‘otherness’ in the places and the people that inhabit them (Šisler 2008a; Höglund 2008; Dyer-Witthford & Peuter 2009). As we move further into the urban area visual signifiers further allude to this. Two signs appear on the right, one a pedestrian sign with the black figure dressed in traditional clothing, and a second that follows a circular ‘no camel’ sign. Non-diegetic aspects of the game also play a significant role as the music builds and creates further tensions as the player moves further into the town. Not only does the sound work as a tension device but sounds are distinctly orientalist which provides a further sense of place beyond the visual landscape.

The player is able to rotate the gun and scan the environment. A sense of imminent danger is further built as three males dressed in militia attire and headscarves become visible on a balcony watching, or as Corporal Dunn suggests, “*scouting*” the convoy.

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**Fig 4.16:** Enemy combatants scout the military convoy (Source: Activision 2009).

Although recognising that these are most probably military combatants, the player is reminded about the rules of engagement, and is discouraged from firing unless fired upon first:

*Sergeant Foley:* “All Hunter two victors keep an eye out for civvies [civilians]. We’re not cleared to engage unless they fire first.”

“Scan the rooftops for hostiles. Stay frosty.”

As scholars have argued, discourses of danger are commonly and have historically been associated with Central Asia (Megoran 2005; Heathershaw & Megoran 2011). This is built through the slow and gradual manoeuvring through the deserted cityscape, as a couple of civilians can be seen fleeing the area. The lack of civilians, however, is a constant feature of the series and can be seen to present these ‘othered’ urban locations “as little more than ‘terrorist nest’ targets to soak up US military firepower” (Graham 2006 p.257). NPCs remind the player to remain vigilant, to “*proceed with caution*” and “*to watch those alleys*”. The empty streets, hushed voices and the player’s vision obstructed by dust clouds from falling debris augment the tension.

Within the gameplay the player is constantly reminded how to view, perceive and act within the landscape. Authentic US military colloquial phrases, such as

'*stay frosty*', encourage the player to stay alert. Again, further designations of this landscape are made by NPCs:

*Corporal Dunn*: "I've got nothing. This place is dead."

[...]

*Corporal Dunn*: "Stay frosty you guys. This is the Wild West."

In the first instance the city is described as devoid of life. Despite a couple of civilians noted in the earlier part of the mission, the urban location comes to be a place only capable of harbouring terrorists and requiring perpetual military intervention (Höglund 2008). Indeed, similar to other military-themed videogames, civilians remain absent from gameplay, presenting a simple and uncomplicated battlespace of 'us' versus 'them'.

Moreover, the 'Wild West' label presents a sense of unpredictability and danger. In this case the urban location becomes reimagined in terms of popular American mythology, of territorial expansionism, the securitisation and the "taming of 'dangerous environments'", often through violent means (Saunders 2012b p.119). These landscapes are thus made meaningful through a combination of visual representation, gameplay mechanics, and through verbal comments made by NPCs which shapes particular geographical imaginations through which the player navigates and responds to.

It is important to recognise that the rendering of these visual worlds does not appear out of a cultural political vacuum. As Wolf (2001) suggests the videogame medium is highly intertextual, drawing upon a range of other texts and other mediums. The role of cinema has a profound influence not just on the cinematic qualities and techniques, as we shall see in relation to the cutscene, but also through the content of film being translated into the virtual worlds of *Modern Warfare*. The *Modern Warfare* series is no exception and can be seen to draw direct references with other popular cultural texts, including *Black Hawk Down*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Behind Enemy Lines*, and *The Rock*. All these films can be seen to inform aspects of the games' narratives, characters and landscapes.

More explicitly, the above example draws notable similarities with the HBO series *Generation Kill* (2008). The television series is a dramatization of a book of the same name which recounts the experiences of an embedded journalist who follows a United States Marine Corps during the 2003 Iraq war. The second episode entitled '*The Cradle of Civilisation*' follows the Marine Corps entering an Iraqi town in military Humvees and, similar to the 'Red Zone', are overcome by insurgents. Despite being set in Iraq, the *Modern Warfare* mission presents a similar urban setting. References are made throughout, including the character dialogue and terminology used, alongside the urban landscape, which bear strong similarities. Ideas and representations of the military and the landscapes they operate in are translated from other texts to form and shape meanings. In this case, while the geographic locations differ, the representational portrayal remains the same: Iraq and Afghanistan become indistinguishable from each other.

As we see here, the games' landscapes are made meaningful not just through their visual signifiers but also through NPC exchanges, gameplay music, and through association with other media texts. Working together they offer a distinctly 'othered' and orientalist landscape, one which is hostile, dangerous and requiring military intervention. While *Modern Warfare* is based around these distant, unfamiliar and exotic locations, in both *Modern Warfare 2* and *Modern Warfare 3* the games' attentions turn to American and Western urban cityscapes.

### ***Landscapes of the 'Homeland'***

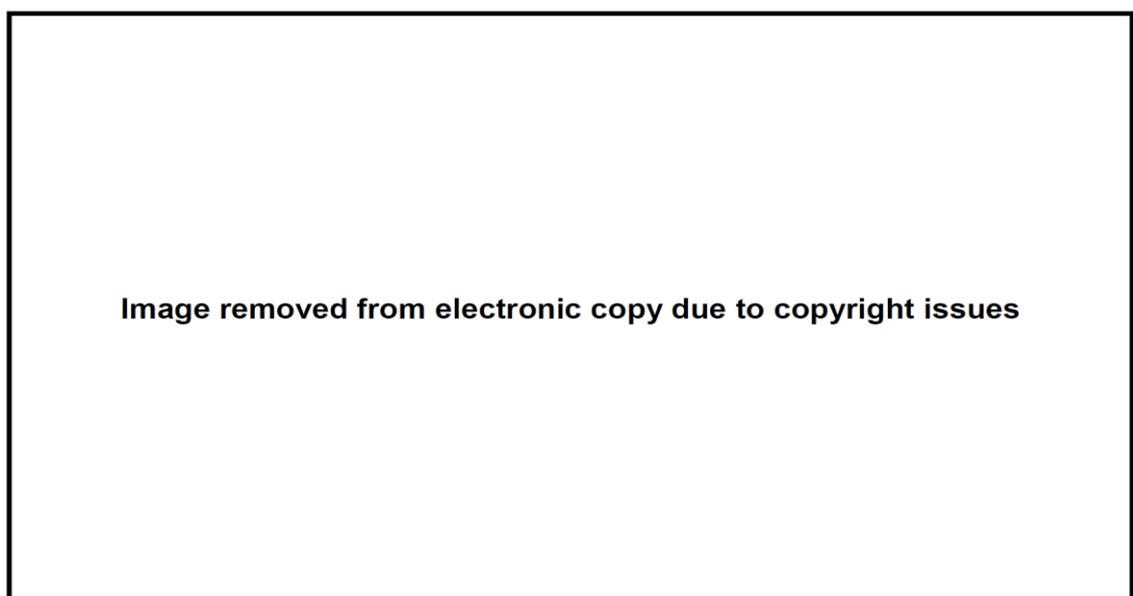
A powerful aspect of the *Modern Warfare* story is the way American and Western European urban locations progressively become the scene of military conflict. Places of perceived domesticity and safety are turned into war-torn streets overcome by hostile Russian forces. *Modern Warfare 3* in particular sees the conflict enter and infiltrate urban locations such as New York, London and Paris.

In doing so, the story develops contemporary 'imaginings of disaster' (Sontag 1965), drawing on anxieties of terrorism and an inconceivable invasion of the 'homeland'. Moving beyond warfare centred on foreign locations, the borders and distances between the battlefronts and homelands are increasingly

becoming ambiguous and blurred. This certainly proved contentious and uncomfortable for certain commentators. One mission set in London entitled '*Mind the Gap*' in *Modern Warfare 3* drew comparisons with the terrorist attacks that occurred on the London Underground in 2005 (Daily Mail 2011: online). What is important here is a geopolitical envisagement of war, terrorism and conflict situated in the homeland.

In both *Modern Warfare 2* and *Modern Warfare 3*, the Ultrationalists have taken control of Russia and have begun a full-blown assault on the eastern coastline of America. This cataclysmic vision of a traumatised American homeland succumbing to an invasion force is a continuing popular cultural trend. For Dodds and Carter (2013 p.99) 9/11 has "altered Western perspectives on the cartographies of danger of security", but also the 'homeland' has become increasingly less isolated from these threats. Imaginations of security threats and danger tie in with broader discourses of homeland securitisation and militarisation and everyday urban localities (Amoore 2009; Graham 2010). The urban landscapes of Western Europe and America become a key place where military violence is located.

The player switches between offensive missions, set beyond American soil, and missions requiring the player to defend against a Russian offensive. In *Modern Warfare 2* we learn that Russian forces have taken Washington, as an 'emergency broadcast' tells residents to leave the area.



**Fig 4.17:** Cutscene prior to the mission 'Of Their Own Accord' (Source: Activision 2009).

Washington D.C. and its historic and iconic landmarks become the battleground as the player attempts to push back the Russian forces. In one of the later missions '*Whiskey Hotel*', players must claim back America's most iconic political landmark – the White House.

Cityscapes imbued with national importance and power are destabilized and subsequently become visualised as the targets within the games. This use of national icons affords a distinct marker of national identity for people within that nation and a key signifier of that nation for those outside. As Edensor (2002) states, nations are not just defined in terms of their borders, but also through iconic sites and buildings which possess symbolic power which reifies national identity. Iconic landmarks, such as the Stock Exchange, the National Monument and the White House operate as synecdoches. These sites and iconic landscapes therefore act "both as signifiers of [America] for outsiders and as ideological statements about [Americanness]...within" (Edensor 2002 p.46). In this case, the White House has strong connections to the nation, being the epicentre of American political power. The fact that Russian forces have surrounded the building, and occupied the wider region, is evocative and disruptive of a geopolitical imagination of America's secure and stable position in the world order. It is through the game that the player is able to fight back and retake these iconic urban landscapes.

The player assumes the role of Private James Ramirez and we exit a bunker which emerges on the south lawn of the White House. The player advances towards the White House, under heavy fire, using the craters and trenches littering the area to return fire while gaining ground.

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**Fig 4.18:** The White House in *Modern Warfare 2* (Source: Activision 2009).

The player is told to advance via the left flank and after heavy Russian resistance enters the White House via the Oval Office where a loud speaker advises that a 'Hammerdown Protocol' has been initiated in order to take out the Russian forces and that the destruction of the city is imminent. The player is forced to head to the roof of the White House in order to avert the fighter jet bombardment of Washington. The player must quickly use green flares in order to ward off the incoming military jets. Overlooking the smouldering Washington skyline, a brief exchange occurs between NPCs that incite retribution:

*Ranger:* "So when are we going to Moscow?"

*Corporal Dunn:* "Not soon enough man. But I know we're going to burn it down when we get there."

*Sergeant Foley:* "When the time is right, Corporal, when the time is right."

The undue trauma suffered at the hands of the Russian forces provokes an immediate call for retribution. The national symbols and iconic landscapes further attach a sense of belonging and familiarity to western audiences, while concurrently the narrative disrupts notions of security and safety, as the battlefield expands into the 'homefront'. Instead of watching passively, users play through and overcome the anxieties of contemporary geopolitical conflicts (Power 2007). Not only do these repetitious visualisations of national monuments and architecture secure a sense of place, but the use of these

iconic sites in the midst of destruction coincides with a contemporary geopolitical outlook which is very much dominated by a sense of danger and fear (Pain & Smith 2008; Pain 2009; Altheide 2010).

This turn to notions of homeland ties in with the perceived western market for the games and provides an outlet in which recognisable and familiar locations are reimagined from places of perceived security and national pride, to places prone to be infiltrated by antagonistic forces and threats. Similar to *Modern Warfare 2*, *Modern Warfare 3* moves us further into iconic cities. The streets of Manhattan see the fight taken into the Stock Exchange, whereas in Europe the Eiffel Tower is shown to collapse.

The games' landscapes communicate particular ideas concerning the representation of military conflict and how the 'domestic' familiar landscapes and the foreign 'other' are both depicted as susceptible to military activities and violence. Besides the environment and landscapes itself, we also need to consider the role of the avatars as Schwartz (2006 p.321) states that videogames "communicate cultural meanings that are experienced not only through game environments but also through avatars, identities provided for players". We now turn to the avatar, its identity and role in the game environment.

#### **4.4 Warrior Geopolitics**

While we have noted the way the virtual landscapes come to reinforce notions of national identity and geopolitical ordering, an important aspect to also consider is the identity that the player assumes. Videogames are important in respect to the ways in which the virtual worlds offer a 'safe' and fantastical world in which to explore engagement with 'other' identities. For Leonard (2006 p.83), they are more than entertainment, but rather seen as "cultural projects saturated with racialized, gendered, sexualized, and national meaning". Taking into consideration the identities and avatars, playable and non-playable characters is important as they serve to reinforce dominant ideological understandings of race, gender and national identity which have wider cultural and social implications.

Turning to the *Modern Warfare* series, the player experiences a number of identities and characterisations over the course of the games' narrative. Important in this experience is the soldierly identity that is assumed by the player and based around predominantly western military Special Forces. The use of Special Forces, such as the British SAS, has a long tradition within the FPS genre. As Dalby (2008 p.439) suggests these military personnel have become staple figures and their identities expressed in popular cultural imaginations of contemporary geopolitical ordering:

“The professional Western Warrior, whether Special Forces operative or garrison soldier in peacekeeping role, is a key figure of the post-September 11 era, physically securing the West, and simultaneously securing its identity as the repository of virtue against barbaric threats to civilisation”.

Popular culture can be seen to (re)produce these identities through asserting a righteous geopolitical agent against a distinct 'other'. Players are first introduced to the British SAS, an organisation that has for Connelly and Willcox (2005 p.11) “evolved into a ‘glamorous’ representation of British national identity”. Through popular culture the SAS has provided an understanding of the shifting ways military force operates and over the years has become a key figure in the British and global (geo)political imagination.

Throughout the series the role, performance and identity of the British SAS is consistently reinforced through the gameplay and narrative dialogue. Here the series portrays particular understandings of military conflict and the role of the Special Forces. The global scale of the conflict means the Special Forces are seen as a nomadic force, effortlessly traversing the globe at a moment's notice. Working in a variety of landscapes and environments, from the sub-zero conditions and frozen settings of Siberia to the populated cities of Western Europe, the Special Forces are shown to be able to operate in any landscape and in any conditions. In addition, they are capable of utilising a variety of technologies, such as Predator drones (Shaw 2013) to overcome any foe and are adept in overcoming physical and environmental obstacles. These traits and characterisations supported in the game are tied with notions of hyper-masculinised identities.

Woodward (2003, 2007) has argued the indivisibility of masculinity and the formation of military identities. The series illustrates the values and qualities that provide an imagination of what the Special Forces embody and this rests on hyper-masculinised traits premised on attributes including:

“pride in physical prowess, particularly the ability to withstand physical hardships, aggressive heterosexuality and homophobia, combined with a celebration of homosociality within the team; the ability to deploy controlled physical aggression and a commitment for the completion of assigned tasks with minimum compliments” (Woodward, 2003 p.44).

These traits are evident throughout the game and include courage, skill, endurance and a stoic demeanour which renders them impervious to injury and death. In the opening of the mission ‘Hunted’ in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* the team is flying in a helicopter to rescue Nikolai in Western Russia, when an enemy missile is fired and hits the tail of the helicopter. The helicopter subsequently spirals out of control hitting the ground as the screen turns to black indicating the player has been injured. Slowly, the character awakes, as the screen image gradually regains clarity, heavy breathing can be heard. As visibility returns Captain MacTavish grabs the avatar:

*Captain Price:* “You’re still in one piece.”

“Get up!”

“Come on. We need to get moving before the search parties get here.”

This idea of a physically powerful figure, able to withstand serious injury and subsequently continue the mission is an ongoing trait within the narrative and the gameplay. No mission, situation or scenario is too challenging for the Special Forces to overcome. On repeated occasions we find the characters vastly outnumbered and outgunned and in seemingly insurmountable situations. Yet, through the gameplay, the player overcomes these situations and even if killed in the gameplay they are able to respawn and continue from previous checkpoints.

We come to understand that the tasks of the Special Forces are central to the maintenance of global security. Upon discovering the imminent threat of the launch of nuclear weapons by Russian Ultranationalist leader Imran Zakhaev (in *Modern Warfare*), the team head towards the Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) site in the Altay Mountains, Russia where Captain Price suggests:

*Captain Price*: "It's quite simple. Either retake the launch facility or we won't recognise the world tomorrow."

The objective for the team remains unambiguous and discourages any moral or political consideration. They are portrayed as shadowy figures within military operations as we discover at the end of *Modern Warfare* when we realise that the general civilian population are unaware of the near outbreak of nuclear warfare; instead, through the media the nuclear missile launches are described as tests. The work of the Special Forces in securing the launch codes and aborting the missile's projected trajectory to mainland USA thus remains concealed from public knowledge.

Within military-themed games, Machin and Van Leeuwen (2007) describe how discourses of individuated and collective identities are visually and discursively present in the gameplay. Characters are individuated through their visual appearance and performances. In this respect, the character 'Ghost' is known for the distinct skull headscarf, or Captain Price is quickly identified through his thick Scottish accent and moustache. Nevertheless the game also ties the characters through collective identities, which can be seen to be drawn around national differences.

Identity constituted through the game is done so in relation with 'other' identities. A clear and evident distinction is made between allies and the enemies which evolve from a distinct form of 'Othering'. Visually, the enemies appear distinctly similar in appearance and actions. In conjunction with their visual appearance, a variety of terms are used to distinguish the enemy, from derived military jargon including 'tango' and 'hostile' to the more derogative and personal such as 'bastard' and 'nasty piece of work'. These particular signifiers come to differentiate the characters from the hyper-masculinised and the virtuous protagonists.

National differences and stereotypes are evoked on a number of occasions between 'enemies' but also based between perceived allies. In *Modern Warfare*, we are introduced to Kamarov, a Russian loyalist, who comes to the aid of the British SAS forces as they attempt to reach Nikolai, a key informant for intelligence. As they arrive at the site this exchange takes place:

*Captain Price:* “The Loyalists are expecting us half a click to the North. Move out.”

*Gaz:* “Loyalists eh? Are those the good Russians or the bad Russians?”

*Captain Price:* “Well, they won't shoot at us on sight, if that's what you're asking.”

*Gaz:* “Yeah, well that's good enough for me, Sir.”

*Captain Price:* “Gaz, do you smell that?”

*Gaz:* “Yeah, Kamarov.”

*Kamarov:* “Welcome to the new Russia, Captain Price.”

The Loyalist Russian Kamarov remains a distrusted and peculiar figure, distinguished by his smell on this occasion, yet becomes a person for the British SAS to communicate with. Indeed, the binary between a supposed ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Russian remains ambivalent – even if seen as an ally, they cannot be trusted. Although the ‘bad’ Russians form many of the enemies dispatched by the player, there is little direct reference to them other than the military technical terms such as ‘tango’ and ‘hostile’. On the other hand, in *Modern Warfare 2* the term ‘Ivan’ is used on several occasions to refer to the Russian enemy. This term, historically used as military slang to describe Russian soldiers or the Russian military as a whole, serves to homogenise the enemy through national association.

Not only are identities differentiated between enemy forces but national differences are also established through the British and American armed forces portrayed in the game. Stereotypes surrounding British and American national identities are captured in character exchanges:

*Captain MacTavish:* “Shepard! Get those fighters to cease fire immediately. That was too close.”

*Shepard:* “I’ll try to buy you some time. One man in the Gulag doesn't mean much to the Navy at this point.”

*Ghost:* “Bloody Yanks! I thought they were the good guys.”

*Captain MacTavish:* “Ghost, cut the chatter. Stay frosty.”

As Captain MacTavish seeks to free prisoner 627 in a Russian Gulag, the American Navy bombard the location which disrupts and hampers the team's progress. The word 'Yanks' is repeatedly used throughout the game as a colloquial term and as demonstrated in this exchange as a pejorative. Here, the notion of a 'gung-ho' approach irrespective of the imminent danger it poses to the Special Forces is demonstrative of the cultural stereotypes that define America's military as bellicose and 'trigger-happy' and lacking restraint (see Higate 2012 on the identity politics evident between UK and American based private contractors voiced within military memoirs).

Another character exchange occurs in *Modern Warfare 3* where the Americans are rendered as egotistical as the British SAS Captain Price jokingly suggests:

*Captain Price:* "Once we get boots on the ground it is going to get lively down there."

*Sandman:* "Hopefully you can keep up old man."

*Captain Price:* "I know you Yanks like to take all the credit so our end will keep the neighbours in check while we roll hard to secure the hostages."

*Sandman:* "Ok, weapons tight guys, no one likes a dead hostage."

*Truck:* "What's the score boss?"

*Sandman:* "Everyone is hostile."

*Grinch:* "Ain't that the truth."

The American counterparts are distinguished through their brashness and arrogance which is lost on the British SAS who are contrasted by their professionalism and their rational approach to the assigned task at hand. These perceived national identity differences are further recognized through cultural and social practices as in this case around drinking cultures:

*Griggs:* "It's just too hot man...but room temperature? Please, a beer should be ice cold!"

*Captain Price:* "A lager maybe, or a glass of water like you drink. But a pint of stout?"

*Griggs:* "I'm gonna have to school y'all both when we get back stateside."

*Gaz:* "Yeh, well either way we're stopping in London first. And I'm buying."

This differentiation between characters is not just evident between perceived 'friend' and 'enemies.' As noted the player assumes a variety of positions such as the British SAS officer but also an American ground troop deployed at the heart of the battle. The differences are apparent with regard to the objectives, situations and through the dialogue occurring between characters. As we have seen, the British SAS operatives have been identified as embodying a warrior ethos; hyper-masculinised, highly skilled and adept in coping in a variety of terrains and locations (Connelly & Willcox 2005). Although these traits are often demonstrated, certain exchanges are illustrative of the differing characteristics. For instance, rather than the stoicism characterised by the British SAS or Task Force 141 playable identities, a level of uncertainty is perceived by the characters and a sense of defeat in the 1st Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment:

*Corporal Dunn:* "Look out!"

"What the hell are we going to do now man? Russians got us outnumbered; shit's falling from the sky. We're screwed man. We're totally..."

*Sergeant Foley:* "Shut up! Get a grip Corporal. Our weapons still work, which means we can still kick some ass."

*Ranger:* "What the hell was that?"

*Sergeant Foley:* "Stay here."

*Corporal Dunn:* "You going out there? Are you nuts?"

*Sergeant Foley:* "It's over. Come on we still have a war to fight."

In this scene a nuclear detonation over America causes all the electronics to fail which causes helicopters to drop from the sky and other vehicles to fail. The heroism and perceived unflappable demeanour displayed by the Special Forces characters are contrasted with the fears and uncertainties expressed by the American soldiers on the ground.

As discussed in this section, the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series invites players to assume a militarised identity that is drawn through hyper-masculinised traits and through national identity. The ability to assume the avatar of a Special Forces operative hinges upon masculinized characterisations, which through the players' actions have to overcome overwhelming situations to maintain global political stability. The national identities of these avatars are reinforced through encounters of differences, whether this is between allied forces, or the adversaries within the game.

#### **4.5 Cutscene: Narrating *Modern Warfare***

In the previous sections we have drawn attention to the different scales of the videogame world from the countries referred to in the game, the landscapes, and the militarised identity that the player virtually embodies. However, in this section I want to draw attention to the ludic narrative device which provides an additional scale – that of the global.

The player is thrown around the world, constantly introduced to new real world locations emphasising the mobile and transnational nature of the conflict. A focus beyond the initial gameplay identifies the importance of other devices which suture these disparate locations into an intelligible understanding of the geographies of the conflict. While we might highlight the specifics of gameplay mechanics and rules, I want to focus on the narrative devices and the ways in which the *Modern Warfare* videogame series is progressed.

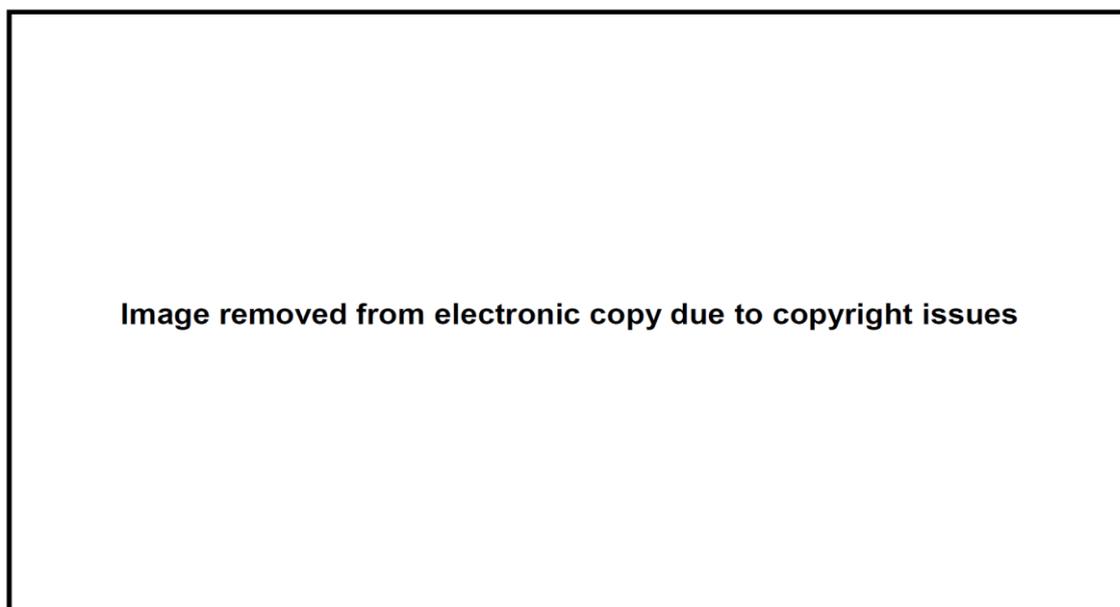
To do so I focus on the cutscene, a narrative device specific to the videogame medium, which provides further contextualisation of the geopolitical narrative. In other words, this means being attentive to the particularities of the videogame medium and its influence in conveying and articulating geopolitical discourses (see Dittmer 2011). This develops Carter and Dodds' (2008) call to attend to 'visual grammar'. In considering film, they suggest the need to analyse filmic techniques, such as montages, as a means of exploring how these visual narrative devices are used to articulate geopolitics.

As Wolf (2001) suggests, cutscenes have been used in a variety of games and for various reasons. These include practical reasons such as performing a break to allow game content to load. However the cutscene is also used as a

narrative device used to advance the overall game story (Wolf 2001). Cutscenes are interspersed throughout the *Modern Warfare* series and are usually encountered prior to the player commencing the game but also when completing a mission within the campaign mode. For instance, at the end of a mission the gameplay is paused and the player becomes an observer to a short clip, usually lasting under a couple of minutes. It is a visual, usually non-interactive segment which serves to further the narrative of the series. These cutscenes “[allow] themes, characters and plots to develop and become resolved over the course of the game[s]” (Howells 2002 p.110). In the *Modern Warfare* series the cutscene sutures the disparate locations in which players engage, contextualising and providing a view of the world. Here, I will outline in detail one example of a cutscene from *Modern Warfare* to illustrate its geopolitical significance.

### ***The Coup***

In the opening cutscene of the *Modern Warfare* series we are provided with details of a coup taking place in an unspecified Middle Eastern country, funded by the Russian Ultranationalist group. At the outset satellite imagery appears along with additional textual information concerning the location, game character, regiment and time. In this case the location is the Bering Strait.<sup>20</sup>

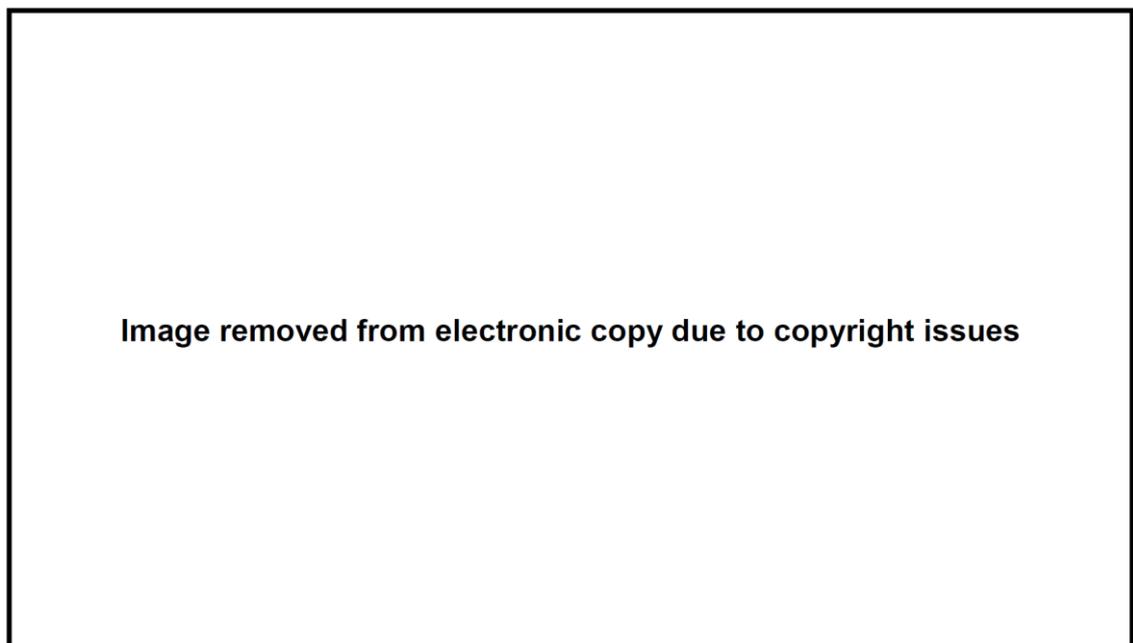


**Fig 4.19:** ‘The Bering Strait’ – Cutscene *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (Source: Activision 2007).

<sup>20</sup> Usually preceding the start of each cutscene is the military insignia of the avatar the player is set to take control of with a loading bar operating underneath.

The overarching theme is the role of the mapping and targeting technologies which provides a narrative device and subsequent imaginings of place. The purpose of this sets out to locate the team in the place that requires decisive action. The textual information provides the locational details while the cursor square moves along the axis of the image, efficiently zooming and manoeuvring across the satellite image of the world, accompanied by various computational sound effects.

The viewer is reminded continually of the computer interface: fluctuating information bars, computational sounds and the loading and lag-time between transiting images. In addition a targeting cursor frames people, locations, objects and loading additional screens and information. The aesthetic and visual qualities make clear linkages to high-resolution satellite imagery that has a long association with the military, in both its development and deployment (MacDonald 2007). This top-down perspective quickly alternates between extensive global views to more localised street interpretations. This militarised view claims to present an all-encompassing view of the world. The specificities of the targets become evident as the cutscene proceeds.

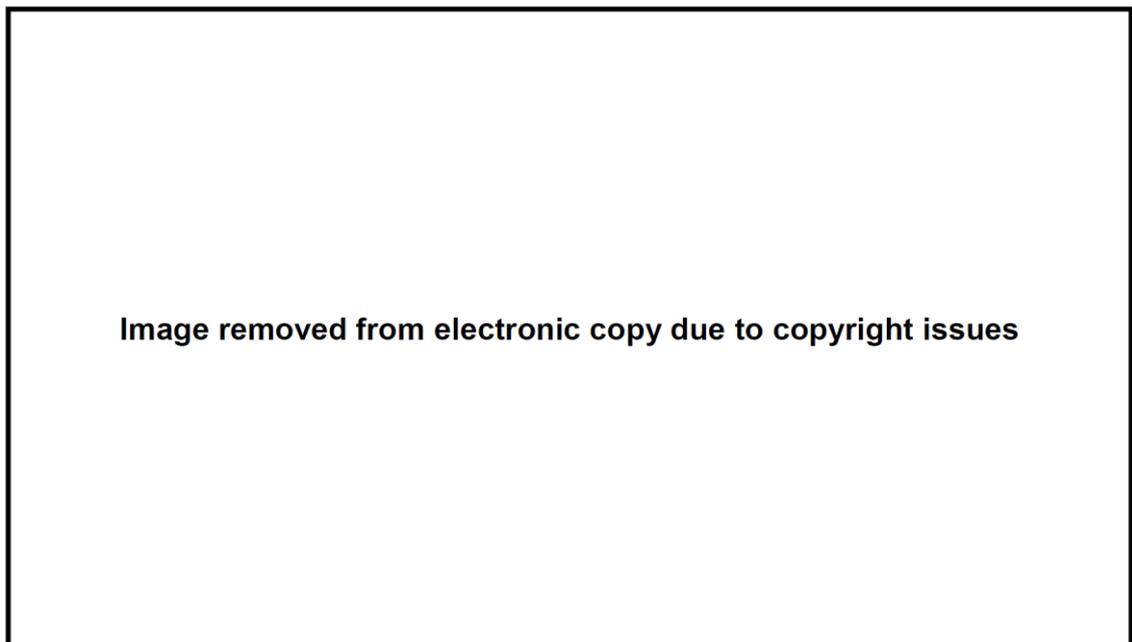


**Fig 4.20:** 'The Middle East' – Cutscene *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (Source: Activision 2007). Moving from the Bering Strait, the viewer's attention is taken to the Middle East. Despite being clearly set on the southwest coast of Saudi Arabia, the only place

reference given is that of the 'Middle East'. Unlike other cutscenes, which provide the full locational information, the actual location remains unspecified in this case.

This has remained an interesting point of discussion for players. One extensive forum post on the *Call of Duty Wiki* website has seen contributors locate the places using *Google Maps*. Furthermore, through examining the games directory files located on the PC version, file names in relation to this and other missions were under the title Saudi Arabia.<sup>21</sup> For many commentators, the reluctance to specify the final location was in order to avoid political controversy.

The scanning device jumps from a location, seemingly adjusting to a suspected target. The tracking square appears to locate the target and quickly and effortlessly zooms into the desired location. Here, textual information reveals the target to be President Al-Fulari.



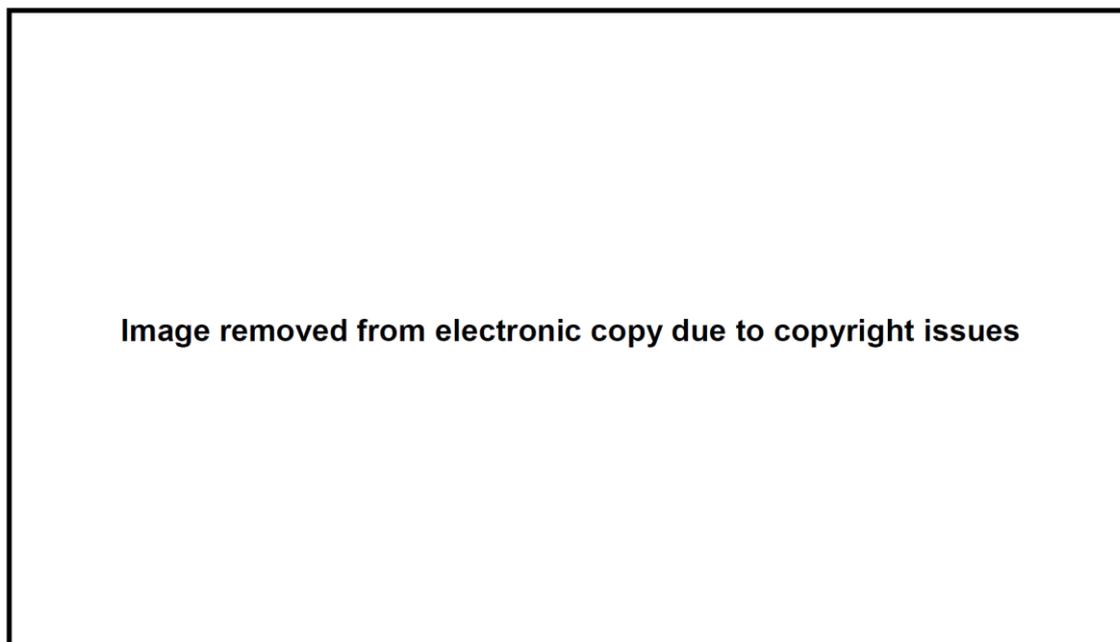
**Fig 4.21:** Unspecified location in the Middle East – Cutscene *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (Source: Activision 2007).

The screen recalibrates and zooms in to provide a more detailed image of an unnamed cityscape. A car is located appearing to make its way to the building in which President Al-Fulari is held. Along with the computational sound effects

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<sup>21</sup> The forum includes the use of Google Maps in order to distinguish the level's actual location. See [http://callofduty.wikia.com/wiki/Forum:Unnamed Middle Eastern Country locations](http://callofduty.wikia.com/wiki/Forum:Unnamed_Middle_Eastern_Country_locations) [Accessed on 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2015].

we hear an unknown screen operator stating “cars inbound”, providing reassurance that the vehicle is being continually tracked. As we follow the vehicle, additional screens present images of what appear to be landmarks, buildings and other objects within the landscape. In this case a tank is suggestive of a hostile militarised environment indicative of the ongoing revolution (see *Figure 4.24*).



**Fig 4.22:** Street view of unspecified location – Cutscene *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (Source: Activision 2007).

The imagery is grainy and dark in colour. Moving traffic signifies that the viewer is examining a real-time image. The vehicle stops at the building where the president is located and the operator zooms in further to reveal a 3D blueprint of the building, where two unidentified persons appear to be dragging the exiled President Al-Fulani. The satellite is not only producing global projections but also providing local topographical visualisations with detailed street views.

Image removed from electronic copy due to copyright issues

**Fig 4.23:** Blueprint of President Al-Fulani with two captors – Cutscene *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (Source: Activision 2007).

The cutscene ends with the camera zooming behind and through the President and so framing the next scene. Here the viewer takes the president's first-person perspective as he is escorted to a location in the vehicle by two Russian Ultranationalists. Unlike other missions, *The Coup* is a non-playable element of the game and functions as an extended cutscene with the player taking the perspective of the President. The player has limited control, in this case the ability to manoeuvre the vision of the President as they proceed to drive through chaotic streets, and so witnesses the unfolding revolution.

These cutscene conventions – the use of satellite imagery, and apparent militarised visual technologies – run throughout the *Modern Warfare* series, and more prominently in *Modern Warfare* and *Modern Warfare 2*<sup>22</sup>. The depiction of geosurveillance technologies serve as a contextualisation, allowing the player a top-down view of the global conflict and revealing the landscapes which they will interact in. In essence the cutscene acts as an explicit device which provides a mediated view of global politics. This scripting, as we have noted, provides an all-encompassing imagination of the world that is reflective of contemporary American militarism and geopolitical anxieties.

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<sup>22</sup> There are various minor colour scheme, aesthetic and schematic alterations in later editions of the games. *Modern Warfare 3*, for instance, moves away from satellite imagery in favour of a blueprint of the world including country and place names.

## ***The Geopolitics of Cutscenes***

I want to suggest the cutscene offers a number of ways of shaping and articulating geopolitical imageries. Firstly the cutscene is used as a narrative device to visibly map out the game's overarching plot. Unlike other aspects of the game, the cutscene offers a brief period of no interaction, suspending player's agency within the game world. Maps and satellite imagery become crucial in developing the narrative. They provide a sense of authenticity by providing an all-encompassing view of the globe and by locating people and actual places. This has been prominent in wider popular cultural items, as Dodds (2011 p.11) suggests in relation to the film *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007):

“Maps feature strongly in the film and visually reinforce the ability to track and record the movements of suspects and CIA sanctioned assassins equally well all over the world. The use of surveillance technologies, however, is not just for show. It also helps, as a narrative device, to promote suspense and contextualize violence”.

In the specific case of *Modern Warfare* these cutscenes operate as a way of advancing the game's narrative, serving to connect and rationalise the places which the player encounters. The eclectic geography of the game is brought together through visual depictions of these locations along with explicit textual references. Put simply, the cutscene links these places “mak[ing] visible the spaces of geopolitical action” (Carter & Dodds 2008 p.112). As we have suggested the cutscene breaks the interactivity of the player, removing their agency. Moreover there is a noticeable change of perspective and context away from inhabiting virtual landscapes, to a gaze that provides a contextualised global overview.

The cutscene therefore can be seen to have implications on the geopolitical narrative. In the first instance it breaks the player's interactivity as they become a visual observer to the spatialisation of the game narrative. Additionally the player is removed from the perspective of the military avatar. Instead, Poole (2010) argues that the use of cutscenes should be seen to introduce a ‘first-person plural view’, which Poole (2010: online) explains:

“To mitigate the player's alienation at playing a confusing variety of grunts around the globe, the interstitial briefing scenes, with their bird's-eye view of the troop dispensations and satellite imagery, and chatter of

commanders, attempt to glue together the disparate kinetic set-pieces with a representation of the community of “us” (which of course mainly means, according to the game’s unreflective cultural imperialism, “I and my fellow Americans”).

This ‘first-person plural view’ presents a more complex relationship between game and player. Here, the player is connected to a wider political identity and affiliation as the cutscenes present an American/British view of the world. This viewpoint presents a world of ‘us’ and ‘them’ performed through the apparent ability to designate military targets.

Secondly, the cutscenes deployed in the *Modern Warfare* series present an explicit geopolitical imaginary *par excellence*. We have noted the visual nature of geopolitics, and here the cutscenes present an explicit vision of the globe via the use of the top-down perspective. Here, American military power is enacted through this perspective which claims to envisage the world as a whole. Ó Tuathail (1996a) notes how this Cartesian perspective presents a disembodied and objective gaze of the world – a world that is captured and narrated via a militarised scopic regime where security threats are made visible, targets are acquired and militarised action is prescribed.

The geopolitical landscape in the game is made sensible and meaningful through designations of spaces and places of (in)security. This view is enabled by apparent satellite technologies which (re)present a particular top-down way of seeing. As many scholars have argued, this viewpoint is not neutral, but deeply politicised (Ó Tuathail 1996a; Adey *et al.* 2013). As Poole (2010) suggests earlier, it provides a top-down view which works to inculcate players into a wider sense of political and cultural collective identity. For critical geopolitics, this view-from-above is problematized for its purported objective claims which are mobilised for political purposes. These visualisations mirror the increasing use and reliance on technologies of contemporary war where “control of the battlespace and projection of power is thus enabled and dependent on the engaged and malevolent view from above” (Williams 2013 p.230-231). As we see in the cutscene the tracking system effortlessly moves presenting an all-encompassing ‘god’s eye’ perspective that claims to make the world visible, manageable and militarised.

Thirdly, the use of satellite imagery provides an explicit cartographic depiction. Here, satellite technologies and imagery are used to provide expansive visualisations of the world which are capable of speedily acquiring and focusing in on targets. Mirroring contemporary technological advances, the application of the satellite imagery has become increasingly prominent since 9/11 with an emphasis to visualise, and more specifically to utilise satellite imagery, in order to secure national and, more significantly, international interests (Livingston & Robinson 2003; Campbell 2013). Observed in these cutscenes is the use of satellite imagery to provide an 'authentic' view from above presenting a 'naturalistic' view of the world with the inclusion of cloud cover and the notable exclusion of territorial imprints of boundaries, borders, or forms of place signifiers.

The satellite imagery invites a particular way of seeing and relating to the world – a world disavowed of political territories and where the geographies of military violence are increasingly seen to operate 'everywhere' (Gregory 2011). For Harris (2006 p.119) "satellite imagery mediates and communicates power and authority [to] the wider culture". Satellite technologies and their capabilities are often romanticised within popular culture, which works to legitimise surveillance as a necessary part of everyday life (Lyon 2007). They impose a particular view of the world which mirrors the contemporary use of satellite imagery to justify and legitimise (geo)political and military violence.

It is also important to note how the aesthetics and qualities of the satellite imagery proclaim a "techno-scientific authority" (Dodge & Perkins 2009 p.497), ostensibly presenting a vision of *the world as it is*. Yet this overlooks the subjective position in which this view arrives and how the imagery is interpreted. Within the *Modern Warfare* series we see the 'view-from-above' move into the realm of popular culture, presenting a geopolitical imagination which blends verticality, power projection and the performance of military violence.

#### **4.6 Concluding Summary**

In this chapter, I have performed a critical geopolitical 'playing' of the *Modern Warfare* series. In doing so, I have highlighted three aspects: the narrative, the virtual landscapes, and the in-game characters, to help to illustrate how notions

of space, place, identity and statecraft are interwoven into the series' campaign mode.

In considering the virtual landscapes I have noted the storyline which allows players to navigate distant and also more familiar locations. Threats, danger and insecurity are not 'over there' but become imagined within the 'homeland'. The various landscapes and geographies that players interact with allude to the contemporary discourses of the 'war on terror', where there is an ambiguity of "where the battlespace begins and ends" (Gregory 2011 p.248). Moreover, there is an increasing turn to the urban locations as sites of military violence. An examination of the virtual landscapes not only provides resources that shape particular worldviews and place association, they are productive of popular imageries of the geographies of military violence.

An important element to consider has been the in-game characters. As noted, the player assumes the role of a number of avatars, mainly Western Special Forces operatives. I have noted the use of the SAS within the series – Special Forces that are intimately tied to a British national identity. It is these figures that are noted as the key geopolitical actors (Dalby 2008). They are portrayed as hyper-masculinised characterisations which the player operates within the virtual landscapes. National identity is a constant theme, referenced through character dialogues which help to construct a sense of 'self', and of 'other'.

While the analysis has focused on representative features of the game world, by drawing attention to the cutscene, the chapter has illustrated the particular ways that *Modern Warfare* evokes and contextualises a geopolitical narrative. In *Modern Warfare*, the cutscene uses global satellite imagery to convey a techno-scientific way of seeing, knowing and acting in the world. The visual cartographic depictions offered by the cutscene thus enlist 'visual spatial imaginaries' (Shim 2014), which offer a powerful means of shaping geographical knowledge of the world and its places. Overall, the chapter illuminates an understanding of the particularities in which popular geopolitical discourses are articulated *vis-à-vis* the medium of the videogame.

In the next chapters I will move away from my critical geopolitical reading, to an understanding of how other individuals and groups interact with and experience the series. There is much to be said about how popular culture items resonate

geopolitically with audiences and the following chapters will explore this in more detail.

## Chapter 5. Answering the *Call of Duty*?

Within popular geopolitics the theoretical and methodological scope has centred on the deconstruction of various popular media texts. While I have outlined previously the political and cultural significance of the *Modern Warfare* series in helping to shape the understandings of geopolitical perceptions, sensibilities and imaginations, how these are internalised, comprehended and constituted *vis-à-vis* play has largely evaded empirical investigation. To remedy this absence, this chapter focuses on the players of *Modern Warfare* and investigates the role of entertainment products in shaping (geo)political identities and subjectivities. The following chapters will therefore elaborate and develop on nascent work within popular geopolitics that is turning towards audiences and the everyday. This burgeoning body of work has sought to provide a perspective which considers the personal, grounded and geopolitical meaning-making involved in consumptive practices and how this is constituted in everyday life.

The chapter is structured as follows. Firstly, I will briefly engage with the literature centring on audiences and popular geopolitics. In doing so I will consider the ‘videogame audience’, and the challenges and possibilities this provides for popular geopolitical analysis. Furthermore I argue for the need to attend to everyday consumptive practices to consider the complex, contingent, and diffuse encounters with popular geopolitical texts. Secondly, the chapter will expand on the empirical findings from the interview process described in *Chapter 3*. I will explore: i) players’ everyday practices of playing *Modern Warfare*, ii) players’ attitudes to the geopolitical and militaristic landscapes, narratives, places and spaces engaged with, and finally iii) a focus on the identification of the Western military identity virtually assumed by the player.

### 5.1 Popular Geopolitics, Audience and Videogames

Saunders (2012a p.83) explains the constitutive role of popular culture and the media, suggesting how they cultivate “popular consciousness”, which “in turn, affects the conduct of foreign policy by elites, who must satisfy the desires and allay the concerns of their constituencies”. The relationship between popular culture and international relations is thus rendered inseparable (Grayson *et al.*

2009). Popular culture matters politically as it shapes understandings of the world based around spatial identities that then produces particular political actions and realities.

However, there has been limited exploration into the efficacy of popular culture and the media in actually shaping this popular geopolitical consciousness (Woon 2014). The realities of how individuals and groups come to consume, understand and internalise geopolitical scripts has largely escaped sustained critical investigation. Instead the academic viewpoint which exemplifies the geopolitical import of cultural items has been dominant (Dittmer 2010). Audience research has become a suggested possible research trajectory as a means replacing the enduring fixation of 'text-based' analysis.

Work on audiences within popular geopolitics has thus far been narrowly theorised and studied. Similar to other aspects of geopolitical scholarship, film audiences have been a focal starting point for thinking around ideas of audience (Dodds 1996; Anaz & Purcell 2010; Dittmer and Dodds 2013; Anaz 2014). Further questions need to be asked within popular geopolitics about how we consider the audiences of different media forms. If we are to consider the ways different media forms (re)present and articulate geopolitical discourse (Dittmer 2007) then we should also consider the different ways that these geopolitical discourses are interpreted and understood in respect to their mediated form. This encourages us to think about how we come to understand and study a 'videogame audience'. What issues need to be considered concerning the relationship between videogames, audience and popular geopolitics? In what ways do players come to understand, interpret and interact with the geopolitical scripts presented and experienced within these virtual militarised worlds? These are questions that I will begin to unpack in the following section.

## **5.2 Videogame Audiences**

The ever-changing technologies, media landscape and consumer habits have stimulated discussion concerning what is an audience. Here terms such as 'user', 'participant' and 'player' have found utility in capturing the multiple levels of media engagement (Rose 2013). Indeed, equating ideas of audiences with new media, such as videogames, has come into dispute. This stems from the notion of interactivity. Unlike film, and other media forms, videogames require

interaction. This means players have to interact with the game world in order to advance the gameplay and the game narrative. From a ludological standpoint, this means the medium significantly differs from other forms, such as the perceived spectatorship of the film viewer. As we explored earlier, ludological approaches have been elevated to a consideration of the game rules and structures, contrary to the narrative features that videogames offer players. This raises issues when studying players' engagements and interactions.

On the other hand, the level of interactivity of gameplay is always dependent on the context and so varies between games. Videogames do not always require direct player engagement. Newman (2002 p.419) notes they can "blend sequences of high-level interaction with segments of almost filmic spectatorship therefore sequences of gameplay can fall into a typology of 'fully interactive', 'non-interactive' and 'partially-interactive'" (Newman 2002). As noted in *Chapter 4*, the cutscene within the *Modern Warfare* series is an example of a 'non-interactive' segment in which players watch, rather than interact with, the screen world. In this respect the series does not just offer an all-pervasive level of interactivity, but offers the "dual positions of participant and audience at the same time" (Crawford 2012 p.33). Here we can draw parallels with other media audience accounts. For Crawford (2012 p.41-42), videogames, and players' subsequent practices, can be seen to encapsulate audience characteristics. As he explains:

"Video gamers perform in-game actions, which they then become an audience to. Video games also allow players to perform to others they are playing with, both in-game and out-of-game. Furthermore, video games can be, and frequently are, the subjects and source of conversations and social performances away from the game screen."

Crawford (2012) draws on Abercrombie and Longhurst's (1998) categorisation of paradigms that have emerged within cultural and media audience research, and how they relate to the videogame medium. Drawing on these paradigms, which include: the behavioural paradigm, the incorporation/resistance paradigm, and the spectacle/performance paradigm, I will draw attention to how they can be considered when seeking to understand players' interactions with the popular geopolitics of the *Modern Warfare* series.

### ***Behavioural Paradigm***

In the first instance we can note a wide scholarship that has examined the role videogames have on individual behaviour. Within this paradigm research on players has often attempted to engage with a hypothesis that violent videogames are conducive to deleterious social and physiological behaviour. This follows a long historical lineage of research that can be associated under the rubric of 'active media'. Here the media can be thought to "actively influence a mostly passive recipient, the player" (Egenfeldt-Nielsen *et al.* 2013 p.256). This has followed mainly positivistic sensibilities where quantitative methods allow conclusions to be drawn on the effects games have on individuals.

The notion of a passive audience has been rejected through current assessments within popular geopolitical scholarship. Beforehand, studies on audiences have explicitly and implicitly argued to reflect the "propaganda model" (Dittmer & Gray 2010 p.1669). In this instance audiences are understood through their passivity. The relationship between production, text and audience becomes linear, envisaged as a 'hypodermic needle', where an all-powerful producer 'injects' their desired meaning into a passive, submissive and indifferent audience (Ruddock 2000). Certainly recent developments within popular geopolitics have sided with more recent cultural theorists and have sought to examine the capacity and agency of the audience.

### ***The Incorporation and Resistance Paradigm***

The behavioural paradigm, while certainly not redundant within videogame studies, has come under critical review. Rather than passive, indifferent, submissive consumers, inculcated into particular ideological subject positions via omnipotent media producers, audiences have begun to be understood as involved and active in the process of meaning-making (Fiske 1989). This more nuanced understanding of the relationship between production, text, and audience was defined by cultural theorist Stuart Hall's (1974) model of 'encoding and decoding'. As such, encoding refers to the ways producers are able to establish a preferred meaning of the text; a meaning which encodes the existing political, economic, social and cultural order. Yet the process of decoding renders the audience as active and open to creating multiple interpretations of the text, which can escape the desired intentions of the

producers. This model became integral in demonstrating the potential meaning conveyed by the text and the possibility of multiple interpretations by an audience.

This foundational framework paved the way for work that has centred on what has been defined as the active audience. This reveals the emerging power relations in the meaning derived from textual consumption and the capabilities and agency of the audience to engender different meanings and understandings. Here audiences, rather than being passive, are engaged consumers and shapers of the meaning derived from this interaction. As Behrenshausen (2013 p.2 emphasis added) puts it:

“[players] are not merely passive recipients of the media they encounter, but rather *active participants* in co-constructing that content through various acts of creative interpretation, resistance, appropriation, negotiation and co-optation.”

Within popular geopolitics the active audience model has taken centre stage, noting the ways audiences actively engage with geopolitical meaning from cultural texts. This is an important factor to consider in that cultural items are not uniformly perceived. In taking this notion of active audience forward it is important to note that players' engagement with military-themed videogames does not necessarily mean players subscribe to the nationalistic and militaristic values the virtual worlds support, and play can involve “resistance and rejection” (Thomson 2008 p.20-21 in Gagnon 2010). This meaning-making process is shaped by various subject markers, such as gender, age, ethnicity and cultural capital (Morley 1980). Mapping an audience thus becomes further complicated and can be encountered in a variety of manners and through different interpretative frameworks.

Through this approach we begin to reveal the complexities and difficulties when it comes to studying audiences. As such, audience research within popular geopolitics has turned to fandom studies (Dittmer & Dodds 2008; Dittmer 2008) to focus attention on a more ‘manageable’, selective group of consumers (Woon 2014). Fans offer high emotional investments and attachment to their engagement with popular cultural texts. As Henry Jenkins' (1992; 2006) work on fans has demonstrated, these individuals and groups offer an insightful way in which cultural texts are critically and creatively engaged with and, in some

cases, appropriated with new meanings, as in the case of fan fiction. For Holland (2012 p.111), however, a focus on fandom studies is limiting to popular geopolitical enquiry:

“we learn about the “fanboys” (this gendering is intentional) who can identify holes in plotlines or inconsistencies in the serial narrative, but what does this tell us about the wider effect of these popular productions on the masses?”

In focusing attention on outlets of more direct fandom expression, such as message boards, we present only a narrow understanding of who, and how a broad range of the populace interact with and consume popular geopolitical texts. This can also include ‘anti-fans’, or ‘non-fans’ who have conflicting engagements and associations with media and cultural texts (Gray 2003). Overall there has been limited empirical investigation which has endeavoured to capture actually how players come to interpret and consume the virtual geopolitical and militaristic environment that they interact with.

Nevertheless, this paradigm can offer grounded insights in how popular geopolitical meaning is derived through play. We move away from an academic standpoint to more everyday ways geopolitics is made intelligible from popular cultural interaction. In undertaking a qualitative player-based approach we can begin to gain insights into the individual negotiation of the geopolitical meaning of the *Modern Warfare* series. This paradigm offers a further way to consider the ways geopolitical ideas, logics and sensibilities depicted within the *Modern Warfare* series are negotiated by their audiences.

### ***The spectacle/performance paradigm***

The previous paradigms have demonstrated an unequal distribution of power, either focusing on the power of the media and producers, or the audience themselves. Overlooked in both cases is the changing nature of media consumption and how this takes place in everyday life (Storey 1999). In the final spectacle and performance paradigm, Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) identify the changing nature of audiences and power distribution. Drawing on a Foucauldian sense that power is more diffuse, they predicate the changing nature of audiences and their relationship with media texts.

They elaborate on different forms of audiences including simple, mass and diffuse audiences. This can be seen in the example of a theatre audience in which there is a proximate and direct communication process between audience and performance. Mass audience alludes to the relative disconnect between performance and audience. For example television programmes are not restricted to one-off performances and can be global in their reach. They are encountered in a number of ways and in everyday situations and usually situated within the domestic, rather than a public, setting. On the other hand audiences are also considered to be more diffuse. Due to the increasing and varied mediated engagements and the consumptive practices that occur on an everyday basis Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998 p.68) suggest that “everyone becomes an audience all the time”. Key here is an understanding of how media consumption unfolds in everyday life and an understanding of how “cultural consumption [is] performative of culture and identity” (Dittmer & Dodds 2008 p.447).

In this section, following on from Crawford (2012), I have outlined the paradigms of audience research and how they resonate with videogames and popular geopolitics. Crawford (2012) stresses that these paradigms should not be seen as mutually exclusive, nor offer definitive insights into the study of videogame audiences. For the purpose of this study the latter two models offer more productive means for exploring how players of *Modern Warfare* engage with the virtual worlds in their everyday life and the (geo)political and cultural identities and attitudes that they cultivate. In endeavouring to take forth an everyday popular geopolitics (Dittmer & Gray 2010), further attention needs to be paid to the role the *Modern Warfare* series has in everyday life. For instance, how are these popular geopolitical texts consumed? Who engages with these texts? Where do these interactions take place? These are all pertinent in shaping the geopolitical meaning of popular cultural texts. Therefore, to begin, my empirical focus is on the individual’s everyday engagement with the *Modern Warfare* series.

### **5.3 *Modern Warfare* and Everyday Life**

When examining the audiences of media texts, popular geopolitics has either ignored the actual temporal investments and exposure to cultural texts, or has

been assumptive of the undivided devotion ostensibly expressed by fans. How popular geopolitical consumptive practices occur and take shape in everyday life has been overlooked. Indeed while common stereotypes and imaginations of videogames and who plays them pervades the public consciousness, there is limited understanding of “what gaming [actually] looks like in the everyday sense” (Shaw 2010b p.56).

Taking into consideration the *Modern Warfare* series, the time engaged with these games varies greatly along with how the series has found expression in everyday life. These are not trivial points, but the idiosyncrasies and investments of the gamer may have significant effects on the gameplay experience. As Newman (2008 p.26) indicates, players bring their own knowledge, habits and practices to the gameplay experience:

“They will unfold differently for different gamers precisely because their skill levels vary, the amount of time they commit to playing varies, or even the decisions they take alter the way the game branches revealing and concealing different parts of the whole.”

Gameplay requires direct player interaction and this interaction is dependent on a number of factors to which I turn now.

The *Call of Duty* franchise has become a common everyday leisure practice, yet there is limited knowledge of the actual usage of the games and the time engaged with them. Figures released from the games publisher *Activision* begin to indicate the significant role the games have in everyday life. Reporting four months after the release of *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, the publisher enthusiastically stated that:

“a staggering 27 million gamers have spent an average of 52 minutes per day playing the shooter [Call of Duty: Black Ops] online...[I]ncredibly, the average Facebook user spends roughly 55 minutes daily on the social network” (Evangelho 2011: online).

Unlike the campaign mode and other mediums such as film, the online multiplayer segment of videogames often occupies a significant proportion of players' time. However, these are average times and an insight into participants' engagements shows a wide variation of temporal investments which often differ from preconceived stereotypes of videogame players and their behaviours (Williams *et al.* 2008).

In my research game time for participants varied widely and was contingent on wider social commitments. A precise measurement was difficult for participants to articulate and gameplay was often determined around a variety of issues, such as personal motivation, social and work obligations, and accessibility. For some participants, however, videogaming played a significant role in everyday life as *Brian* suggests:

“I play pretty much every day but I'm not an obsessive gamer. Like in terms of playing online, I'm not fussed about leader boards or anything like that. I'm not part of any gaming clans. So I guess I'm somewhere between...Well I find the distinction between casual and hardcore is a bit basic, but I'm probably somewhere in between the two. You know, I'm taking it more seriously than somebody who plays the game now and again, but I'm not totally obsessive about it either. I rarely buy a title when it first comes out. I'm not rushing to the shops to buy the latest thing. I just pick up stuff when I feel like it really, you know, so I think it's worth it when the price goes down. Like some of the prices when they first come out are so expensive.”

(*Brian*)

In this exchange *Brian* indicates the inadequacy of the terms ‘casual’ and ‘hardcore’ which are used within the videogame industry and beyond to describe players’ association with the medium (Juul 2010). However, as *Brian* discusses, these categories were unhelpful in accounting for his engagement with the medium. While suggesting that he plays every day, he was keen to distance himself from obsessive practices of play found with ‘hardcore’ players, while also acknowledging his engagements can be seen to surpass the more ‘casual’ style of others. The time spent playing videogames varied for players, becoming a significant part of everyday life. However game time was contingent on other social arrangements, but also dependent on personal desire, and whether other people were available to play:

“I only play this type of game in multiplayer so it would be when my friends are available and I'm in the mood. This could be once a month to playing that game every night for a week.”

(*Daniel*, IT Consultant: Email Interview).

We can see here the wider social aspect of gameplay that is encouraged and motivated by the playing of *Modern Warfare*. The multiplayer option, for

instance, enables players to connect, compete, and play with people they know and do not know. Through Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) technologies and headsets, players are able to speak directly with others. Play therefore does not occur in isolation but is predicated on the availability of friendship networks. *Emil*, a 20-year-old student who studies in London, discussed how *Call of Duty* allowed him to communicate with friends back home:

“I've got a lot of people back up in Leeds and it's something that lads can do online and sort of... You can't ring a guy friend up and just have a chat, you've got to have something to take the piss out of with, just have that banter... That's kind of what does it for us.”

(*Emil*, Student: Interview *Modern Warfare 3* Launch Night)

Playing online enabled the maintenance of pre-established friendships. As *Emil* suggests, playing online also reinforced gendered identities. Playing war online was seen as a masculine pastime which allowed friendships to be maintained over distances. The medium allowed male bonds to be reinforced and gaming was seen in opposition to other ‘feminised’ communicative practices.

### ***Modes of Play***

In *Chapter 4* we noted the geopolitical significance of the campaign mode of the *Modern Warfare* series. However, what is important to emphasise is that it is just one aspect of the game and there are different modes of playing and engaging in virtual war. The campaign mode is usually an independent experience where players interact with a predefined story and work through a number of missions. Other options of play include ‘Spec Ops’, or ‘Special Operations’, which can be played ‘solo, split screen, or online’ (The Call of Duty Wiki 2015). These are short missions offering a range of objectives which often require the cooperation of another player. The multiplayer option is suggested to be behind the meteoric success of the franchise and is where “up to 18 users battle one another on self-enclosed, pre-designed maps over an internet connection” (Ash 2013 p.31). A range of gameplay options are presented including ‘*capture the flag*’ and ‘*team death match*’ and players can enter into randomly assigned sessions, or, as noted earlier, can connect with friends and organise their own sessions.

Besides these playing options, we must note that players also bring their own playing styles, practices and intentions, which shape their engagement with the game and modes of gameplay. This can range from changing the difficulty level of the game mode, to specifically focusing on attaining in-game achievements (Jakobsson 2011), and also through creating their own in-game rules and the use of cheats (Consalvo 2007), which can all have minor, or significant, effects on the gameplay experience. Rather than being narrowly focused, interaction with playing war can thus be seen as varied, offering a range of predefined (and user-defined) playing options which subsequently engender differing engagements with the geopolitical.

The previous chapter concentrated predominantly on the single campaign mode. This was justified due to the series' explicit geopolitical narrative. However, as we have suggested, the game offers far more possible gameplay encounters, each often predicated on personal preferences and circumstances. For instance, drawing from *Xbox Live* figures, the studio *Infinity Ward* revealed that 30% of players of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2007) completely ignored the single campaign mode (Hicks 2009: online).

All my research participants but one suggested that they had played the single campaign mode of the games from the *Modern Warfare* series. The single campaign mode was seen as a temporary investment, providing a finite and obligatory aspect of the series, whereas the multiplayer option was seen to provide "endless playability" (Dean). Playing through the single campaign mode allowed players to gain an insight into the new skills, competencies and weaponry available in the game which would allow them to benefit in the multiplayer option.

This group 'gaming interview' illustrates some of the differing opinions and approaches to gameplay preference:

*Dean*: "I am never into the story to be honest. It's more beating people that you're playing against. The stories are a bit samey and typical."

*Gary*: "That's how they are in this kind of genre."

*Interviewer*: "and in what ways does [the genre shape the narrative]...?"

*Gary*: "The standard bad guy...I don't pay that much attention to the stories. I don't really know what they're about. I'd rather get to the end of

the campaign and then get on to *Xbox Live* [referring here to the multiplayer option].”

While the majority of participants indicated that they played through the game’s campaign mode, as these quotes suggest the narrative was met with general disinterest and an absence of emotional investment. The games fell into acknowledged and pre-established generic conventions. As Hughes (2010 p.128) explains, videogame genres “initiate players’ expectations about particular forms of gameplay and character sets and they structure and heighten gaming affects”. For these players, the genre of *Modern Warfare* evoked perceived expectations of a narrative script and for them the gameplay of the multiplayer surpassed considerations of the game’s storylines. Indeed while we have discussed the narrative aspect of the *Modern Warfare* series it is not the only option, nor experiences that player’s desire. The online play mode is seen as a significant draw for players (see *Chapter 6*). Furthermore players’ engagement with the narrative can be seen to be limited and, as Carr (2006) suggests, features such as the cutscene, can be actively skipped by the player.

However not all participants expressed these views nor exhibited similar behaviours. Conversely an engagement with the multiplayer option of the *Modern Warfare* series was restricted due to more practical circumstances. *Shaun*, a 19-year-old student, discussed the economic costs required to engage with the multiplayer option. In this case in order to gain access to the multiplayer aspect of *Modern Warfare* series through an *Xbox* console, a yearly subscription to *Xbox Live* is required. Financial issues, but also technical equipment, such as the availability of internet connection, restricted accessibility to certain aspects of the game.

Other participants suggested that they preferred engaging in the campaign mode rather than the multiplayer option. When referring to the multiplayer option *Arjun*, a 25-year-old student from India, suggested how the competitive environment dissuaded him from this option of play:

“I’m not that into the skill element and how good I am doing as compared to others. So I mostly want to remain in the flow of the story and the game action instead of testing my skills.”

(*Arjun*)

A central element of the multiplayer option is the integration of competition whereby players' in-game actions are quantified and mapped against other players. Whereas the competitive nature of play is often cited as a key motivation of multiplayer gameplay (see Jansz & Martens 2005), in this case and the next, these competitive environments were avoided which *Arjun* states is down to the 'skill element' required in comparison to the story-mode which is largely an individual effort .

Further developing on player preferences, *Jacob*, a 25-year-old plumber, suggests how his experiences of the multiplayer option did not match his expectations, nor the preconceived view of the values of the military:

"I just want to play the game. I think the main reason why I like playing the campaign instead of the online, because I always imagine armies being very strategic and really like you work as a team. Whereas online everyone is just out for themselves, and I don't like that idea. Whereas when you play offline there's like set things of guys walking in line with each other and stuff. It feels like your proper army thing. Whereas online no one does that, you know, stick together."

(*Jacob*)

The different options of gameplay offer differing engagements with the militaristic and geopolitical narrative. In this case 'online' play facilitated a more open, individualised aspect of play that, for *Jacob*, went against his own personal imaginations of the military in terms of their activities and how they might perform in these situations. On the other hand, the 'offline', or campaign mode, presented a more authentic and realistic performance of military activities which could be subscribed to. This illustrates how players bring their own skills, competencies and imaginations which affect their overall gameplay choices and also how these particular modes of gameplay shape their perceptions of 'proper' military performances.

### ***Placing Modern Warfare***

An important consideration that has evaded popular geopolitical scholarship is how media consumption occurs in place. Nicley (2009 p.22 emphasis in the original) affirms the significance of place by attesting that 'geopolitical narratives must work through places, and indeed are constituted relationally through their presentation *in place*'. While the *Modern Warfare* series offers a diverse set of geographies for players to navigate, playing virtual war is always situated in a

material place. Military-themed videogames are played via different technologies and in different places and spaces, whether this is the public setting of a LAN gaming centre (Payne 2010), or a military recruitment event such as the *American Virtual Army Experience* (VAE) (Allen 2009), or the more private setting of the home. These private and public spaces are key to the structuring, accessibility and constitution of popular geopolitical imaginations.

The majority of participants in this study indicated how the domestic setting was where playing videogames occurred. These places varied from the bedroom to the living room, but were dependent on a number of conditions and contexts:

*Interviewer:* "Where do you predominantly play?"

*Shaun:* "My bedroom. I tried it in the living room but it conflicted with the parents' TV schedule."

Consoles, such as the *Xbox*, require a television screen. In this case we see the collective family space of the living room as contestable and at times restricting access to videogaming. This is indicative of the emergence of a 'bedroom culture' (Livingstone 2007), whereby media consumption and the technologies that enable this have become established within the domestic setting and are increasingly found in the bedroom. For a number of individuals the bedroom setting allows a private experience of play, uninterrupted by wider social relations and restrictive orderings of collective spaces. The space of the bedroom becomes a private domain, where the 'secret mission' narrative can find expression, as players "manfully perform the state's '*out of sight*' work" (Hughes 2008 p.990 my emphasis).

While the bedroom has become a key place of gameplay, the domestic politics of playing videogames is further illuminated in a discussion with three male participants, all building surveyors, all in their early 30s and all living with female partners. Playing videogames demonstrates the entanglement with gendered consumptive practices which organise and govern where playing virtual war actually happens:

*Michael:* "Well I live in a one-bedroom flat so mine is... So at one end of the living room I've got a 45-inch flat screen TV, and in the opposite corner, I've got a 22-inch TV which she [the partner] allows me to play on instead."

*Fraser:* "Mine's set up in the kitchen, but she [the partner] makes me...I've had to put it within the unit, hide it because she doesn't like it being on sight."

*Michael:* "What, she doesn't like people knowing that you're playing videogames?"

*Fraser:* "Yeah, because she thinks it's for three-year-olds like. She still has that mentality, no matter how much you tell her that a lot of people like 40, or 50-year-olds are playing it. She doesn't...she presumes it's for kids."

*Robin:* "We've just got the one TV and it is all on that so it's whenever she's watching soaps, or she is out when I can get on the *Xbox* and I can get on it and play all day. Which I'd much rather do than do anything else."

The exchange between these three players illustrates the wider gendered social power relations of media consumption occurring in the domestic setting. Videogames have long been labelled as a masculine leisure activity, defined within the virtual worlds (Williams *et al.* 2009), but also in the fact that female players are often marginalised, controlled and restricted in their accessibility to videogame technologies (Schott & Horrell 2000; Bryce & Rutter 2003; McNamee 1998). While we can see how the spatial arrangement and accessibility to media technologies is suggested to be "controlled by male members of the household" (Bryce & Rutter 2003 p.9), we see how gaming for these male participants is restricted, limited and negotiated due to their partners' access to the television. Accessibility to the console is predicated on the videogame console being concealed from view, isolated to particular locations in the household and dependent on other media consumption within the collective space of the living room. This is evidence of how videogame accessibility is negotiated via gendered relations within the domestic setting. Furthermore, as we see there is a preconceived imagination and understanding of the videogame medium as a juvenile activity. Stereotypes have long relegated gaming to a masculine, solitary and adolescent practice, despite empirical studies suggesting otherwise (Quandt *et al.* 2009). Other perceptions of videogames beyond the immediate player show differing understanding of the medium and its content.

*Modern Warfare* gameplay occurs within a variety of virtual and physical spaces and places. However, rather than seeing the private and the public as separate entities, the 'virtual' and 'real' worlds can be seen as mutually constituted (Valentine & Holloway 2002). The majority of participants suggested that the playing of *Modern Warfare* centred on the private, domestic setting. Players' engagement with these virtual worlds and the negotiation of wider popular geopolitical imaginations is therefore shaped within the often private, domestic setting. As discussed by *Shaun*, the games extended beyond the immediacy of the gameplay experience:

"The big draw for [these] videogames, which a lot of people don't share, is the storyline. The storyline is a big draw from me. I like a videogame, or a film for that matter, where you can play it and it keeps you thinking about it after you go away, contrary to the typical action gaming where you're just shooting brainlessly."

(*Shaun*)

The content from the videogame can be seen to transcend the screen *imaginatively*, but as *Shaun* continued, also become "*physically* embedded within everyday life" (Gosling & Crawford 2010 p.147 emphasis in the original):

"...the fact that this game makes use of all the modern weapons...I mean when you went into school the next day that's all you heard. They [students] seem to get knowledge of these weapons...[T]he reason why I get all my knowledge of the weapons and all that is 'Oh, that's an M37' or 'that's a G3', it was all from the videogames', so that's a very interesting effect to what it actually did to myself."

(*Shaun*)

This quote indicates a number of points relevant to thinking about the extension of popular geopolitics beyond the screen. Firstly, while we have considered the domestic, material spaces and places of gameplay, *Shaun* indicates how the virtual game world manifests beyond the place of play. As argued by Horton (2012) popular cultural phenomena are socially embedded, performed, and constituted in everyday geographies and practices. In this case the school playground becomes a location where aspects of the game were further discussed, and tied in and established with wider social relations beyond the screen. Secondly, this illustrates a collapse between the private and public dichotomy. The private, domesticated gameplay experiences become

emphatically discussed in public everyday spaces. While we have suggested the domestication of the militarised content, audiences are everywhere and gameplay is discussed beyond the immediacy of play. As such it becomes performative, where identities are constructed and performed in everyday life. A final point that emerges from this example is how the *Modern Warfare* series becomes an informative source, supplying contemporary knowledge of military weaponry, hardware and technology. Often advertised for their authentic and realistic mimesis of military technologies, this is suggested to feed into a wider understanding of the weaponry used by the military and their subsequent capabilities.

In this section I have explored and presented a more complex understanding of the players of the *Modern Warfare* series and how it situates in their everyday life. This has raised important considerations in terms of the varying time commitments, the gameplay preferences and the places and spaces of play that are integral to how players understand and interact with the *Call of Duty*. *Chapter 6* goes further in providing a more insightful understanding of the domesticated assemblage involved in popular geopolitical consumption. However, in the next section I examine players' reflections, attitudes and subjectivities to the geopolitical and militaristic content of the campaign-mode of the *Modern Warfare* series.

#### **5.4 Players' Geopolitical Imaginations**

“Individual perceptions of geopolitical issues are important topics for geopolitical analysis. Legitimation of non-elite popular geopolitics gives a “voice” to those actually affected by the geopolitical practices of nation-states, and thus opens another empirical and “grounded” window on public (non-elite and/but popular) perceptions of geopolitical issues and realities” (Purcell *et al.* 2010 p.379).

Purcell *et al.* (2010) suggest that rather than focusing attention on elitist perceptions and propagations of geopolitical discourse, further attention needs to be given to wider public geopolitical imaginations. Rather than being conceived as passive dupes, the players' attitudes, understandings, and actual interactions (as displayed in the previous sections) vary from individual to individual. Moreover, individualised perceptions of the geopolitical can begin to

provide insightful ways in which popular geopolitical discourses are internalised, negotiated and also contested. While previous popular geopolitical studies have drawn attention to the sociality of online forum discussion, this section explores the individual.<sup>23</sup> In the next section I explore players' geopolitical attitudes in relation to *playing virtual war*.

### ***The Motives for Playing Modern Warfare***

When asked what drew them, and others, to the *Call of Duty* series, participants delivered a range of responses and motivations. Here, participants spoke specifically about the multiplayer option, the sociality of play, and the competitive environment, as a key draw to the *Modern Warfare* series. In some instances this was seen to be irrespective of the gameplay and virtual worlds themselves. *Jacob* suggests here how the popularity of the series, and the social relations that it enables, encourages his engagement with the series:

“With *Call of Duty* – because it’s so big now – you kind of feel if you don’t buy it you’re the only one missing out. So, I will still get the new because I know everyone else will get the new one.”

(*Jacob*)

In essence, as *Jacob* indicates, the series becomes performative of wider expressions of social identities. By not playing, or buying the *Call of Duty* series, a person would exclude and isolate themselves from wider social relations. The choices here were not necessarily guided by the game content *per se*, but the social capital that owning and playing the game would give the player, both in the virtual and physical everyday sociality of gaming (Steinkuehler & Williams 2006). Allied with the sociality of playing war, participants discussed the draw of playing with, and against, other players, and the competitive and skilful competencies required, which for some participants made this an enjoyable and a desirable aspect of playing virtual war.

Besides the wider social preferences that drew players to *Modern Warfare*, other players drew attention to the game’s presentation and content. For instance, it was the purported realism and authenticity that was a key motive to participation, as these comments suggest:

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<sup>23</sup> While the majority of interviews are based on individual discussions, three focus groups were also undertaken (see Appendix B).

“I think it’s because they’re really realistic. That’s the reason I like playing them, because they look really good and they [the producers] spend time making it look good. Whereas with *Halo*<sup>24</sup>... Don’t get me wrong – it looks good. It’s just not...not kind of real, whereas this you kind of know it’s real.”

(*Malcolm*, British 23-year-old).

“I’m interested in seeing how these games pan out, how realistic they are, and how relevant they are to world events...[B]ecause you do go to locations, such as the Middle East and Afghanistan, and you do experience them, to a certain extent, and you almost do feel like you’re in the shoes of a British or American soldier.”

(*Louis*, 20-year-old student).

“...it’s something that was not in everybody’s household and suddenly it’s there. It is not just in one game, it is in quite a few. Also you’ve obviously got films and stuff as well. You’ve got the news where there is a lot more war being involved, there’s a lot more behind the scenes of it. There’s a lot more information which we never had beforehand. So, I think people actually want to be part of it – in a way. As close as we can without actually being in it [war]. Because, personally, I wouldn’t actually go to war, but yet I would play these games.”

(*Nick*, 22-year-old).

In these comments participants allude to the different forms of realism offered by *Modern Warfare*. In the first instance, the graphical, aesthetic and visual qualities of the game, as indicated by *Malcolm*, are suggested to display verisimilitude unlike fantastical games which are recognised for their unrealistic content. The *Modern Warfare* series, due to its content and representation of contemporary conflict is thus deemed more ‘real’. As *Louis* indicates, this realism is strengthened due to the inclusion of real-world countries and regions, alongside the avatar identities that the player assumes. In this case there was a level of interest to see how the videogame connects and relates to the realities of contemporary warfare. *Nick*, on the other hand, draws connections between the wider media ecology and the ways the games reflect and expand on mediated warfare. For *Nick* this increasing exposure to the visual aspects of warfare and knowledge increases a desire get closer to war.

As he continues, the world offers the ability to transgress identities, and imagine being at war “*without actually being in it*”. Play in this sense is understood as a ‘transitional space’. In other words a “creative experience” which involves

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<sup>24</sup> *Halo* is a futuristic military first-person shooter videogame series.

“experiment[ing] with the space between subjective fantasy and objective reality” (Shaw 2010a p.793). For Shaw (2010a p.799) entering these spaces that blur ‘self’ and (virtual) world is a political practice which elicits “consent, participation, and less frequently resistance”. As the comments suggest, rather than being abstract, the *Modern Warfare* worlds can offer both participation in and understanding of the everyday realities and geographies of war and military violence. As both of the latter quotes suggest, there are connections made between the ‘real’ and virtual world in respect to the geopolitical narrative of the game world and the identities assumed by the player. Considered here is how “realism and detail allow gamers to accept game spaces as ‘real’” (Schwartz 2006 p.315). In this regard the *Modern Warfare* world is not considered a fictionalised, fantastical, imaginary world. Instead, the ‘real’ countries and urban settings, alongside the ability to virtually interact as American or British soldiers in these regions of contemporary geopolitical interest, are key factors in drawing players closer, and add to players’ own knowledge and popular geopolitical imaginations.

When discussing the broader *Call of Duty* catalogue, players discussed the significance of the earlier, historical iterations of the series. There were varying preferences concerning the contemporary setting of *Modern Warfare* and the historicised scripts encountered in games such as *Call of Duty: World at War*. Players’ preferences for the historical versions of the *Call of Duty* series were indicated through their prior historical knowledge. As *Louis* states:

“World War II was quite a big topic that I learnt about at school so it was interesting to not just read books [but] to take part in it once again virtually.”

In this respect the games and the experiences of interaction allow *Louis* to connect further to his prior knowledge of historical conflicts. This interest in connecting with the past was vocalised by a number of participants who began to suggest the significance of the medium as providing, “authentic historical experiences”, and in opposition to a “mere ‘shoot-’em-up’ [form of] entertainment” (Penney 2010 p.198). Rather than simply allowing players to interact with their already established knowledge, the games also encouraged further intrigue, beyond the initial gameplay experience, as *Michael* suggests:

“I have always been a fan of history and military, I have played levels, I mean if you look at the *Call of Duty* expansion packs, the first ones for the PC had maps like Pavlov's House<sup>25</sup>, which I didn't know stuff about, but then you start reading into what Pavlov's House was and actually learn about the Russians against the Germans, and the Germans invading. There are aspects like that where I find these modern ones [Discussing the *Modern Warfare* series] just a little bit stupid now, these invincible men. There is a foreign guy who's gone a bit mental and then all of a sudden he's got an army and has managed to kidnap the President and then all of a sudden America's at war again. I don't really get anything out of these. I just find that as the story goes it doesn't really mean anything, there is just this mental guy who has lost the plot and then next minute...”

(*Michael*)

This example points to the wider significance of popular cultural consumption, which encourages further engagement with the narratives and artefacts beyond the screen. The different genres of games solicited different expectations and values from the players, with the historical games discussed for their authenticity and pedagogical value, in contrast to the contemporary games.

Rather than these videogames being seen as their only source of perception of the military, war and conflict, players not only referred to their past education, but the roles of other mediated sources, especially film:

*Interviewer*: Do these videogames influence your perception of the military?

*James*: “Basically no, because when I played these games at 12 years old I have already read something about the military. I know what the real war is. I know what World War II is. I've watched the movies so that gives me a direct impression.”

Having already encountered film, *James* suggests the wider connections in which knowledge of the military is encountered and understood. Here, reading and films are both seen as integral and legitimate texts shaping perceptions prior to engaging with videogames. This prior knowledge attained from these sources was elevated above the videogame medium and was seen as giving an initial insight into what 'real war' is. Rather than a definitive source of

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<sup>25</sup> A fortified apartment controlled by Russian forces during the Battle of Stalingrad 27 September, 1942 to February 2, 1943. The story became a mission in *Call of Duty* where players support Pavlov and his squadron in recapturing the apartment from German occupation.

knowledge, or artefact that shapes geopolitical and militarised imaginations, these videogames can be seen to be intertwined within a larger military-entertainment-complex (Schulzke 2013a). Other military-themed videogames were discussed with participants such as *Homefront*, *Medal of Honor*, *Tom Clancy*, *Spec Ops: The Line*, *America's Army* and *Battlefield*. Players recalled films and other mediums that helped them make sense of both the videogame medium and the geopolitical and militaristic content. It is thus very difficult, if not impossible, to attribute the *Modern Warfare* series as having a definitive and exclusive role in shaping players' geopolitical and militaristic sensibilities (Dittmer 2010). Hoskins and O'Loughlin's (2010) model of 'diffused war' highlights the complex web of media texts that audiences are exposed to in relation to the ways in which military violence and conflict are mediated. This raises methodological issues in understanding the broader media ecology that individuals are exposed to, the different mediums, and how they are interpreted, understood and experienced and their geopolitical implications.

The role of film was an integral feature in which participants discussed and gave meaning to these videogames. The series was defined as "just like Hollywood, but in videogames" (*Ali*). The style, techniques, and narrative structure and content of the *Modern Warfare* series was discussed in relation to a wide variety of films:

*Interviewer:* "I mean you obviously like your films... Does your taste in videogames such as *Call of Duty* translate into films, do you like certain films and genres...?"

*Jake:* "Yeah I suppose, so like I was saying on my favourite mission on *Call of Duty* are those sneaky spy-type ones, and I love all that sort of Bourne films and stuff like that. Where it's sort of based in reality and it's grounded in reality, fair enough it will go over the top in certain aspects, but it stays grounded. So okay this is the world, this is 2012, and that's what I like. And I like that idea of it feeling more real I want to feel real but in an extreme situation, because I am never going to see that extreme situation, but I wanted to feel real so I can actually imagine what it would feel like in terms of the *Call of Duty*. Like when there are bits when London gets bombed and stuff like that. There is one bit where you come out of the underground tunnel and there are loads of people just stood around waiting, and you're all waiting for a truck to come along. And I

always remember walking up those stairs and looking around. I had no interest in following that truck, I was looking at all the people stood around and nearby and I thought this feels so cool, I actually feel like I am an actual soldier and this is what it would actually be like if something had gone off and I loved that, because I don't like the idea of stuff, awful stuff like that actually happening in the real world but it's still exciting, so the fact that is based on reality, based more like a film, it seems more real it's way better.”

In this extended extract, *Jake* indicates the relationship between film and the *Modern Warfare* series. In noting the parallels between the extreme situations, and the covert, stealth approaches expressed in film, and played out in *Modern Warfare*, *Jake* draws on how in the games he can play out fears and anxieties of ‘extreme scenarios’ happening. As Huntemann’s (2010 p.233) study of players also reveals these videogames can “provide emotional management tools for real-world fears about terrorism”. Similar to the opening quotes of this section, the gameplay allows a suspension of belief and provides a safe space to play out these fears of terrorism in familiar locations such as London.

### ***Navigating the Landscapes of Modern Warfare***

As indicated in the previous section, players’ comments began to draw connection with the *Modern Warfare* series’ fictionalised narrative and how this resonates with contemporary geopolitical discourse. The expansion of locations within *Modern Warfare 3* was seen as a way of mirroring contemporary political realities:

*Interviewer*: “Thinking about the campaign mode where these games set...?”

*Dean*: “I think they've been pretty varied they'd been set in all the major cities across the world. There has been Paris there has been London.”

*Gary*: “Again, that's for marketing because they've got to involve major countries...”

*Dean*: “They've got to have the familiar narrative between every country who're major buyers of this game.”

*Gary*: “It seems more varied in the most recent one because it's a bigger market now.”

*Dean*: “Yeah, well in the last one it was based in like in some Middle Eastern country...”

Gary: “But you can definitely see in the newest one [*Modern Warfare 3*] because there was obviously the London Underground for a start which is iconic...”

*Dean*: “...Paris you had the Eiffel Tower in the background. There is Times Square in New York, or I mean Wall Street. I think may be aside from Paris they are kind of playing on the terrorist aspect in that there has been terrorist activity in London, and obviously America with the World Trade Centre. They are trying to bring familiarity with actually what's happening in the game as well as these areas.”

In unveiling a wider geopolitical narrative, it is suggested that the game can appeal to and resonate with a transnational audience (Coulter 2011). In the case of *Modern Warfare 3*, the choice of locations was seen to be connected directly to contemporary political events. As *Dean* suggests there have been terrorist attacks in both London and New York. The *Modern Warfare* series was seen to capitalise on these events by including these places and terrorist activity that occurs there. Similarly *Jake*, a personal trainer, commented on the ways *Modern Warfare 3* connected to contemporary events:

“It was something where you could think ‘oh yeah, this is where the London bombings were, and such, and September 11<sup>th</sup> and stuff like that. So I think that was kind of clever how they [the producers] did that.”

(*Jake*)

Indeed, players enjoyed the aspect of navigating around familiar landscapes, such as London. This has also provoked some negative condemnation from the wider public, especially in how the games purportedly reflected the attacks on the London Underground (Daily Mail 2011). To *Jake* it provided more relevance and immediacy to the role he adopted and allowed him to relate to these contemporary events.

Along with the fears and terrorist activities within key Western urban locations, players also discussed the games' focus on the Middle East as a pivotal region in contemporary geopolitics. Discussing the original *Modern Warfare* and its depiction of the Middle East, a majority of comments outlined the often crude and primitive landscapes that are employed within the games' landscapes. The Middle East is seen by players as primitive, filled with “shacks” and “dilapidated villages” surrounded by “desert upon desert” (*Alan*). In the game the Middle East became a place where “everyone's a terrorist” (*Simon*) and usually

depicted as “nasty, inhumane and all the rest of it” (*Jake*). Largely the representations of the Middle East were understood in a negative light and participants used their own knowledge to contest the depictions of the Middle East depicted in *Modern Warfare*. *Ali*, a Bahraini student, disputed the representations as an individual with experience of living in the Middle East:

“It’s completely false and what they do [the producers] is a completely false representation of the Middle East because they show you a shanty town, like buildings made out of rock and mud and the road completely sand and there’s palm trees. If you see Dubai, Bahrain, or Kuwait you see like a huge skyline. We have BMWs, Jaguars, and Porsches ... [T]hey might have taken these images from Somalia because Somalia has that representation. It’s still a city a war, because they’ve got this civil war and all that stuff. If you have seen *Black Hawk Down*, that is a good representation of how it was [the country], sandy roads and all that stuff. But what they say, ‘oh were going to take it to the Middle East and we are going to show the Arabs and stuff’, that was completely wrong. But it wasn’t an insult to us because it’s all fictional and not real.”

(*Ali*: MA unpublished data)

Drawing on other filmic depictions, *Ali* suggests there is a conflation between popular mediated representations of Somalia and the places depicted in the Middle East. Drawing attention to the initial *Modern Warfare* game (where in *Chapter 4* we noted the cutscene zooming in on the Middle East) while the country is unnamed in the gameplay, *Ali* notes how it was obviously Saudi Arabia. As he goes on to suggest “I know a lot of my friends were Saudis. They were all playing with it they had no problems with it. It doesn’t bother us...”.

Similarly, *Arjun*, a student from India, drew attention to the depiction of India in *Modern Warfare 3*. India features at the beginning of the game. Nikolai takes Soap and Price to a safe house in northern Indian in the region of Himachal Pradesh, when the Ultranationalists attack. Reflecting on his own consideration of the scene *Arjun* suggests its incongruity to the overall geopolitical narrative within the game:

“The way they have shown everything in India. I mean I must appreciate the graphic designers and everything. But far as our relations with India. I mean even when they did the whole game, when the game comes to an end. You see that India still has nothing to do with the main story. So why have you shown it? You could have done that even in Pakistan, or into Iraq, any damn country in the world, you could have even shown it in Australia. So why India?”

These extracts show the different geographies of 'reading/playing' which cultivate different attitudes. While the verisimilitude of the places such as London are celebrated and embraced by players, other places are seen to be represented in a negative light. Noted also in the conversations though is the fact that players are able to suspend these critical reflections during play, either by appreciating the verisimilitude in graphical representation, or by acknowledging that they are interacting with a fictional world.

As the interviews demonstrate, players do not always straightforwardly accept the virtual geopolitical narrative and representations of places within the game. *Arjun*, from India, continued that one of his least favourite aspects of the *Modern Warfare* series, was how it continually equated and "portrayed [Russia] as evil". For *Arjun* this presented a simplistic and contestable geopolitical view of the world which is associated directly with a perceived righteous American world view.

In another instance, participants discussed the videogame *Homefront* (2011), a FPS military shooter. The game is set in the near future where a unified Korea attacks and infiltrates the American western coastline. Within the game the player assumes the role of a resistance group that seeks to overturn Korea's occupation of America. For *Shaun*, the storyline was "A' star" and he suggested that it did present an "accurate reflection" of the world, based on his own personal knowledge and research gained by reading reports on North Korean use of concentration camps.

Conversely, *Simon* discussed how for him *Homefront* presented a story that was unpalatable:

"I won't even play games when it gets too bad like that in *Homefront*, just because what I have heard about it and its crassness with regards to how it handles an entire country full of people. It's important but kids don't care. It's a lot easier to accept that there is a country full of people that want you dead because of your freedoms."

(*Simon*: MA unpublished data)

Similarly, in the case of *America's Army*, *Scott* mentions how he was discouraged by this particular game due to its close association with the US military. He continued that, because the players could only play as an American soldier, it meant that the game became a "propagandist ideal [where] everybody

has to think they are doing the right thing”. What is interesting in these quotes is how gamer choices are based on their politicised content. Portwood-Stacer (2013 p.1042) helpfully expands on this notion of media refusal.

“[R]efusal is a discursive move that entails more than simply not using something – it’s a kind of conscious disavowal that involves the recognition that non-use signifies something socially or politically meaningful.”

In this respect the latter comments indicate conscious decisions based on political objections to the representations and gameplay logics. The participants did not indicate that this was a decision that they shared with others; however, it did show the individualised considerations which lead to resistance to other military-themed videogames.

To summarise, this section has examined how players react and relate to the military and geopolitical content. In doing so, firstly I explored the range of motives for playing *Modern Warfare*, including the graphical and geopolitical realism portrayed in the series. While producers suggest that the games are far removed from contemporary geopolitics, players are capable of presenting their own reading and interpretations that resonate with popular geopolitical imaginaries. Secondly, the responses show how the games’ meaning was discussed with reference to other popular cultural artefacts and sources. This alludes to the complex media ecology in which individuals’ imaginations of the military and geopolitics are constructed. Finally, players are not passive receptors to the content, but use multiple identities to refute and to contest the content they engage with. In the next section I continue with the theme of identity and explore how players connect with the avatars and characters they assume in the *Modern Warfare* series.

### **5.5 Playing the “Warrior”**

A main tenet of critical geopolitical enquiry is the way in which political identities are spatially constructed. Rather than being fixed and stable constructs, identity is considered as constantly being negotiated. The popular geopolitical literature has thus explored how national forms of identity are expressed and maintained through popular cultural artefacts. However, less consideration has been focussed on how these (re)productions of national identity shape and resonate

with their audiences. In this section, I examine how players come to understand the militarised identities they assume, how they identify with the characters, and how this resonates with their own identities.

### ***Identity Politics***

*Modern Warfare* allows players to assume and encounter various military identities within the gameplay. For the majority of the participants the games present the protagonist avatars in a positive light, and were noted for their in-game performance and appearance. As such the characterisation of the protagonist characters was discussed by participants as masculinised, “tattoo-clad muscle guys” (*Adam*), who “yell catchphrase after catchphrase”, who are seen as and are “very nationalistic and patriotic” (*Louis*) and “heroes...who will throw themselves on the line and very organised” (*Jacob*). Heroism was seen as a defining trait of the military identity that the player undertakes (Woodward *et al.* 2009).

Participants recognised how the *Modern Warfare* series presented a particular kind of military figure, as *Adam*, a 22-year-old art student, suggests:

“I think with *Call of Duty*, you’re part of the best warriors in the world kind of thing. It almost feels like you’re above the military, still a unit, but like a special force, like the SAS – best of the best kind of thing. So it’s more of a primal thing like people who’re like professional killers, rather than just get into the army and it’s a job kind of thing. I suppose it just seems more of a primal warrior kind of a...I don’t know why but the word I want to use is Viking, these warriors, rather than these drones that are like pawns sent to be killed.”

(*Adam*: MA unpublished data)

The Special Forces depicted in the games are understood as warriors – a proficient outfit, highly professionalised and adept in the prosecution of military violence (Dalby 2008). This was linked with a particular imagination of a warrior, drawing parallels with the semi-mythologised figure of the Viking. The characters are seemingly elevated beyond perceived conceptions of the armed services and engaged in activities that require exceptional abilities, aptitudes, and dispositions.

While presented with these characterisations, players noted however how they were exaggerated, abstracted, and detached from the perceived realities of

military activities. Participants noted ludic structures such as the ability to respawn, the continual regeneration of health, and the fact that player's agency was limited *vis-à-vis* the game controls and structures. The perceived glorified and inflated representations of the military, and the in-game structures and logics, were suggested to discredit any semblance to the realities of military violence. Moreover, participants drew on their own personal experiences and broader knowledge, which grounded their understanding of the virtual worlds:

“[W]e have military training in the university. We basically have to receive, very basic military practice, things like holding a gun, and it's really different because and again you hold it as long as possible, but in reality you hold it for ten minutes and you feel like ‘God, *it's heavy!*’ I definitely don't think the games give an indication of how real combat is.”

(James)

On the other hand, engagements with the *Modern Warfare* series were in some instances productive of bridging the civilian–military divide. While playing *Modern Warfare*, Malcolm discussed how playing evoked imaginations of the realities of the military, and what they do:

“...you kind of think you're an expert in everything. You kind of think that you know what's going on and how to deal with yourself in that situation, obviously you don't. I think it gives you respect for the people that do it as well, especially when it is as half as bad as this. You think these guys are doing this day in and out.”

(Malcolm: MA unpublished data)

Malcolm notes how the gameplay blurs the lines between the real and the virtual, and encourages a sense of empowerment and the ability to imagine oneself in certain situations. Moreover, through play an empathetic bond is created between themselves and the imagined realities of operations involving special military forces.

### **Identification**

While previous research has examined the mediated representations of soldierly identities, the *Modern Warfare* series requires the player to virtually assume, interact and perform this identity. Scholars have noted the significance of ‘identification’ with media characters; “audience members experience reception and interpretation of the text from the inside, as if the events were

happening to them” (Cohen 2001 p.245). This is conceived as a central element of the enjoyment factor of videogaming, inviting players to assume particular identities within the virtual worlds and then experiencing the assumed identity in a virtual environment. Identification with virtual characters is seen to be amplified in the case of videogames due to the interactive element of play (Taylor 2003). In referring to why they feel the military videogame genre is so popular, one interviewee suggests:

“For me they are a nice break from something a little more in-depth, like Role Playing Game (RPG) – like they get a little deep after a while and sometimes it’s nice to have a break and shoot something in the face. For me, you’re undercover, not undercover, but erm...like Special Ops. I quite like the idea of that because it makes you feel special, rather than just being like some other guy. I prefer ones where you’re a bit more covert.”

*(Alexander: MA unpublished data)*

There is a desire to transgress into the role of the military within the games. The chance to play as these military groups presents situations where the player can escape the generic understanding of the military, and can perform a military identity that operates outside the conventional rules of engagement and are thus enabled to operate in exceptional circumstances. This sense of distinct military identity heightens the identification between player and game world.

A key aspect of this identification process was how this identity resonated with different subject markers of the player. Identification was further amplified by how players saw themselves in relation to the identity of the virtual character. In this case, national identity increased the identification with the avatars. With most of the participants declaring themselves as British, many drew the connections between themselves and the British SAS characters:

“So I like Soap because he is Scottish basically, being Scottish that is the one that I associate myself with. So those are ones I like the best to be honest. But I guess in a way you do build a relationship with them all in a way and when people die you go oh that's a shame type of thing.”

*(Louis)*

“My favourite character is probably [Captain] Price. Not related to the game in any sense, because he's brash and I've always had a thing for that type of character. And, also that he's British, so I can relate to him in that sense, and on top of that he is the good guy. He's that type of

antihero because he is the type that would do anything as long as he gets results. Like a 'Dirty Harry' kind of character. The sort of antihero like they won't take any mercy on the bad guys and I have quite a special place for them because like I say they get the job done like a Batman sort of character. Yeah they all have something in common: Dirty Harry, Batman and Captain Price. They get the results!"

(*Shaun*)

British audiences were receptive of the ability to play as the SAS, rather than as purely from an American perspective which the military-themed genre usually entails. This alludes to macro-textual readings, or what Livingstone (2005 cited in Dittmer & Dodds 2008) has termed 'cartographies of textual reception'. Here, players connected to the particular aspects of the *Modern Warfare* series due to aspects they could relate to, such as the national identity of the main characters. The structuring of interpretations of players are also drawn around 'micro readings', or what Livingstone suggests the 'cultural geography of reading'. As *Shaun* indicates, the identification of one character was seen to intersect with other, familiar mediated identities. Rather than constituted as a single unified subject, individuals can actively construct and enact multiple identities drawn from a range of discourses and subject positions offered through various discourses and institutes (Grossberg 1987). Moreover, this does not always entail identification with the avatar, as *Scott* suggests:

"...almost every type of military game, the campaign puts you in an American soldier's shoes. I don't want to be an American soldier. I don't want to be a British soldier. I don't want to be a soldier for any country, thank you very much. I'm interested in it from a gamer's point of view and storytelling point of view, but I am not a raging patriot."

(*Scott*: MA unpublished data)

This desire to be stripped of national identity within the game hints at the way players subscribe to an imagined identity that allows the dislocating of themselves from the on-screen identities, hinting at the complex, multiple and yet at times, contradictory identities practised by players (Shaw 2010b). Players do not necessarily accept the identities they are offered by the videogame world (Ash & Gallacher 2011). In this case *Scott* suggests how, in order to overcome this dilemma, he draws on a 'gamer's point of view', an identity which is hinged on the medium's story telling techniques and capabilities, rather than its nationalistic content.

While national identity helped to heighten identification with these British participants, national identity was performed in other aspects of the game, mainly the multiplayer option. Allowing people to connect from diverse geographical locations, the multiplayer option offers unique social environments and interactions.

These player identities, as *Nick* goes on to discuss, are drawn around national differences and identities:

“[W]hen I am playing online and stuff it can cause a lot of arguments between different cultures and stuff. Like the clan tags and stuff your people who have the USSR and stuff like that, well obviously they have fallen you know. And you actually get people arguing over it saying like Russians are better and all that sort of stuff. Me personally, I find that it hasn't really changed me on my perspective at all on the cultures themselves. It can, obviously this is conjoined with the news media as well, it can feel a little more tense about security in general.”

(*Nick*)

In contrast to the single player campaign, identities within the multiplayer campaign mode are customisable. Players are able to modify their clan name and emblem which can refer to national affiliation and be displayed visually, in the latter case, through the use of flags. Noticeably the reference to the USSR reflects the single campaign mode, and the Ultrnationalists' own desire for Russia to revert back to the Soviet Union. Taylor (2006 p.321) argues “players not only bring in existing meaning systems about their and others' national context but may even develop (or at the minimum reify) opinions in relation to gameplay”. *Nick* continues to elaborate:

“even with the game tag and you have to speak to a person you know where they're from. I do find that quite interesting because from personal experience I am very diverse so I can talk to anyone in the world. But a lot of the Americans I've had a lot of trouble with them. Because they will see the Great Britain flag 'British guy and all that', and before I know it they're all drawing on stereotypes.”

(*Nick*)

As others have also indicated these temporary communities are often drawn around national identity which is communicated via players' conversations, visual emblems, textual information and character customisation. Illustrated in these forums and in accordance with Brekhus (2008 p.1069), “some individuals

use time and space to accentuate and express their identity, travelling to identity-specific spaces to play up their identities”. As these instances begin to indicate, the virtual environment becomes a space in which national identity is performed and constituted.

While other participants noted the sociality of videogaming and the ability to interact and “learn about other cultures”, the multiplayer option of *Modern Warfare*, as I’ve begun to suggest, is not always so welcoming, nor inclusive. Indeed, the one female participant interviewed during the research, noted the often exclusionary environment that is created in this highly masculine domain. *Sarah*, a 20-year-old student, indicated the gendered nature of the online environment and the multiplayer option of *Call of Duty*:

*Interviewer*: “Can you discuss your experience as female gamer...”

*Sarah*: “It goes both ways, really. You can get like shit talked to you and then you can get loads of compliments and things like that. It depends because people generally believe that because you’re a girl, you’re a bad gamer. But, not to toot my own horn, but I’m actually a good gamer. I don’t know what else to say really...”

*Interviewer*: “I mean, with *Call of Duty*...?”

*Sarah*: “Oh yeah, I try not to make it obvious, obvious that I am a girl [so] people can treat us equally so, but yeh...”

*Interviewer*: “How do you do that?”

*Sarah*: “Just by not... You know sometimes you have girls who have girly clans with like girly emblems? I don’t do that I just have it normal and I just kind of... Well obviously my gamer tag is [states name]. But people don’t really notice. Sometimes especially recently, when it’s become more socially accepted. I’m not getting as much shit talked to us [me].”

*Interviewer*: “...[A]nd you mentioned as well designing your own tag?”

*Sarah*: “Yeah, so I don’t make it so obvious. [Also] I usually just keep it in private parties as well when I’m speaking...”

*Sarah* discusses how she adopts a number of practices in order to enter this masculine environment without drawing attention to her gender. This includes only using her headset in ‘private parties’ – where the players in the group are regulated and are ‘invite-only’. Additionally, *Sarah* mentions the ‘emblems’. The *Call of Duty* enables players to create and customize their own emblems which

identify and display the player when they are in the multiplayer option. Players are able to customise their emblem with different colours and insignia which they earn through unlocking achievements within the gameplay. As *Sarah* suggests there was a conscious effort to ensure she avoided exhibiting a 'girly emblem'. This was further elaborated on by a female player I talked to at the *Call of Duty: Black Ops II* launch night, who followed similar procedures to *Sarah*; avoiding playing in the public forum and also avoiding specific 'girly' colours, such as pink, when creating her emblem. While the social and gendered dynamics of the physical place of play shaped accessibility, these dynamics also found expression within virtual online spaces of play. As shown in these dialogues with female players, the gendered online environment has implications for the overall gaming experience and practices (Lin 2008). This is not to draw attention to only negative aspects, as players suggested how they enjoyed the ability to communicate with other players, and learn about other cultures through these online forums. However, it reveals how *Modern Warfare* players can encounter a masculine, heteronormative, and discriminatory environment, which shapes gaming performances, behaviours and practices.

## 5.6 Concluding Summary

This chapter has adopted a player-based approach to reflect on the ways *Modern Warfare* is encountered and consumed. It has gone beyond the previous focus on representations of geopolitics to consider how these geopolitical worlds are actually understood by the players. The empirical data from this chapter has illustrated the complex, multifaceted and contingent role *Modern Warfare* plays in the everyday lives of players.

Firstly, going further than previous understandings of audience reception, it has considered the players' emotional investments into the series, the different aspects of the series they engage with, and the place of play. These aspects shape the meaning of the game worlds they engage with and as such illustrate the complex ways in which geopolitics is lived (Dittmer & Gray 2010). As such, these exchanges began to illustrate how the militarised and geopolitical content transcends the screen and becomes integrated into the everyday life of the player.

Secondly, the chapter explored the ways players understood the geopolitical narrative depicted in the *Modern Warfare* series. The data presents a more complicated understanding of players as passive, disengaged and submissive consumers. Here players drew connection with contemporary geopolitical realities and the game world. An interesting finding was how players used other sources, such as film, to qualify their geopolitical understandings of the game worlds. This raises interesting questions concerning the ways geopolitical knowledge is comprehended via a range of sources. The influence of the *Modern Warfare* series cannot be seen in isolation as the main means of shaping geographical imagination, but we need to consider the wider media ecology players are entangled with.

Finally, in turning to the identification between the player and the avatar, we see how players' own political and cultural identities shaped their understanding of the game. Indeed, forms of national identity amplified players' identification with the British SAS. An important aspect of players' own motives was to engage with a militaristic identity which resonated with their own personal expectations of the Special Forces' role and values. The game was seen as a way of connecting these imaginations into the realities of what military identities do and where they do it. However, as players indicated they do not necessarily accept the identities they engage with. Players suggested that they avoid certain games they do not politically agree with or when the identity of the avatar is seen as problematic. Overall the chapter provides a detailed insight into the player practices and understandings of *Modern Warfare*.

In the next chapter I continue to focus on the players of *Call of Duty*. However, in doing so I turn to what players actually do, rather than what they say they do. In adopting a video ethnographic approach I advance an understanding of the playing of war and illustrate the embodied, affective and experiential elements that become entangled with the geopolitical.

## Chapter 6. Experiencing the *Call of Duty*

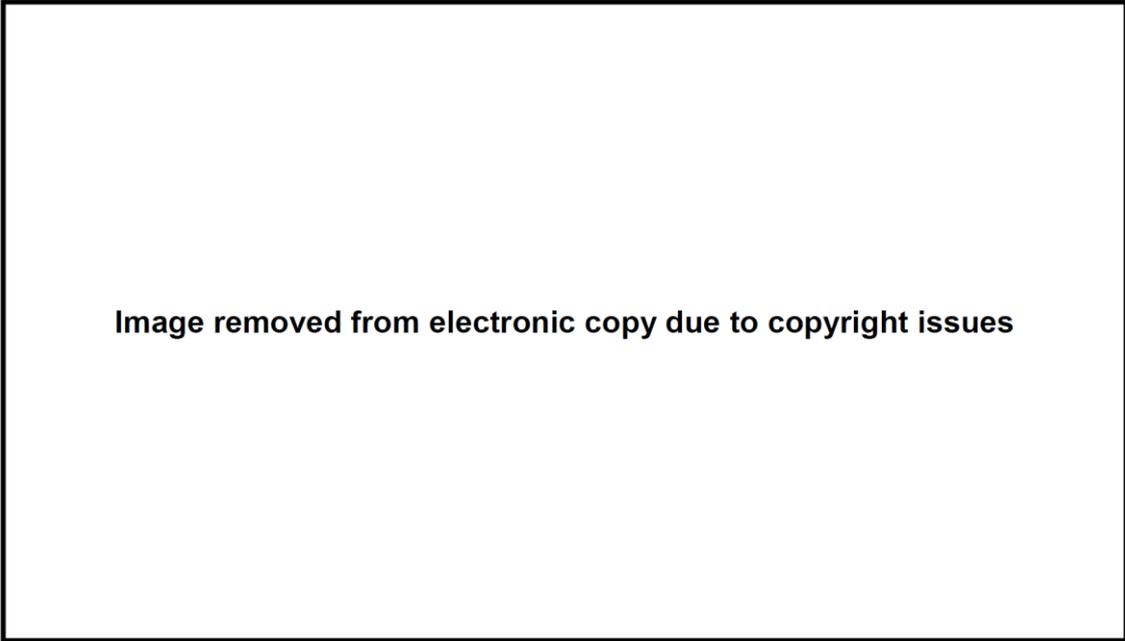


Image removed from electronic copy due to copyright issues

**Fig 6.1:** Robbie Cooper video 'Immersion' (Source: Robbie Cooper 2014).

A camera focuses directly on the face of a young child. His eyes are fixated, concentration undeterred. His body rocks gently, eyebrows furrowed, and his face contorts with palpable tension. A cacophony of gunfire can be heard in the background. These are the opening clips of Robbie Cooper's art installation *Immersion* (2008). The short video installation captures players interacting and immersed in the act of playing videogames, and in this instance, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*. 'Immersion' presents a fascinating glimpse into players' embodied engagements with videogames. What is interesting about this art project is that by recording the faces of individuals as they engage with videogames, Cooper's project begins to bring to the forefront the affective, emotive, experiential, and immersive capacity of the medium. This is where I will turn in this chapter.

In this chapter I argue for the need to move beyond a focus on representation to consider the embodied, experiential, and affective encounters of playing virtual war. As such, I begin to account for the everyday experiences of gamers and seek to provide a unique insight into understanding what it is to play war.

I will begin by introducing Non-Representational Theory (NRT). Building on the key tenets of NRT, I will discuss how considerations of audiences within popular geopolitics need to turn to the everyday practices and performances in which geopolitical knowledge is encountered and experienced (see *Chapter 5*). This aims to develop a 'more-than-representational' popular geopolitics, one that considers the 'events, doings, backgrounds, relations, and affective resonances' (Vannini 2015) that are constitutive of the geopolitical.

After setting and expanding on the theoretical foundations of the chapter, I will draw upon interview data to examine how individuals discuss the experiential moments of play within the single campaign mode. However, here I encountered a number of problems, which included the players' inability to recall the experiential moments of play (see *Chapter 3*). The chapter thus goes on to elaborate and unpack the complex relations between human and non-human entities that constitute players' entrance into the virtual geopolitical worlds by analysing playing war *in situ*.

## **6.1 Introducing Non-Representational Theory (NRT)**

NRT over the last decade has experienced a growth in interest from within Human Geography (Anderson & Harrison 2010; Lorimer 2008; Vannini & Taggart 2013; Thrift 2002). This interest was brought to the forefront through the initial work of Nigel Thrift. NRT emerged as a dissatisfaction with social sciences' apparent fixation on representation and discourse. Instead NRT offers an experimental framework which is interested in the practice and flow of everyday life (Thrift 2008). Previous to this, the 'New Cultural Geography' movement in 1980s encouraged a shift towards social constructivist epistemologies (Cosgrove & Jackson 1987). This research turned to the deconstruction of social and cultural objects, phenomena and orderings, revealing subsequent power relations. However, such explanations and forms of analysis were thought to have overlooked the enactments of everyday life (Thrift & Dewsbury 2000). This perceived reductionism, they argue, subsequently overlooks the lived, practised, performed, embodied processual encounters that pervade the everyday. Occupied by the vitality of everyday activities and enactments, NRT considers prosaic encounters as a source of

becoming, organised through interactions between bodies, materials and technologies.

Recently a body of scholarship under the banner of NRT has emerged within Human Geography focusing on an array of research trajectories and subject matters. These have included an emphasis on, but are not limited to, the lived body and the way it is attuned to a sense of being in the world (Harrison 2000; McCormack; 2002; Saldanha 2005); relations between human and non-human entities and a heightened appreciation of the capacities of materials and objects having agency (Thrift 2003; Spinney 2006; Whatmore 2006); the role of affect, sensations and emotions in everyday life (Anderson 2004; Pain *et al.* 2010; Pile 2010); landscapes and the surrounding environment's ability to affect the body (Wylie 2005; Sidaway 2009; Macpherson 2010). Crucially, NRT invites a form of witnessing which summons us as researchers to examine everyday life. As Lorimer (2005 p.84) suggests, NRT considers:

“how life takes shape and gains expression in shared experiences, everyday routines, fleeting encounters, embodied movements, precognitive triggers, practical skills, affective intensities, enduring urges, unexceptional interactions and sensuous dispositions.”

Despite its growing application in Human Geography, NRT has provoked a critical reaction from within the discipline (Cresswell 2012; Tolia-Kelly 2006). The term 'non-representational' remains provocative in its apparent indifference and the casting out of representation (Castree & Macmillan 2004). Within critical geopolitics, turning towards the minutiae of everyday life detracts from the 'bigger things' that have been the foundational characteristics of the scholarship.

However, I want to suggest that the representative practices that sustain these geopolitical cultures have not been jettisoned completely. Instead scholars are calling for further attention to consider how representations are lived, experienced, and performed (Shaw & Wharf 2009; Müller 2008; Thrift 2000). In the words of Nigel Thrift (2000 p.385) there is still room for discourse, “but ...discourse understood in a broader way, and one which is less taken in by representation and more attuned to actual practices”. In other words, we turn from a focus on geopolitical discourse as something not to be 'uncovered', but

to consider the commingling of geopolitical discourse with everyday practices, performances, and experiences.

In this respect I prefer to use Lorimer's (2005) lexical adjustment 'more-than-representational'. This, I argue, provides a useful means of taking popular geopolitical research forward. As I will now go on to discuss this offers a number of opportunities for popular geopolitical scholarship. This includes an appreciation of the embodied encounters of the geopolitical, the actual practices of popular cultural consumption, and ongoing, everyday relations that provide an insightful, and more nuanced, understanding of what it is to play virtual war.

## **6.2 Towards a 'More-Than-Representational' Geopolitics**

Popular geopolitical scholarship has emerged through an analysis of the representative practices of the media and entertainment and, recently, its resulting interpretations by audiences. Escaping such analysis though is the audiences' everyday engagements with popular culture. The consumption, interpretation and internalisation of popular culture is not something that happens in a social and cultural vacuum (as noted in *Chapter 5*), but is situated, practised and experienced within everyday geographies. Turning to a more than representational geopolitics helps us consider the everyday lived experiences of popular culture which have so far eluded geopolitical scholars.

As within the broader discipline of human geography, more-than-representational thinking has begun to enter critical geopolitical thought. Moving beyond a focus on representation, Dittmer and Gray (2010) have called for a geopolitics which is attuned to the everyday. As they suggest this "focus[es] on the everyday intersection of the human body with places, environments, objects, and discourses linked to geopolitics" (2010 p.1673). In this respect more-than-representational thought offers a body of work that can usefully expand an interest into the everyday experiences of popular geopolitics. Here, I turn to Vannini (2015) to elaborate on the key tenets of NRT and how they are useful in developing a more-than-representational geopolitics.

For Vannini (2015), NRT thinking is interested in a number of subject matters including: *events, relations, doings, backgrounds, affective resonances*. Each of these tenets of NRT offers productive ways of thinking about popular geopolitics

from a new perspective. The term *event* opens up investigation into the moment and unfolding of popular geopolitical consumption. The event of consumption is overlooked within current popular geopolitics. By turning towards the event of consumption we reveal the contingent nature in which popular culture is experienced. These events “do not resemble, or reproduce a set of *a priori* conditions” (Anderson & Harrison 2010 p.22) but instead are volatile, contingent and ever-changing. The moment and the event of gameplay, in this case, is never predefined. It is therefore important to consider the dynamic, processional and practices of play (Woodyer 2012). Through turning to play as an event we analyse the contingent practices, situations and performances in which everyday geopolitics happens.

The *doing* helps us consider the specific everyday practice and performances which relate to popular geopolitical consumption. In contrast to previous audience-based studies in popular geopolitics, the actual situated context of consumption and its attendant practices have been overlooked. This involves considering the ways popular culture is experienced and practised in the everyday. In this instance Ash and Gallacher (2011 p.362) contend that:

“Tracing out the embodied experiences of firing weapons in popular military-themed videogames (such as Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 and Battlefield Bad Company 2) can help us to understand the geographic practices of videogaming as part of a broader ‘resonance machine’ (Connolly 2005), which mediates and produces popular geopolitical understandings and attitudes towards real-world conflicts.”

With *background* we take into consideration the situated context of the *doings* and *event* of consumption. Whether this is the public space of the cinema, or the intimate location of the home, the background setting and its multiple social and material relations play an important role in amplifying, or disrupting the ways geopolitics is experienced (Dodds & Dittmer 2013). Through examining the situated context in which media consumption occurs we can reveal how this is influenced by an array of background happenings that are constitutive of the geopolitical.

NRT also forces us to consider the *relations* forged between an entanglement of human and non-human interactions. This relational view decentres the human and instead considers how agency is spread across a range of actors “decentring reified totalities” (Müller 2015 p.28). Müller (2015 p.28) argues that

we move towards an assemblage theory which unpacks the “ordering [of] heterogeneous entities that...work together for a certain time”. Such relational thinking is argued to move us beyond the artificial separation of the micro and the macro and instead considers how the macro is always composed and constituted of a plethora of micro entities that work together to form the whole (Dittmer 2014). Rather than a vertical and hierarchical understanding of scale this suggests geopolitical power works on a horizontal plane, in which there exists the entangled and distributed relations between an array of objects, materials, bodies and environments. This pushes forward a post-human turn in geopolitics, a turn that considers the complex assemblage that allows for the mediation, experience, and practices associated with the geopolitical (Williams 2011; Ingram 2012; Weir 2014). These relations are certainly evident when we consider the videogame medium and the technical and material components that enable players to enter these militarised virtual worlds.

Finally, and perhaps the area which has begun to gain most credence with geopolitical scholarship is *affective resonances*. Affect is a key concept that has been taken forward within critical geopolitics and is worthy of expanding on. Dittmer (2010) suggests affect has taken two trajectories. Firstly, academics have understood affect through the associations between bodies, matter, and technology. Secondly, academics have been concerned with affect in biological terms and the imbrication of culture-brain-body (Connolly 2002). The latter has generated growing interest and theorisation. This notion of affect has been taken forward by Gerard Ó Tuathail. A somatic marker is defined by Connolly (2002 cited in Ó Tuathail 2003, p.858) as:

“a culturally mobilized, corporeal disposition through which affect-imbued, preliminary orientations to perceptions and judgment scale down the material factored into cost-benefit analyses, principled judgments, and reflective experiments.”

Discussing the events of 9/11, Ó Tuathail (2003) notes the affective resonance of the event which encouraged a geopolitical culture premised on pre-emptive militarism and a deep-seated desire for revenge. This marker mobilised a set of decisions which move beyond intellectual and rational considerations to what became “a memory that necessitates and justifies a radical “down-scaling” of the world into infantile categories” (Ó Tuathail 2003 p.859). Considering this

notion of affect we can note how discourses and representations intermingle in ways that are not wholly discernible. Through turning to affect in geopolitics we begin to question “how pre-cognitive, libidinal, ‘gut feelings’ interfere and operate with geopolitical representations” (Müller 2013 p.61). This can certainly be seen in the capacity of the videogame medium which offers a highly affective mode of engagement that requires fleeting moments of intense (re)action.

Popular culture is an outlet in which the geopolitical affectively resonates with audiences. The work of Carter and McCormack (2006, 2010) is helpful as it begins to explain the multi-layered affective ways in which geopolitical logics are rendered through the visual-audio schemes of films. From the perspective of production, Carter and McCormack (2006) suggest the techniques and technologies deployed within the film can come to amplify geopolitical events and cultures. Taking the hugely successful film *Saving Private Ryan* as an example, Carter and McCormack draw on the depictions of the intense battle scene alongside the film’s attempt to draw emotional attachment to the main characters. These aspects converge to “heighten the morally redemptive actions of Allied (or largely American) intervention” (Carter & McCormack 2006 p.235). This draws attention to the representational structures and values present in the film and the ways these can affectively resonate with geopolitical sensibilities. In this sense we can move beyond ideological signs to the way “[cinematic] images become refigured as bodies of affective intensity with the capacity to affect other kinds of bodies” (Carter & McCormack 2006 p.235). This perhaps becomes more evident when we consider videogames. Playing in these virtual worlds can become less about interpreting the geopolitical narrative or representative world, but rests more on the affective experience of performing in virtual worlds (Dittmer 2010). This, however, does not remove a concern with representations and discourses, but instead invites us to consider how the game’s geopolitical and militarised representative worlds are affectively experienced by the player.

### ***Embodied Geopolitics***

In this chapter we turn attention to the embodied geopolitics of playing *Call of Duty*. Compared with the elite and state-centric focus found in critical geopolitical studies, feminist geopolitics turns attention to the everyday micro-scales in which geopolitics is shaped, constituted, and resisted. In particular, the

scale of the body and embodied practices, performances, and enactments become legitimate sites in order to unpack the diffusion and reproduction of geopolitical power. By turning to embodiment, feminist geopolitics seeks to expose and provide grounded understandings into the ways in which geopolitics becomes spatialised and meaningful in everyday life, as Williams (2011 p.384) explains:

“[T]he term ‘embodied’ relates specifically to how geopolitical spaces are created and experienced and speaks directly to the role and position of individual bodies within these spatialised and spatialising experiences.”

Examples of work include the exploration of the human and non-human assemblage forged between drone and pilot (Williams 2011), the ways that body, and bodies, are enlisted into performances of (geo)political resistance (Swanson 2015), and how the spaces of birth become geopolitically contestable (McKinnon 2014). However, studies examining embodied geopolitics have drawn attention to the ways bodies are positioned in relation to state-led discourses. Instead I want to consider the prosaic ways popular geopolitical discourses are practised, embodied, and experienced.

Current accounts of popular geopolitics disregard the affective relations forged between bodies and cultural artefacts. This is perhaps exemplified in the videogame medium as players are rarely numb to the virtual topographies they navigate (Shaw & Warf 2009). Videogames are a medium designed to cultivate (positive) affective states of engagement (Ash 2010b, 2013) and they attempt to immerse players in virtual worlds that are politically and ideologically charged. A range of techniques are used which immerse the player. For instance, the first-person perspective controls the visual perception of the player heightening immersion, while other technologies such as force feedback<sup>26</sup> encourage the virtual world to be felt, sensed, and embodied (Murphy 2004). A concern with the more-than-representational should consider the affective resonances of play and its geopolitical implications. While scholars have examined the representative worlds of videogames, they have overlooked the medium’s ability to affect and how they “become embodied, felt, experienced, and lived” (Shaw & Warf 2009 p.9). I want to now turn to the ways of understanding the

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<sup>26</sup> Force feedback refers to the ways videogame controls often have technologies which vibrate in the player’s hand, in relation to the onscreen activities. For instance, in the FPS shooters, such as *Call of Duty*, the vibrations occur when firing attempts to mimic recoil, as well as in other instances.

experiences of playing war. To begin I explore the interview data to illustrate the affective resonances of playing war.

### 6.3 Affective Worlds: Affective Geopolitics

Playing *Call of Duty* allows players to (virtually) experience the enactment of military violence. Continuing with our interest in the single campaign mode of the game series, it is worth considering how players actually experience these virtual worlds and how they relate to geopolitical cultures and imaginations about the military (Dittmer 2010; Shaw & Warf 2009; Sylvester 2011). For many participants, various aspects of playing virtual war has cultivated particular embodied responses. Here, participants discussed particular moments of gameplay that encouraged intensive experiences, and immersed them in the virtual world. For instance, a number of missions within the single campaign mode require players to go undetected, and avoid direct confrontation with the enemy avatars. For many, this aspect was a source of enjoyment and served to amplify the affective potential of the game:

“I like the stealth missions a lot. I like the idea of being a sniper and taking out your targets. It sounds weird. You get a kick out of it though. You’re waiting to pull the trigger and that whereas if you just shoot somebody with a machine gun... it’s just repetitive. Where this is not repetitive. You’ve got one shot with the sniper. I think that’s what makes it a bit more exciting and more fun.”

(Louis)

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*Jacob:* “I like...I don’t like time jobs I don’t like being in a rush and I like it where it’s all stealth.”

*Interviewer:* “Any reason?”

*Jacob:* “It just feels cool. It just feels like I’m a proper soldier. I love the stuff where you have got to like sneak past guards, you don’t have to kill them or anything like that, you just have to sneak past them, or you have to quickly take them out, sniper them and run and I like all that kind of thing. Where I just think if you are blowing stuff up that could be any game.”

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“When you’re trying to be undetected, just that sort of nervous and sort of thinking that someone could just pop out at me at any single minute and when it all goes silent and you’re just creeping through somewhere... That’s a bit scary, but it sort of just gets your adrenaline gripping. It is hard

to put into words it's sort of that adrenaline rush that you get and I suppose it's exactly the same as playing something like *Manhunt* [a videogame] as a child, I mean you feel like you're alone and feel that you could be caught at any time and when you're caught...that's it. That's the end. And you're just trying your hardest to be unseen and to get the mission done."

(*Alexander*: MA unpublished data)

Particular aspects of play had an affective resonance with the players. The stealth mission was a source of enjoyment which *Louis* discusses and something which encouraged a different style of play. In this case going undetected within the gameplay heightened emotive states. Players thus attempt to navigate particular aspects of the game without being detected. In the case of *Alexander* we can see how attempting to abide by the game rules heightened his engagement with the game. Instead of discussing the representative worlds as such, the game dynamics stimulate the affective state of the player. The game's focus on playing as Special Forces operatives comes to be affectively reinforced. The act of being covert in the game strengthens the connection and identification with the onscreen avatar. As *Jacob* suggests, this style and mode of play encourages an imagination of being "a proper soldier." Moving stealthily through the game world in this case is deemed a more realistic reflection of how the Special Forces operate. As noted the affective potential changes in the context of the game mode.

Rather than consider the connection through purely representational and the visual aspects, the ludic structures of the gameplay are considered to amplify experiences immersing players into the game world. However, as *Alexander* goes on to qualify, neither the game dynamics, nor their affective consequences, can be seen to be limited to the *Call of Duty* series. *Manhunt*, a game noted for its extreme violence, encourages the player to navigate the virtual world stealthily. Instead of the representative worlds it is the styles of play that pervade other types of videogames and not exclusively experienced in the militarised world of *Modern Warfare*. The gameplay becomes an intensively affective event which connects the player to the identity of a Special Forces operative and wider cultures and understanding of the military and what they do and how they do it.

The notion of affect of working beyond cognition makes it difficult to assess the game's affective capabilities on audiences. This is at the heart of issues surrounding affect studies and how we can come to understand "evidence of audiences' affective responses to films [and other popular cultural artefacts] outside what can be inferred from their discursive production" (Dittmer 2011 p.128). If we consider affect in terms of its precognition upon the body, then we revert to passive understandings of audience as Barnett (2008 p.193 emphasis in the original cited in Dittmer 2010) discusses:

"Classical media-effects research is often criticised for assuming a hypodermic model of media power, ascribing to "the media" the ability to inject their preferred messages into the minds of their audiences. [Scholar of affect] Connolly goes one better than this: his account of media-affects is meant almost literally as a hypodermic model of influence, with media technologies ascribed remarkable determinative power in infusing affective dispositions under the skin of their audiences."

This notion of affect can be seen to manipulate audiences prior to their comprehension. In this case we can note the arguments discussed in the previous chapter and the ways the audience has been rendered as passive and in this case as dupes to the ways the game has been designed to affectively resonate with them.

While the games do work on a preconscious level, players show awareness of the techniques of affective amplification. For instance, the cinematic qualities and methods such as the selective use of sound are noted for cultivating embodied states of play. As one participant mentions, these techniques are recalled and understood critically:

"It's actually subtle propaganda because what they [the game producers] do is that they invoke an emotion. Like, for example, you're actually there resuscitating Soap [in game character] on the bench, it's trying to put you into the heat of the moment. Trying to bring back a person back to life and getting you to think what it is like performing first aid on the battlefield. Through that I think it creates a subtle effect on what people perceive to be real style army."

(*Shaun*)

The player notes the narrative techniques of immersing the players into the game world. This for *Shaun* can be seen to be problematic, generating responses which work on the player emotionally and which encourage particular

imaginings of what it is to be a soldier and the heroic acts performed on the battlefield. Rather than being passive to these techniques, *Shaun* presents a critical perspective and contemplation of the ways the game works on the player beyond the purely representational. There were other ways in which the game was seen to use techniques and practices to capture the player's senses and immerse them in the military action.

#### 6.4 Sensory War

Beyond the gameplay, there are other key techniques and elements within the *Modern Warfare* series which amplify player immersion into the virtual environment. Within popular geopolitics there has been a preoccupation with the visual at the expense of other sensory engagements (Pinkerton & Dodds 2009). The geopolitics of the *Modern Warfare* series is not purely about the *seen* elements rendered on screen, but it also invokes other bodily senses as described in this comment:

“There is a lot of music in it [the single campaign mode], like a film. That makes you feel stuff because they always do that thing when someone dies, or if someone is supposed to be a huge part of the film, that you're supposed to love they put some sad music in it. And then like, you know when you've got a timing thing you've got to run away, it's all sort of fast-paced music do you know? I mean like strings [referring to the orchestral music], so that makes you feel in that mood where you feel 'oh God I need to get out of here!' and you just start panicking, when in reality pause it [the game] and you're just back in the living room again but yeah when you are in it you're like [mimics heavy breathing]. If you get involved in the game.”

(*Jacob*)

The relevance of non-diegetic elements of the gameplay is shown here. Videogames often display diegetic information; in the case of *Modern Warfare*, this includes a health bar, and navigational and location markers, and as *Jacob* suggests, occasionally timers. Rather than being disruptive to the overall immersion and connection with the game world, these features amplify affective engagement encouraging the player to attune to the virtual world and the in-game objectives. Moreover, *Jacob* refers to the significance of sound and more specifically non-diegetic sounds – sounds that are not attributed to the action of the game world. Sound thus provides affective amplification which can be seen to resonate with, and mobilise, the body (Waitt *et al.* 2014).

Similarly to film, the use of music connects and “enhances the narrative experience of gameplay” (Whalen 2004 np). Rather than being disruptive to a player’s engagement and immersion in the virtual world, sound is an integral feature which amplifies their experiences. The death of a character, for instance, becomes emotively enhanced through the accompanying music, cultivating feelings and sensations based on the geopolitical narrative which exemplifies military cultures of redemption, revenge, and unilateral intervention (Carter & McCormack 2006).

The importance of the sound to players’ gameplay experience was further elaborated on by *Alan*. During the gaming interview, I had muted the volume of the videogame he was playing in order to capture the interview using a Dictaphone. *Alan* noted this as having a significant effect on his gameplay experience:

“We were playing this game but I can’t actually hear anything, so that kind of takes it away. I was always in this room I was not on the battlefield so it wasn’t totally immersive. But yeah, these vibrations [discussing the feedback generated by the controller], the sounds, the kind of aims and zooms, and things like that makes you feel like you are there [in the game], but there doesn’t exist. Totally immersive...apart from smell.”

(*Alan*: MA unpublished data)

This quote indicates the array of elements that coalesce to immerse the player in the virtual world. As *Alan* suggests a breakage or disruption in these elements has implications for the gameplay experience. In this case the absence of sound, coupled with the gaming interview process, had an overall negative effect on the immersion into the ‘battlefield’. Rather than a simplistic, seamless entrance into this ‘transitional space’ (Shaw 2010a) offered by the *Modern Warfare* series, players’ experiences were contingent on the assemblage of technologies and elements which connect the player to the virtual world.

This notion of assemblage will be developed later on in the chapter. However, what is indicated here are the sensory-inducing apparatuses, technologies, and in-game mechanics and visuals which converge to allow the player to enter the virtual ‘battlefield’. While the visual and representational worlds in videogames come to construct particular geographical imageries, other elements such as

sound have an influential role in amplifying the narrative and connecting the player to the militarised and geopolitical worlds. As suggested by *Alan*, the sound helps to situate the player in the physical space in which the game is being played.

As demonstrated in these comments, the game has profound embodied and affective capabilities which can tie players into the game worlds. However, rather than just a purely visual understanding of the game world, players demonstrate how it is experienced via other elements which amplify their gameplay experience and narrative. These affective resonances are further defined by the type of gameplay.

### ***Multiplayer vs Single Campaign Mode***

While some participants identified aspects of the single campaign mode which emotionally and affectively resonate, others suggested this relationship was further determined by the type of gameplay they interacted with. Often ignored in current research is the versatility of the videogame medium and the different options and ways of encountering the geopolitical and militarised virtual worlds (see *Chapter 5*). Our interest thus far has been predominantly on the single campaign mode. As we have seen, participants do recall particular experiential moments of gameplay. Yet, responses from a number of participants indicated how the single campaign mode was experienced dispassionately whereas the multiplayer option was credited with generating a more intense experience. These individuals discuss the emotional and affective differences between them:

“In campaign mode I’m just a mindless zombie, following orders and working through objectives. Not in a ‘C is for Charlie Company’ way mind you, I fully appreciate how that may have come across, but basically in single player I just lose myself to the enjoyment of the story.”

*(Keith)*

“I never get on edge in the actual gameplay [single campaign mode] because you’re handheld through it all it’s just the thing you have to go through you know nothing is going to be impossible...”

*(Dean)*

“I think your emotional swings are far greater in multiplayer than they are in the campaign. In the campaign you only get annoyed if you get something like one of those death loops where you have just gone past

the same point and a grenade lands in front of you. And you've got to go back. There is nothing really emotional in the game. I didn't exactly shed a tear when I carried that RPG through the airport and mowed down hundreds of people. It was just 'this is quite fun' 'Isn't this mental?' I never shed a tear for them at any point. Whereas I think the multiplayer is a bit of a different story."

(*Robin*)

As these player quotes demonstrate, their immersive, emotional and affective engagements differ based on the game mode they are engaging with. The single campaign mode, in this instance, inculcates limited affective and emotive states upon the player. The linear structure of the single campaign mode clearly has implications on the player's experience. There is awareness, for instance, of the pre-programmed and predefined structures that guide and that define the player's agency within the rule-based game world (Nitsche 2008). As *Dean* suggests, he feels he is being 'handheld' throughout the single campaign mode where the player is compliant to the logics of the game. While this limits the choices of the player within the virtual world, the awareness of the structural narratives of the game world can serve to reduce the affective resonance with the player. In the single campaign mode players are able to respawn upon being killed, and also other techniques, such as changing the difficulty of the gameplay emphasises both the opportunities and limitations of player agency and mastery of the game world (Juul 2010).

The actual content of the videogame also failed to resonate with certain players. *Robin* discusses a controversial mission, in *Modern Warfare 2* entitled 'No Russian', where the player assumes the role of an undercover military operative and, in order to maintain their cover, becomes an accomplice in a terrorist attack (see *Chapter 4*). Based in an airport foyer, the player can either shoot and kill civilians, or choose not to. *Robin* discusses how the mission itself and the apparent moral implications, which were widely discussed by the media upon its release, did not resonate emotionally with the player. Alternatively there is the sense that enjoyment is being gained despite having to face up to the moral challenges that the level poses. While presenting a moral choice for other players, *Robin* notes an indifferent response to this aspect of the game. Yet, on the other hand, the multiplayer option as *Robin* suggests encourages a range of "emotional swings" for the player.

This illustrates the varying ways players connect to the videogame world and its significance for popular geopolitics. While players identified the potential for the aspects of the game to be affectively amplified, other participants noted how the campaign mode engenders unreflective and disengaged interaction. The purported predefined and structural arrangements of the game, rather than being absent from the player's consciousness, are clear in their limited mastery over space and narrative.

More notably participants identified the multiplayer option of *Modern Warfare* as encouraging a range of 'emotional swings'. The multiplayer option offers a highly competitive environment. This game mode differs in that it involves players connecting to a global network of players. The added element of other human controlled avatars, the competitive nature of the gameplay, and the emphasis on possible contingent encounters (Ash 2010b) are seen to cultivate more significant embodied responses in the players.

Developing on these insights, I want to now specifically focus on the multiplayer option of *Call of Duty*. The multiplayer offers a different geopolitical encounter compared to the constrained narrative of the single campaign mode. I want to further explore the embodied engagements with playing virtual war which is suggested by the interviews, to be more prominent and evident in the multiplayer option. Moreover, I argue that in order to capture this we need to move beyond what players say they do, to a focus on what they actually do. In order to overcome difficulties encountered in attempting to discuss player experiences (*Chapter 3*), I used a video ethnography, filming my own and participants' engagements with this game mode. This allowed an insight into players' experiences *in situ*, an understanding of the techno-social relations, and the situated context of play.

### **6.5 Everyday Geopolitics – Playing Ludic War**

Through the recordings I was able to shed light on the situated context of play and the actual place in which geopolitics is experienced. Absent within the videogame literature is how and where games are actually played (but see Reeves *et al.* 2009). Payne's (2010) ethnography of a LAN gaming centre is useful in taking forward the understanding of military gaming in place. Using the idea of 'ludic war' – "the activity of playing war or military-themed videogames

alone or with others”, Payne (2010 p.207) examines the way ideological and militarised content pervades the social spaces of the gaming centre. By attending to the social relations and how they are situated in context, Payne (2010 p.208) remarks how “power hierarchies in fictional, war-torn synthetic worlds are reified and replayed in the real world”. Through the video ethnography a detailed insight can be gained into the contextualised, and social, but also the technological relations which enter and emanate from the home.

### ***The Videogame Assemblage***

The playing of ludic war is predicated on a complex assemblage of human and non-human interactions and environmental contexts. The video ethnographic technique used in this aspect of the research revealed how play is not just a simple relationship between the player and the screen world, but there exists a range of actors, processes, environments and relations that make up the play moment (Taylor 2009 p.332). These elements work to further affect the player and how they relate to the virtual world. Moreover, rather than seeing gameplay as fixed, it can be seen as an event, which is the:

“outcome of a material assemblage of various entities, forces, and rules working together to encourage and prohibit specific forms of movement and action” (Ash 2010b p.667).

This notion of event acknowledges that gameplay and its resulting affect upon the body is not predefined. As we noted in the previous section, there are various in-game elements, such as sound, which amplify and negotiate players’ experiences and affective resonances. If we are to take forward Power’s (2007, p.284) claim that videogames are “affective assemblages through which geopolitical sensibilities emerge”, we need to consider the heterogeneous components of this assemblage which render these geopolitical encounters possible (Dittmer 2013, 2014). Such thinking helps overcome binary constructions such as ‘public and private’, ‘virtual and real’, ‘micro and macro’, and instead seeks to expose the multiple actors and relations that constitute the geopolitics of playing virtual war.

## ***Domesticating War***

While the *Call of Duty* series attempts to virtually put players in the boots of a soldier, the players' interaction with the game is always grounded in a physical location. In nearly all the interviews the home was the specific place in which participants played *Call of Duty*. The home thus becomes a key setting where geopolitical ideas *emerge*, and a place in which these ideas are *influenced* (Brickell 2012). In other words, the domestic setting is not just a place where (geo)political identities and subjectivities are constituted, imagined, or resisted, but the environment of the home actively shapes how these discourses are consumed, understood, and performed.

The ethnographic studies took place in the domestic setting of friends' homes. The actual location of the filming was largely dictated by where the console<sup>27</sup> was positioned in the household. In two cases the filming was undertaken in the living room. In one case the friend's bedroom and the other in a spare bedroom dedicated to video gaming. These spaces were the main place of play. Whereas the bedroom offered the comforts of privatised moments of play, the living room was a place governed by social relations where play would occur depending on who was using the room (see *Chapter 5*).

The ethnographic footage showed how the arrangement of the domestic space required constant negotiation and consideration of wider environmental and social factors. There was a physical alteration of the place of play into that of a gaming space (Gosling & Crawford 2010). In most instances play had to be organised around partners' or other family members' use of the room. Curtains were often drawn in order to avoid glare on the screen which could impinge on the visual experience of players. *Dean*, for instance, discussed how he had resorted to sticking paper on the transom above the door to block sunlight entering the room and onto the screen.

The screen was an essential component of the assemblage which provided the visualisation of gameplay. The setting up of the multiplayer option required a transformation of how the gameplay was visualised on the screen. Unprompted, players noted the difficulties of acclimatising to the fact that during the multiplayer option, the screen becomes split to accommodate other players. In

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<sup>27</sup> In all cases an Xbox 360 console was used.

the case of the multiplayer mode the screen is divided horizontally allowing two players, or more, to play on the same screen:

*Malcolm*: “Takes a bit getting used, you know, playing it on the smaller screen.”

*Interviewer*: “Yeah, I know.”

*Marcus*: “Because normally I play it just on my own.” [discussing the fact we’re playing split screen]

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*Gary*: [moves to a different seating position] “I feel like a rookie.”

*Dean*: [flinches]

[...]

*Dean*: “See I get used to having it full screen and whenever you do multiplayer it’s shit.”

*Gary*: “This is more like a full screen for me. I’ve got a small TV.”

The reduction of the screen size for players had significant effects on the forms of visualisation. The technologies of the screen and how they are creative of spatialities and visualities which foster relations of “attention, captivation and immersion” (Ash *et al.* 2009 p.465) are often overlooked. In these comments we note the necessity to adapt to the different screen arrangement, which for *Dean* and *Marcus* was a noticeable disruption in their customary individual engagements with the game.

The place of the screen shaped the physical and bodily arrangements within the room. The sedentary position of the player was constantly negotiated. As the following exchange details, play influenced particular corporeal positionings:

*Author*: [moves in the chair]

*Gary*: [moves seating position to lean forward] “I can never play in a relaxed position I have to be on the edge of my seat to play.”

*Dean*: “You’ve got to get in your gaming position haven’t you?”

*Gary*: “I sometimes play it in that [points to a children’s chair in the middle of the room] and play in the middle of the room.”

Gary: [moves seat]

[...]

Author: “Bit weird having the TV up there.” [Points to the television which is fitted to the wall].

Gary: “Yeah, I’m used to it now.”



**Fig. 6.2:** Dean, Gary and Interviewer – Gary moves towards the edge of the seat (Source: Author).

Play is described as an intense corporeal activity. As *Gary* indicates, play requires a bodily positioning that is primed, and prepared. In achieving this ‘gaming position’, *Gary* suggests, there was evidence of on-going relations between what Bissell (2008) calls the ‘body-chair assemblage’. This required players adjusting and changing seating, swapping seats with other individuals, and constant micro readjustments within their seat. *Figure 6.2* shows the player leaning forward on the edge of the seat, with hunched shoulders, forearms resting on legs, and the eyes fixated upwards towards the screen. The videogame encouraged players to ‘lean forward’, rather than ‘lean back’. Rather than achieving a comfortable position, players were constantly adjusting their bodies. Intense engagements were punctuated frequently. When players were killed in the multiplayer option, or were waiting for the game to load, this provided opportunities for players to stretch, reposition in the chair, alongside

other activities, such as checking mobile phones. Playing ludic war elicits an embodied performance that is primed, attentive, and constantly in motion.

In these examples we note just some of the elements, actors, environments and social practices which constitute ludic war. Rather than being predefined, playing ludic war is made possible through an assemblage of human and non-human relations working in concert. This draws parallels with Simpson's (2013) proposed ecological approach to embodied practices. The player is continually enrolled and co-constituted in a complex range of relations. Through drawing attention to the social-material environments we reveal the sheer complexity in which an everyday geopolitics occurs. How the geopolitical is experienced is constantly in flux, based not just on the subject performance alone, but instead made intelligible and articulated through a range of heterogeneous entities. Gameplay therefore cannot be considered as defined, concrete or with a determined outcome, but produced through a range of relations that have the power to amplify, but also to disrupt, as we shall now go on to discuss.

### ***Assemblage Failure***

With this notion of assemblage we begin to reveal the multiple, complex flows and relations which prevent gameplay from being seen as a stable phenomenon. The fragility and contingent nature of these co-emerging relationships are precarious and prone to disruption (Anderson & McFarlane 2011). Indeed, gameplay is often rendered as a place in which players come to readily experience and transpose themselves into a virtual militarised environment. Instead player interactions, especially in the multiplayer mode, are predicated on external technicalities. This was often disrupted in relation to the internet network connection that is required when playing. These interruptions have repercussions for the relationship between player and encounter.

Technical defects and disruption were evident within the wider gaming assemblage. Indeed, in the interviews players noted the frustration of lag<sup>28</sup>. As *Sarah* noted, this was often an inevitable feature of play which "you can't really do anything about". Disruption to the network can have repercussions on play. In discussing these interruptions Pozo (2012 p.2) suggests how they "rupture

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<sup>28</sup> Lag is a delay between player's actions and the reaction of the server. This is usually prominent when playing online.

the immersion of gamers in a seamless 'war space'" and return the player to the physical place of play.

This was quite a regular occurrence for players and they often discussed their frustrations with technical issues disrupting play. These technical issues revolved around lagging and glitches, or more significantly, when play was brought to an abrupt end due to the loss of connection. While seen perhaps as minor insignificances, they have implications for breaking the immersion of the player within the virtual world. Moreover, these technological disruptions bring attention to notions of distributed agency (Bennett 2005) in the gaming experience. It is not just human interactions or agency within the assemblage that determines the gameplay experience, but non-human elements which shape the constitutive elements of the whole.

This notion of distributed agency complicates and enriches an understanding of relational ontology based on contingent and co-emerging relations between bodies, technology, environment and geopolitics. The consumption of popular geopolitics, in this case, is not based on a simple relationship between text and audience, but is dependent on a background hum of on-going socio-technical relations which have specific implications in regard to how geopolitical ideas circulate and gain meaning. If we consider the importance of the screen in the assemblage, and its properties which allow visualisation and "shaping the possibilities for geographic imaginaries" (Ash *et al.* 2009 p.465), then disruptions to the screen shape the players' abilities to play and experience virtual war.

Moments of rupture in the gameplay experience occurred on a number of occasions in the ethnographic studies. They varied in severity, from small fleeting glitches, to the controller disconnecting from the console, and to the complete disconnection from multiplayer servers. One situation, where I myself was playing, involved the game disconnecting while a new network server was being located. Just before the disruption I had inadvertently locked my weapon on an enemy avatar.

The gameplay froze and a countdown was displayed on screen as we waited for a new server to be located:

**[The game is disrupted due to the server connection]**

*Author.* “Awww”

**[The gameplay pauses due to the network connection being lost. The interviewer’s avatar has an enemy avatar in his line of sight.]**

*Dean:* [Laughs and looks at *Author*] “Just knife, knife, knife!”<sup>29</sup>

*Gary:* “Was he right there?” [Laughs]

*Author.* [Nods]

*Dean:* “It’s going to be counting down. He’s pointing at you!” [A countdown begins on screen.]

*All:* “Aww!” [Author attempts to kill the other player but fails.]

*Gary:* “I was there as well I didn’t realise.” [laughs]



**Fig 6.3:** Waiting for the game to recommence after the connection to the network is disrupted (Source: Author).

This technical fault stopped play and upon the countdown finishing I was able to enter back into the virtual war. As noted in the discussion, the disruption brings attention back to the room. As such this minor breakage in the assemblage of

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<sup>29</sup> Players have the ability to melee their opponents with a knife in close-quarter situations.

gameplay adds nuance to a seamless, coherent experience of these virtual militarised worlds.

The ways in which popular geopolitics is encountered occurs through complex socio-technical relations. Rather than offering a seamless gameplay experience, it is prone to disruptions based on these relations. However, as suggested in the above vignette, this can produce new experiences and affective encounters of gameplay which are not necessarily intended by the game designers. Here, the virtual experience and sense of immersion is broken. Pozo (2012 p.9) alludes to the geopolitical implications:

“While gamers may appear to be competing against one another in an endlessly regenerated and re-destroyed virtual Iraqi landscape, the concept of lag as a network phenomenon reliant on physical geography makes the virtual Iraqi space less important for multiplayer gamers than the physical distance between the players using that space.”

A perspective that considers the assemblage of out-of-game environments and material surroundings illustrates the multiple, contingent and always unfolding nature of media consumption. This presents a much more complicated account of the ways geopolitics is encountered, amplified and understood through the everyday. As noted the game involves an assemblage of materials based in the physical setting of play. However, we should also consider how this assemblage extends within and beyond the virtual worlds.

### ***Playing with Guns***

*Jacob:* This gun scares me.

*Author:* It's too powerful?

*Jacob:* It's not quick enough... how did I not?? [Raises controller]

*Author:* The problem is reloading it... I got a triple kill.

*Jacob:* Did you?

*Jacob:* You can't run very fast with this gun can you?

The gun is a pivotal in-game object. The weapon connects the player to the on-screen action and, depending on the weapon, offers the only way for a player to interact within the virtual landscape. With recent interest in political geography

on the role and capacity of objects (Meehan *et al.* 2013; Squire 2014; Meehan *et al.* 2014) we might also consider the wider significance of objects and in this case the ‘virtual weapon’ becoming symbolic in the exercise and “performance of state power” (Meehan *et al.* 2013 p.8). The scope of the gun identifies the targets while the player, by applying pressure to the button, enacts and maintains geopolitical power within the virtual world.

Within the multiplayer option, weapons take on further significance. While in the single campaign mode weapons are largely ascribed to the player depending on the mission, the multiplayer option provides choices. Each player has the ability to pick a limited number of weapons, additional items and attachments. Players also have to unlock particular achievements to gain access to different weapons which can aid their gameplay. When asked to elaborate on their decisions during the playing *Dean* and *Gary* discuss a number of reasons and factors informing their particular choices:

*Author.* “How do you go about choosing the weapons?”

*Dean:* “For this I’m trying to ambush them [the other team] so I try to get a fast shooting weapon. It’s [referring to weapon chosen] not good for clip sizes because you reload loads but works for ambush style.”

*Gary:* “I go for the semi-automatic. It’s got less recoil so when you see them you can, and you seem to get them on target quicker, rather than flailing around – like spraying.”

*Dean:* “It just depends on what mood I’m in to what weapon I use. Sometimes I want to use a sniper.”

*Gary:* “Yeah, I like the suppresser on it sometimes because it’s quite quiet and I want that stealth and you can hear the power of the gun as well. You just feel like you’re doing more damage.”

*Dean:* “It also depends how we’re doing.”

*Interviewer:* “One stage you’re moving a lot [talking to Dean] and Gary you’re ...?”

*Dean:* “Yeah, that’s to do with weapon choice I like to keep moving as I’m less than an easy target because I don’t have much range on this weapon... I’ve got to get in closer. If I’m stood still aiming it’s not going to work.”

*Gary*: “I like to have a little scan around and see when you can get a view when you can get a bit of space and look into the distance and just focus and see if anything moves.”

This exchange shows how *Dean* and *Gary* “consider the worth of weapons, their functions, use and results” (Lukas 2010 p.80). While the choice may be simply dependent on mood, it can also be related to desired ways of acting in the game. This can be attempting to ‘ambush’ the enemy, or to perform more stealthily by using a silenced weapon attachment. *Dean* and *Gary* describe how different playing styles affect the weapon choice which affects how they perform in the spaces of the game and upon their opponents.

They also refer to the strengths and limitations of the weapons, detailing a level of knowledge of how these weapons work within the game world. Both identified key features in their weapon choice, whether this was the necessity for fast firing weapons to complement the ambush style proposed by *Dean*, or to pick a semi-automatic which has less recoil as suggested by *Gary*. Another noticeable point expressed in this conversation is the militarised terminology that is used to discuss gameplay. *Gary* uses the term ‘spraying’ to indicate the desire to move beyond an uncontrolled, erratic form of firing. This term is widely used in the First-Person Shooter (FPS) genre and is derived from ‘spray and pray’, a term used within the military. Within the game world it is described as an action where “a player uses guns with either high rates of fire or high bullet counts and shoots with reckless abandon” (Giant Bomb 2015: online). This can also be seen as a negative practice within the online community. *Gary*, on the other hand, describes attempting to ‘ambush’ opponents – a long-established military term and tactic. We can see how the language and vocabulary of ludic war conflates with militarised terminology (Duell 2014). As such the gaming language and practice can be seen to be militarised and extend into the everyday domestic setting.

However, these militarised values, practices, and objects are not just verbalised but they are felt, sensed and experienced. As *Gary* notes “...you can hear the power of the gun as well. You just feel like you’re doing more damage.” The object of the gun is not just known through its purely visual depiction within the

game, but also understood through its relationship with the body. In this case we can see how the gun extends beyond the virtual world.

Whilst calls have been made to turn attention to the political power of physical, material objects we can note how the in-game object of a gun exerts affective capabilities which extend beyond the screen. Paterson (2006 p.705) argues “objects can be virtual and still have a presence”. This, as Paterson (2006) discusses, is increased by the use of forced feedback technologies. These technologies thus encourage the spillover of the virtual militarised world into the physical world (Shaw & Warf 2009). The vibrations mimic the recoil of the gun but also allow the player to feel the affect/effects of returning fire.

Participants discussed how the vibrations affected them. For certain players it became a hindrance, and the vibration was turned off due to negative effects on their gameplay. *Brian* mentioned he was worried about the health consequences of continued exposure to sustained vibrations. For *Jacob* it was an unnoticed feature of play. Only through the interview did *Jacob* suggest he became aware of the vibrations and their effects on his body, showing a level of attunement of the game level experience on the body (Ash 2013). In explaining this attunement further *Jake* discusses how it becomes a vital, but nevertheless a largely unconscious, aspect of their gameplay:

“I really like vibrations in games, I think it has given them a whole new perspective like, it’s not quite a fourth dimension, but you definitely notice it when it turns itself off if your battery is running low. You feel disconnected without it after getting used to it for so long and it’s quite odd.... when it’s just there you don’t really notice it but your brain just takes up on it and it sort of, when the controller just starts vibrating you’re thinking ‘oh I’m being shot from somewhere I best hide’ and it’s just all just instantaneous reactions but then I think with more and more games coming out with no controllers or it’s a bit like ‘oh well’ you don’t have the same fun. But I do like the vibrations.”

(*Jake*)

The vibrations, as discussed by *Jake*, are seen as an important technology which connects the player to the screen world. The vibrations become attuned and felt through the body in ways which are not evidently comprehended. The haptic technologies provide ways of knowing and experiencing the virtual worlds which force the player to respond to and to act upon.

Paterson (2006, 2009) has discussed the technologies being used which help collapse the physical and virtual realms. The vibrations are usually associated with the gun, whether this is a consequence of bullets hitting the virtual avatar, or the feel of the player firing. The forced feedback experienced when the player fires, immerses the player and thus “mimic[s] sensations of solidity, and spatial extension of an object” (Paterson 2006 p.706). In the vignette below the in-game gun, literally and physically extends beyond the screen and is corporeally articulated:

*Dean:* “I like the PPW me.”

*Author:* “I kind of like the assault rifles...”

*Dean:* “I only like the single shot assault rifles.”

*Author:* “No, it’s got to be constant.”

*Dean:* “I like my accuracy.” [makes gun sound and mimics gun using hands while laughing]



**Fig 6.4:** Dean mimics the sound and firing of a single assault rifle (Source: Author).

The single assault rifle is demonstrated by *Dean* as a way of attaining accuracy in the virtual environment. The single-shot gun has certain properties which allow more accuracy in comparison to the automatic guns. *Dean* comes to corporeally mimic the gun in terms of imagining its embodied presence and performs the sounds of the gun. The properties of the weapon are performed, embodied and made meaningful in everyday life. Rather than being

disconnected from the on-screen content, players sense, feel and embody the screen world.

## 6.6 Concluding Remarks

In contrast to the previous chapter which centred largely on participants' interpretations, this chapter explored *what it is to play war* in its situated context. Through adopting a more-than-representational perspective, I have explored the affective, experiential and embodied aspects of play and how this resonates with the games' militaristic and geopolitical content. Also, the chapter adopted a video ethnographic approach in order to capture the complexities of playing war. As such, this chapter makes a number of important contributions to understanding the ways the popular geopolitics of the game world enter into everyday life.

Firstly, it has provided a situated and intimate glimpse into the ways popular geopolitics is consumed in the domestic setting. It has shown the material and social relations in which playing war unfolds and how the virtual worlds are experienced, understood and navigated in material places. Such investigations help move beyond clear-cut distinctions between 'public' and 'private' and reveal how different scales interrelate. Moreover, it considers the ways the environment shapes popular geopolitical consumption.

Secondly, the chapter has highlighted the complex relations between human and non-human entities that constitute the playing of virtual war. Play is predicated on a complex, contingent and volatile ecology of human and non-human entities that allow the affective mediation of, and immersion into, these virtual geopolitical worlds. How these aspects interact has implications on the experiences of playing war.

Finally, it notes the embodied, experiential and affective aspects of playing war. Here, different aspects of the gameplay were discussed as amplifying their immersion with the game world and their attachment to the soldierly identity they assume. In the case of the in-game object of the gun, rather than being dislocated, it became felt and sensed in the physical world through the haptic technologies and embodied interactions with the surrounding environment.

In two chapters I have explored how players come to understand, experience and embody popular geopolitics. This makes an important contribution to an understanding of what Dittmer and Gray (2010) call popular geopolitics 2.0. However, as this thesis argues, a turn to the everyday can lose sight of the political economic structures of popular geopolitical knowledge production. In the proceeding chapters I turn to the role of the producers and explore how the *Modern Warfare* series is made and marketed.

## Chapter 7. Producing *Modern Warfare*

*“Where do geopolitical ideas come from and how are they authored? What are the material conduits of ideas? How do opinions form in a newspaper editorial office or how do TV stations decide how to frame a geopolitical issue? Who can set the agenda and act as a gatekeeper?”*  
(Müller 2012 p.384)

This thesis thus far, has analysed players’ engagements with, and the visual details of, the geopolitical and militarised worlds offered in the *Modern Warfare* series. Critical analysis within popular geopolitics has explicitly drawn attention to the ‘finished’ product. Our analytical attention in this chapter, however, focuses on an understanding of the processes, power relations and the interactions that go into the production and shape *how the games are made*. Current enquiry has thus overlooked a perspective that considers the multiple actors, organisations and institutions that create, define and shape cultural products. Carter (2008 np) rightly points out that scholars of geopolitics “need to think about where the dominant discourses, tropes, affects actually come from [and] how they continue to get produced and circulated”. As I will argue, this analytical fixation on a ‘finished’ product obscures the power relations, creative energies and the defining economic and political structures that enable the production of particular popular geopolitical narratives in the first place. The aim of this chapter is to begin to unpack and reveal the processes and practices of production involved in the making of the *Modern Warfare* series. This will shed light on the political structures, alongside the everyday social-material relations, that shape the overall geopolitical scripting of the videogame.

In terms of structure, I will proceed by setting an agenda which considers the context in which geopolitical discourses are produced. This will draw attention to the ways the dominant geopolitical narratives, ideas and scripts come into being. In order to achieve this, I argue the need to adopt an ‘integrated approach’ (Hesmondhalgh & Saha 2013) which is sensitive to the macro, and micro practices, and to the interplay between structure and agency within cultural production. I firstly examine the political economic structures of the *Modern Warfare* series, indicating the power relations between the videogame publisher *Activision*, and the videogame studio *Infinity Ward*, and how this

affects what game is produced. Secondly, I consider the micro aspects of production, noting the everyday social-material relations and the agency of individual actors in shaping the final videogame. This 'integrated approach' accounts for the organisational structures, and how this interacts within a complex web of social relations, creative energies, technological and material relations, which shape the final geopolitical product.

Due to the issues of accessing primary data, as discussed in *Chapter 3*, this chapter will draw on documentary evidence. This includes using various websites, *YouTube*, video game magazines, and newspaper articles containing interviews with key actors who were involved in the series production.

### **7.1 Production and Popular Geopolitics: Content over context**

The opening quote from Müller (2012 p.384), indicates an important, yet overlooked question within critical geopolitics; *where do geopolitical ideas, narratives and scripts come from?* While scholars within popular geopolitics have explored the ways geopolitical logics are visualised and represented, this has been largely understood from a perspective which has focused on an examination of the text as a 'finished' product (Rech 2012; Coulter 2013). In this respect, popular geopolitical discourse is understood as ontologically pre-given, where the focus is on the academic, and more recently on audience engagements, understandings and interpretations of a final geopolitical text.

Indeed, within popular geopolitics comprehensive theoretical and methodological studies concerning the production of geopolitical discourse remains scarce. While work often notes the influence and motives of producers through short interviews, or the use of statistical figures to demonstrate the economic success of popular cultural artefacts, there have been limited efforts in exploring creative impulses and the wider economic and political conditions that enable the production of the popular geopolitical items in question (Carter 2008). Scholars have thus avoided questions of production; the ways in which geopolitical texts, scripts, narratives, codes and logics actually come to fruition. By tracing the processes of cultural production, popular geopolitics can shed light on the ways dominant geopolitical tropes are established in the media and entertainment industry. Importantly it reveals that these texts are not pre-given, but are the product of political relations and multiple practices and processes.

The question remains how might an examination of the production of popular geopolitics proceed? Two main theoretical and analytical foci have been used to facilitate an understanding of the creative industries and of the creation of cultural goods. Firstly, there has been a turn to the everyday processes and application of creative agency within cultural production. This has involved a turn towards situated approaches that have drawn on specific observations and given voice to the individuals implicated in the design, development and circulation of the media texts (Levine 2001; Caldwell 2008; Saha 2012). Secondly, research can be seen to take a political economy standpoint. Here, the role of market economies, capital accumulation and corporate and political policy are understood as crucial to the production and distribution of cultural goods (Maxwell 2001; Winseck & Jin 2012). A political economic approach exposes the power relations between various corporations, organisations and institutions involved in the production.

Recent work in cultural studies has begun to encourage micro forms of analysis that is sensitive towards the everyday social relations that are constitutive towards the overall process of media production (Paterson & Domingo 2008). Through escaping an overly deterministic economic perspective, this cultural approach has provided insights towards how meaning involves everyday social exchange and negotiation. Although studies have tended to present both the 'cultural' and 'economical' approaches as exclusive, this has been deemed untenable, and instead consideration has been placed on the complex relationship between the two (du Gay 1997). Both perspectives offer productive ways of understanding the ways in which popular geopolitical discourses materialise.

In the first instance, scholars within human geography suggest that greater attention is needed to consider the wider political-economic structures of cultural production (Coulter 2013; Rosati 2007). In referring to Sharp's seminal text within popular geopolitics, '*Condensing the Cold War*,' Toal (2003) highlights this omission by drawing attention to Sharp's fixation upon the (re)presentation of geopolitical discourses that occupy the pages of the *Reader's Digest*. As such, less attention is given towards the *Reader's Digest* as an institution and the dynamic and contingent ways in it functioned to produce such geopolitical discourses. Toal (2003) suggests that this analysis

overlooks the underlying forces such as the social and historical context of the magazines production, the agency of the editors and authors, and the way “the political economy conditions, shapes and subsidises knowledge production in so-called ‘free press’ states” (Toal 2003 p.161). This absence of social, political and economic contexts and structures impoverishes any understanding of the ways that geopolitical discourses are produced and disseminated.

Indeed, economic and financial factors are pivotal within cultural production. While appearing incongruous to geopolitical analysis, factors such as economic funding play a fundamental role in shaping the final product. Coulter’s (2011, 2013) research, considers the multiple stakeholders involved in the negotiations of funding and production of films. Key to these negotiations are “invocations of territorial interest or identity to justify a project or win support for a position” (Coulter 2011 p.949). What this approach further exemplifies is the role of particular actors, organisations, and institutions within media and cultural production.

A political economic approach, as suggested above, however obscures the more everyday practices and individual agency that are implicated in cultural production. Limited studies within geopolitics have drawn attention to the role of individuals in shaping geopolitical discourses. Megoran (2006b) interviewed key individuals in the organisation of a national service of remembrance at St Paul’s Cathedral, UK, as a response to the September 11<sup>th</sup> attack. He argues that despite the organisers’ desire that the act of remembrance remained apolitical, the event augmented a geopolitical script that sided with a military response while marginalising alternative and peaceful responses.

Similarly within popular geopolitics, Klaus Dodds (1996, 2007) has provided insights into the individual artistic labour of satirical political cartoonist, Steve Bell. When interviewing Bell, Dodds examines his own analytical interpretation of the cartoons in relation to the actual motives and artistic design employed by Bell. Yet, while the interview sheds light on Bell’s politicised and creative decisions, this places the creation solely on the individual. In this case brief mentions are made in respect of the (lack of) influence emanating from the newspaper’s publisher the *Guardian*, yet wider structural arrangements are largely absent from discussions.

Vital to understanding the production of geopolitical knowledge is to acknowledge the actors involved in the process. Critical geopolitics has emphasised the power and authoritative role that certain actors have in circulating geographical knowledge. However, by concentrating on the 'public-face' of organisations, the inner workings and the sociology of knowledge production escapes analytical focus (Toal 2003). Müller (2012) offers an alternative perspective, arguing that organisations should not be seen as monolithic entities, but they - and their geopolitical work - are the product of relations held together between heterogeneous human and non-human elements. Drawing on actor-network theory, Müller (2012) advocates the necessity to unpack the multiple, contingent social-material relations that are constitutive of the organisation, and ultimately how these processual relations influence, shape and produce geopolitical texts.

These ideas are taken forward by Weisser (2014) who argues that textual documents have a central role in the performance and mechanics of international relations. Sympathetic to Thrift's (2000) call to examine the 'little things', Weisser (2014) draws attention to the role, and production of documents in furthering organisations' geopolitical agendas. Furthermore, documents are brought into existence via practices and material arrangements. Weisser (2014 p.46) therefore argues that documents should be considered as the "effects of organisational practice' and as having 'effects in organisational practices'".

Despite there being a tendency to focus on the (geo)politics of texts, it is important to recognise how the processes of production are wrought with political decisions and practices. For instance, Neumann's (2007) study on speech writing in the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs provides an insight into the multiple actors and everyday working routines within which speeches actually get produced. Weisser (2014 p.49) argues "politics pertaining to the document is about the inclusive and exclusive effects of certain practical doings and material arrangements". Moreover, there remain deeply politicalised questions concerning agency, and how that agency can be seen to be distributed between different human, and non-human entities, involved in the production (Müller 2012). While these studies have been attentive to the workings of formal governmental institutes and texts, these ideas can usefully

be adopted in popular geopolitics, in order to shed light on ways geopolitical scripts, narratives and representations are the product of particular organisational and social-material relations.

When considering the production of popular geopolitics, research would benefit from an awareness of the complex and contingent practices of production. Focusing on one aspect can obscure factors that may seem incongruous to the geopolitical, but nevertheless are important (Dittmer 2011). Therefore how can we account for the multiple practices, actors and relations that constitute the production process of popular entertainment products? Cultural theorists Hesmondhalgh and Saha (2013 p.186) note that there are:

“many types of factors influencing lives and institutions, including economic, socio cultural, political, and technological factors, and their complex interplay”.

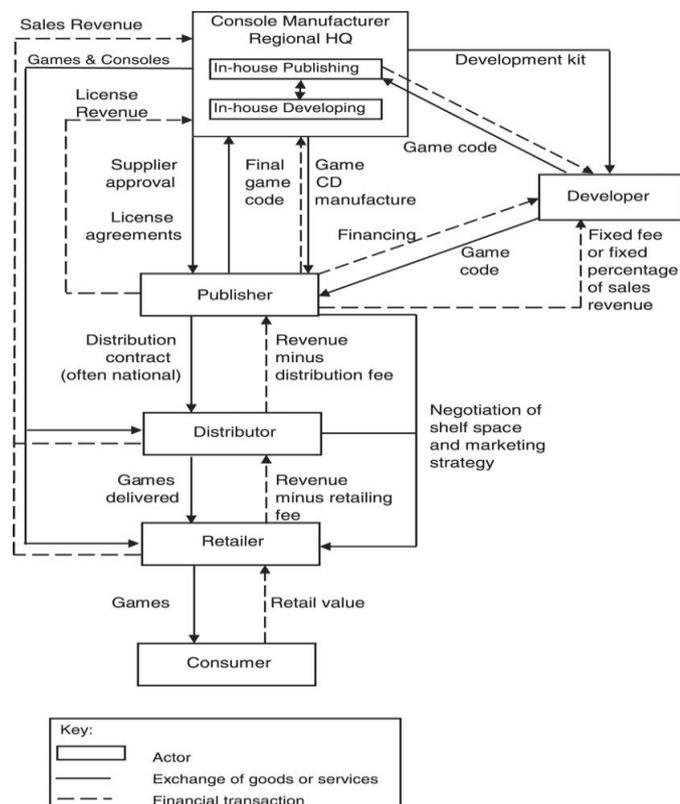
As such, they argue for an ‘integrated approach’ within cultural studies. This approach acknowledges micro and macro processes, the relationship between structures and agency, and the change and continuity that are encountered in practices of cultural production. However, accounting for all these complex interplays would certainly be a difficult feat in the space of a thesis, never mind a single chapter. This chapter considers the macro – the political economic and organisational structures of videogame production, and the micro – the everyday social-material relations and practices that contribute to revealing the decisions and creative choices behind geopolitical narratives.

Another important issue which has implications for studying the production of popular geopolitics is the practical consideration of accessibility. The absence of studies concerning popular geopolitics can be largely attributed to this issue. Defending the omission of speaking directly to the writers’ of *Reader’s Digest*, Sharp (2003) suggests the difficulty and inability to speak to, or to gain access to cultural producers. However, as expressed in *Chapter 3*, and sympathetic to suggestions made by Kuus (2008), rather than claim defeat, other methodological approaches, such as documentary analysis, can be usefully employed to uncover the practices of production. Moreover, this also shapes what understandings of the production process can be feasibly uncovered.

In this chapter while I focus specifically on *Modern Warfare* series, other videogames in the franchise are discussed in order to flesh out the processes of production. In this first part, I will explore the macro processes informing the production of the series, turning to the volatile relations between the series' publisher *Activision* and development studio *Infinity Ward*.

## 7.2 Videogame Production

If we are to begin to reveal the ways the *Modern Warfare* series is developed, we need to begin by looking at the organisational structures, practices and relations that have implications on what game gets made. Rather than being abstract, disembodied, and immaterial, all popular geopolitical narratives are the product of relations between various actors and institutions. In the case of videogames, the work of Johns (2006) has illuminated the geographies of their production. *Figure 7.1* indicates the processes and the key actors involved in the production, from the actual videogame development, to the retailing and circulation of the final videogame.



**Fig 7.1:** Interconnections between the main actors within software production network of videogames (Source: Johns 2006 p.164).

While Johns' (2006) research exemplifies the spatial distribution of production and the industrial organisation of the videogame industry, such work is less useful in examining the role that these arrangements have on shaping the 'final product'. What it does reveal, however, is that the production of videogames involves two key actors, the publisher and the developer.

### **7.3 Publisher Vs Developer**

The key actors in the *Modern Warfare* series development are the publisher *Activision*, and the development studio – *Infinity Ward*. The developers are integral to the production of the content of the videogame, while the publisher overlooks the financing and subsequent distribution of the final videogame. Unlike other creative industries such as books and films where the creative stage is independent from publishing and distribution, the majority of the production cycle in the case of the videogame industry, is “vertically integrated and controlled by one company” (Kerr 2006 p.64), in this case it is usually the publisher. Evident are the uneven power relations as the publisher, in usual circumstances, maintains control over the development studio.

*Activision* was founded in 1979 and has become one of the biggest videogame publishers in the world. The development studio, *Infinity Ward* was co-founded as an independent game development studio in 2002 by Vince Zampella, Jason West and Grant Collier. Previously this trio had been employees of *2015 Inc*, the game studio responsible for the production of *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* (2002) and owned by *Electronic Arts* (EA) publishers, a direct competitor to *Activision*. Parting ways with *EA*, *Activision* initially bought 30% shares of the newly established studio, financing them to develop the first *Call of Duty*. Upon its successful release *Activision* bought the studio outright, and *Infinity Ward* thus became integrated into the in-house development team – a common practice within the videogame industry. The first *Call of Duty* was released for the PC in 2003. Set in World War II, the game came as a direct challenge to the *Medal of Honor* series.

In *Call of Duty*, *Activision* controls key aspects of the production including development, publishing, distribution, and retail. Accordingly, they maintain power over the final product “exert[ing] tremendous influence over what games get made” (Dyer-Witherford & De Peuter 2009 p.41). Moreover, they have

definitive control over the intellectual property of the videogame. These relations are further explained by Johns (2006 p.169):

“In essence, developers are charged with the creative development of a game code, which is then passed over to the publisher who oversees the rest of the production network [...] the publisher retains the intellectual property rights to the games, despite the initial concept and creative input originating with the developer”.

The relations between publisher and studio are often turbulent and videogames are the product of power struggles, between the conflicting intentions and desires of both parties. For instance, the corporate culture of the publishers often clashes with the creative aspirations of the studio development team. As such, publishers often have a poor reputation concerning their dealings with development studios and their overriding economic motives (Kerr 2006 p.64). This is particularly true for *Activision*, which has been branded an ‘Evil Empire’ by the gaming press and community (Antista 2011: online). Much quoted comments by *Activision* CEO Bobby Kotick have buttressed this label. Kotick notoriously suggested the publisher’s role was to “take all the fun out of making videogames” (Chalk 2009: online). Further to these comments Kotick, discussing the volatility of the gaming industry in the time of recession, reportedly gave a candid insight into the company culture:

“I think we've definitely been able to instil in the culture the scepticism and pessimism and fear that you should have in an economy like we're in today. And so, generally while people talk about the recession, we are pretty good at keeping people focused on the deep depression. And I think that, as a result, you have people that are very mindful of their costs. They are mindful of the value they have to deliver” (see Totllo 2009: online).<sup>30</sup>

Comments such as these allude to the publisher’s economic incentives and motives to produce a profitable product. This often comes at the expense of creative, original, and perceived risky ventures. The game developers are thus largely constrained by the decisions made by the publisher. Discussing these often strained relations, as recalled by Vince Zampella, *Activision* were reluctant to commission a contemporary iteration of the *Call of Duty* series:

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<sup>30</sup> At a pre-release press conference hosted by *Infinity Ward* in September 2011 the words scepticism, pessimism and fear, featured in the studio’s presentation of *the Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* multiplayer option. Displayed subtly on screen these three words featured as three different custom classes of weapons.

“Activision...did not want *Modern Warfare*. They thought working on a modern game was risky and [thought], 'Oh my god you can't do that, it's crazy!' They were doing market research to show us we were wrong the whole time” (GameSpot Staff 2009: online).

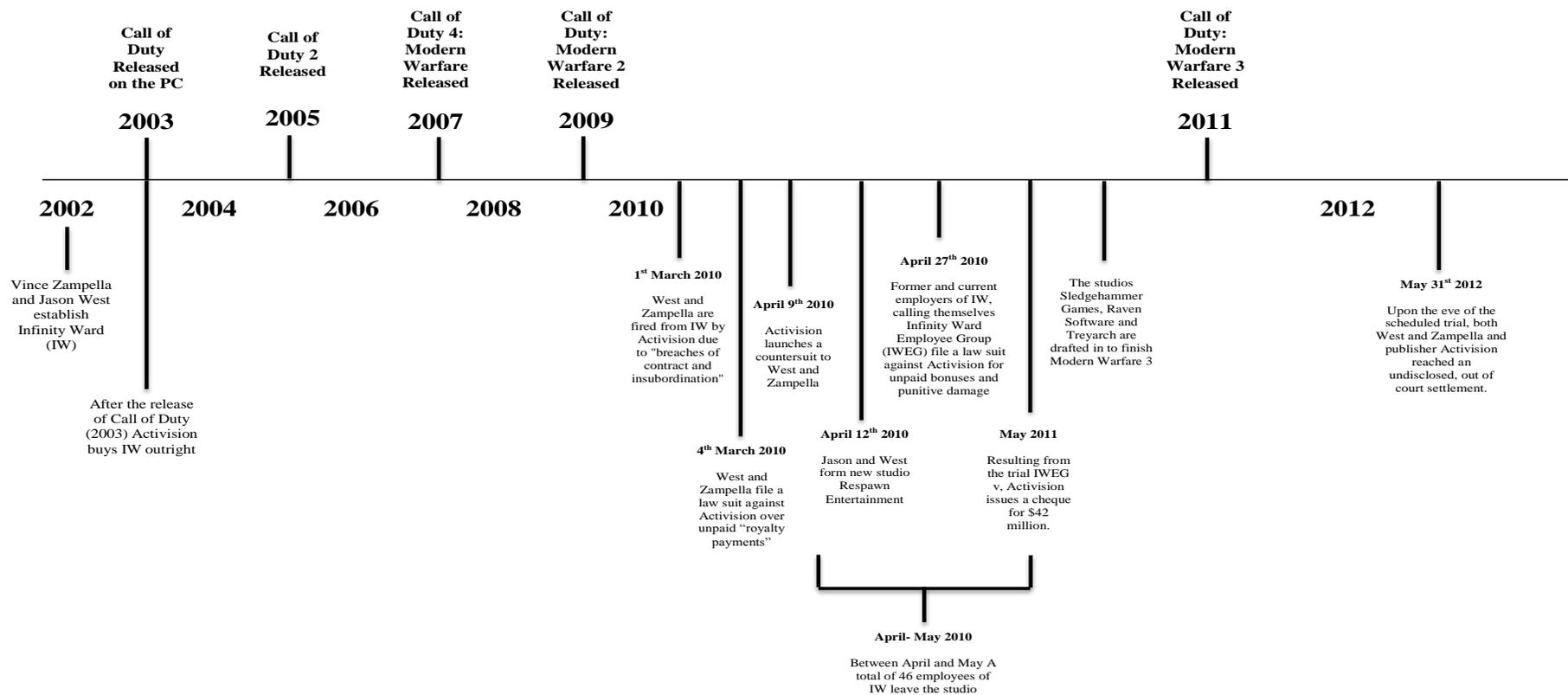
The desire of the studio to create a contemporary account of warfare was initially suppressed by *Activision*. Dyer-Whiteford and de Peuter (2009 p.43) argue publishers are “notoriously risk averse”. This shows the publisher’s reliance on audience and market feedback and a preference for established genres and themes, which contributes to what game narrative is produced. As such publishers perfect “a method of risk aversion, preferring clones of proven hits to experimentation” (Dyer-Witherford & de Peuter 2009 p.45). In the case of *Call of Duty*, while the studio sought to expand their creative scope into modern times, *Activision* maintained its control and influence on the process of videogame production, pushing for the perceived safer option in maintaining the series’ historical focus.

However, in appeasing this apparent discontent with the studio, *Activision* and *Infinity Ward* struck a compromise. In exchange for producing another World War II themed-videogame *Call of Duty 2* (2005), *Activision* would give the studio Developer Kits (devkits) for consoles. These devkits would enable the studio to produce videogames for consoles, as well as PC and expand their creative potential. After the successful release of *Call of Duty 2* (2005), and the critical acclaim it received, the balance of power shifted. *Infinity Ward* was thus able to push forward *Modern Warfare* which would change the videogame industry. Moreover, the relations between publisher and studio would dramatically shift.

### ***The Battle over Creative Control***

With only a small proportion of videogames entering successfully into the market, publishers largely “incur all the risk and uncertainties” which consequently means “they adopt an aggressive and tough approach to negotiations [with the developers]” (Kerr 2006 p.64). Such negotiations are often the product of interests vying over creative freedom and control over the content the videogame. Certainly this became increasingly evident between *Activision* and *Infinity Ward* and erupted in a spectacular fashion.

**Activision v Infinity Ward: A timeline showing the key events concerning the relationship between publisher and studio**



**Fig 7.2:** Timeline showing the key events following the dismissal of both Jason West and Vince Zampella from *Infinity Ward*.

On March 1<sup>st</sup> 2010, around 6 months after the record breaking release of *Modern Warfare 2*, *Infinity Ward* founders Jason West and Vince Zampella were sacked by *Activision*. A statement from *Activision* revealed that the pairs' firing was the result of "insubordination and breaching their contractual agreements" (Thorsen 2010: online). While the specific details of these accusations were initially unclear, the relationship quickly deteriorated into a mass publicised legal conflict. Days after their sacking, Zampella and West filed a law suit against *Activision*, claiming that they were unfairly dismissed and that the publisher had withheld bonuses owed after the release of *Modern Warfare 2*. The legal documentation that was revealed over the course of the next few years shed an interesting light on the publisher and developer relations and the battle over creative control of *Modern Warfare*.

Publically available documentation, resulting from the court cases, revealed the explicit and underhand methods devised by *Activision* in an attempt to remove West and Zampella from *Infinity Ward*. Perhaps most remarkable was the revelation of *Project Icebreaker* (Klepek 2012: online). Thomas Fenady, IT professional at *Activision*, explained how eight months prior to the sacking of West and Zampella, he was told by *Activision's* Chief Legal Officer George Rose to "dig up dirt" on the pair, on the basis that *Activision* were "sick of dealing with these guys [and] their ego... we just want to get rid of them" (Klepek 2012: online). What became known as *Project Icebreaker* was supported by *Activision's* CEO Bobby Kotick. Testimony provided by Fenady revealed how explicit attempts were made to try and locate incriminating evidence in order to sack both West and Zampella. Fenady was tasked with hacking into the pairs' laptops in order to locate any incriminating evidence which could be in turn be used to justify firing them. Plans were devised and discussed to stage a fake "fumigation" and to enact a "mock fire drill" at the *Infinity Ward* studio, in order to provide an opportunity to access the pairs' computers (Klepek 2012: online).

These attempts demonstrate the poor relations between studio and publisher, which can be largely related to the internal politics over the creative control of the franchise.

As West states in an interview, there was a continuing battle to push the franchise in a different direction:

“...Activision wanted us to make another World War II game...So that’d be an example of when we pushed for something creatively. And now they [Activision] have billions of dollars they didn’t have before” (Chafkin 2013: online).

The release of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2007), as West suggested, generated unprecedented profits and success for the company. The game sold more than 10 million copies in its first 9 months and was voted game of the year at the Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences (AIAS)<sup>31</sup> in 2007. This exceptional triumph of *Modern Warfare* had further implications on the balance of (creative) power. The economic success gave more power to the studio.

With the unprecedented success of the game, *Activision* was keen to ensure the studio would develop a sequel. To do so required a renewal of West and Zampella’s contract. In March 2008, both parties signed a *Memorandum of Understanding* (MOU). The contract tied *Infinity Ward* into the development of the sequel *Modern Warfare 2*, to be released in November 2009. Moreover, the MOU revealed important developments in regards to the relations between publisher and development studio, namely those concerning the creative control over the franchise of *Call of Duty*.

The MOU revealed a unique shift, as *Infinity Ward* would gain increasing control over the franchise, attaining creative control following the release of *Modern Warfare 2*:

“IW [Infinity Ward] management would be entitled to exercise creative authority over the development of any games to be published under the *Modern Warfare* brand ... no game associated with the *Modern Warfare* brand can be commercially released without the written consent of IW Management” (see Los Angeles Times 2012: online).

As the document details, this gave *Infinity Ward* increasing control of the creative development of the *Modern Warfare* series, subject to reasonable approval from *Activision*. This included game and storyline development, studio recruitment, and the ability for *Infinity Ward* to employ a marketing manager (with the approval of *Activision*) to oversee advertising, promotion and PR

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<sup>31</sup> Since 2012 the awards are now known as the D.I.C.E. awards

activities. Furthermore, the studio was granted autonomy from the publisher, a move exceptional to the industry. As the MOU continued:

“Following the release of *Modern Warfare 2*... IW will be entitled to operate as if it were independent in that it will be permitted to choose its own development projects and release schedules.”

“In the event that IW commences development of a new videogame IP [Intellectual Property] (“New IP”) will have the same creative authority over the new IP as with *Modern Warfare*... It is currently contemplated that the New IP would be either based in the sci-fi genre with a 3-year development cycle or be another *Modern Warfare* based title or a non-competitive *Call of Duty* spin-off”

“Activision will retain authority and responsibility over all titles within the *Call of Duty* franchise (specifically excluding any *Call of Duty* title set in modern day (post Vietnam), the near future or distant future, which shall be under the authority of IW...” (see Los Angeles Times 2012: online).

The success of the *Modern Warfare* series gave *Infinity Ward* the ability to negotiate a contractual agreement that entitled the team to full production rights over the series and limited intervention from the publisher. It was arranged that “no one among Activision’s top brass would play *Modern Warfare 2* until the general public did” (Chafkin 2013: online). This provided a level of creative freedom rarely experienced within the industry, which, as the final clause indicates, gave creative control over what geopolitical narratives were produced within the *Call of Duty* series.

In the latter clause, we can see how the *Call of Duty* franchise narrative is dictated around specific temporalities. While *Activision* and the other development in-house studio *Treyarch*, would maintain narrative control focusing on periods prior to Vietnam, *Infinity Ward* would gain creative control over the production of ‘modern day’, ‘near future’ and ‘distant future’ geopolitical narratives.

Illustrated within the contractual agreements is the politics that control the space/time of the *Call of Duty* worlds. In this case we see how space is disrupted as a central aspect of the narratives; instead the geopolitical context is defined via particular temporal epochs of American military history, alongside other temporal attributes which govern the geopolitical context and narrative of the videogames and their production.

Despite popular geopolitics examining the simplification of spatial frameworks within popular culture, it has overlooked the significance and the politics concerning the cultural production of time (Klinke 2013). Klinke (2013 p.3) goes on to argue that “temporal language contaminates geopolitical writing and collective identities are produced as much through temporal boundaries as they are through spatial ones”. The construction and control of the politics of time, or chronopolitics, is central to the production of the franchises’ geopolitical narrative and what videogame gets made.

The contract shows the categorisation of historic and futuristic temporal periods. Rather than emerging around spatial narratives, the MOU shows the contested nature and importance of time in the construction and control over popular geopolitical narratives. The periodisation demonstrated in the production of videogames is always a political process which is subjective. Within the *Call of Duty* franchise, historical narratives allow players to revisit key temporal periods defined and positioned usually Western/ American history, while *Infinity Ward* controlled the ability to control narratives that run parallel to contemporary geopolitical discourses.

The release of the details of the MOU is indicative of the power relations that govern the creative practices in which a videogame is produced. The negotiation of creative control over *Modern Warfare* and increased independence from the publisher was unique to the videogame industry as a whole. Moreover, it indicated the formal, contractual, and legal negotiations that shape the game’s geopolitical narrative. Despite *Infinity Ward* gaining unprecedented freedom, this did not last. The sacking of West and Zampella revoked *Infinity Ward’s* creative control over the franchise with immediate effect. Furthermore, this had severe consequences for the production of *Modern Warfare 3*.

### **Reorganisation**

“Are we going to rebuild? Hell Yeah. The unit take casualties. If you can put them back together, get the morale up, you can take the hill. Either that or you deconstitute [sic] the outfit and bring in a new outfit. Right? We have a mission –make the best game possible– at Activision” (Hank Kiersay quoted in Smith 2010: online).

As epitomised by the apt words of the military advisor of the *Call of Duty* series Hank Kiersay, the fallout of the saga meant the reorganisation of *Infinity Ward*. Most importantly with the removal of West and Zampella, *Activision* were able to regain creative control over the franchise. One of the pivotal factors of the successful production and release of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*, was the apparent low turnover of staff at *Infinity Ward*. The stability and familiarity of the team working together on previous games was crucial to the successful development of *Modern Warfare* (Rieke & Boon 2008: online).

West and Zampella were replaced by *Activision* Chief Technology Officer, Steve Pearce and Head of Production, Steve Ackrich, allowing the publisher to regain further control of the production process. Between April and May 2009, 46 members of staff, nearly half of *Infinity Ward*, left. The majority of these employees joined Zampella and West at their newly established videogame development studio *Respawn Entertainment*. The ongoing production of *Modern Warfare 3* and the extent of the fallout, *Infinity Ward* was left significantly downsized, lacking the original creative team responsible for the production of the *Modern Warfare* (see *Figure 7.3*).

| Defined role in <i>Infinity Ward</i>                | Numbers of employees leaving <i>Infinity Ward</i> from April 2010 |
|-----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Artists and Concept Artists                         | 36% (8 of 22)                                                     |
| Animators/Technical Animators/Mocap People          | 40% (4 of 10) of                                                  |
| Designers and Scripters                             | 74% (17 of 23)                                                    |
| Engineers                                           | 80% (12 of 15)                                                    |
| Writers                                             | 100% (5 of 5)                                                     |
| Leads and Directors from these Departments Combined | 82% (13 of 16)                                                    |

**Fig: 7.3:** Table shows the number of staff that left *Infinity Ward* from April 2010 (Source: CynicalSmirk 2010: online).

On April 27<sup>th</sup> 2009 current and former employees of *Infinity Ward* launched a separate court case. Calling themselves the *Infinity Ward Employee Group* (IWEG) the case sought up to \$125 million in unpaid bonuses, coupled with up to \$500million in punitive damages.

To cope with the demands of developing the next *Modern Warfare* game, the development was now no longer tied to one studio. Instead, in order to maintain the *Modern Warfare 3* release date, *Activision* was forced to outsource the production to other game development studios, *Sledgehammer Games* and *Raven Software*. Along with the remaining team and newly appointed staff at *Infinity Ward*, the studios collaborated in the development of *Modern Warfare 3*. Although undermining the position of *Infinity Ward* as the sole developer, this alliance was seen as beneficial to the overall final product as the length of the single campaign mode was increased.

By examining the macro organisational structures, I have illustrated the power relations between publisher and developer and the implications this has had on the production of *Modern Warfare*. As illustrated this tension was drawn around creative control over the franchise. Illustrated here is how the 'final' geopolitical 'text' emerges out of behind-the-scenes negotiations, contractual agreements, and organisational structures. The narrative produced is based around a concern over temporal periods. This points towards the need to consider time, as well as space/place within popular geopolitical analysis.

However, this analysis and perspective does not reveal the everyday creative decisions, process, and practices through which the virtual worlds materialise. Indeed, questions regarding the various actors involved in the actual creative decisions that go in the design, production, and construction popular geopolitical texts remain hidden. Moving from this examination of the ordering of production, I want to draw attention to the everyday negotiations in which the geopolitical content of the game is realised.

#### **7.4 The 'Everyday' Popular Geopolitical Production of *Modern Warfare***

I want to focus attention on the everyday processes and practices negotiated and discussed by the game developers and designers. As Hesmondhalgh and Saha (2013) indicate, studies need to incorporate an 'integrated approach',

acknowledging the macro, while addressing the micro – the everyday social and cultural knowledge, practices and choices. This turn to the everyday consists of an examination of the individual actors, designers and programmers working to deliver a final product and exposes the everyday exchanges of knowledge which constitute the military geographic imaginaries represented in the game.

### ***The Influence of Cinema***

A number of different influences come to inform the rendering of the virtual landscapes, characters and narrative of the *Modern Warfare* series. In producing the single campaign narrative, cinematic conventions play an integral role in the composition of the series. For Bolter and Grusin (1999) the ‘new’ media, such as videogames, can be actively seen to incorporate similar conventions to other media equivalents. They suggest that this is a form of ‘remediation’. Cinema has become a key source of inspiration for the creation of the *Modern Warfare* series and a source for influencing the geopolitical scriptings of the game world.

There are a number of ways films have become an integral feature of the *Call of Duty* franchise. The *Call of Duty*, and the *Modern Warfare* series, have consulted and employed screen writers to contribute to the scripting of the various games’ narratives. Working in close collaboration with the games developers, screen writers have an important role in generating a storyline. These include celebrated screenwriters such as Stephen Gaghan, who has written film scripts including *Traffic* (2000) and the ‘geopolitical thriller’ *Syriana* (2005). Gaghan was asked to write the game script for the *Modern Warfare* follow-up, *Call of Duty: Ghosts* (2013). The futuristic setting in *Call of Duty: Ghosts* presented Gaghan with an opportunity to implement contemporary geopolitical reference points and sentiments which could be embedded within the script of the game. Like the “intertextual nature of much of geopolitics” (Sharp 2000 p.35), scriptwriters, such as Gaghan, draw on personal knowledge and resources to contextualise the geopolitical narrative.

Contemporary anxieties around America’s geopolitical position became a key theme developed, as Gaghan confesses, “I did riff off people’s fears of America not being a superpower anymore” (Yahoo News 2013: online). In this particular

game historical anxieties are reignited in relation to threats emanating from South America. Gaghan goes on to explain:

“If you are trying to imagine where a huge antagonist could come out of South America that could threaten America, in a plausible way, I felt like I knew. I had given a lot of thought to the American Empire. It's just something I'm interested in. *Syriana* was a lot about the nature of the American Empire. I had lots of time with and read a lot of books about that stuff” (see Ohannessian 2013: online).

Presented with the task of creating a plausible threat to American hegemony, Gaghan's comments can be seen to draw parallels to the classical geopolitical corpus, that purports objective geographical claims and professes an ability to prophesise and predict future threats to national interests (c.f. Kaplan 2013). Megoran (2010) suggests how classical geopolitical logics are creatively reworked and discussed in contemporary times, which he defines as neoclassical geopolitics. However, these neoclassical geopolitical scripts are not just produced and constructed in the elite echelons, but are formulated and circulated via popular cultural outlets. In this case, Gaghan reveals how his personal knowledge, and experience of writing for *Syriana*, a film revolving around American economic and political relations with the Middle East (see Carter & Dodds 2014 p.1), and his knowledge of the 'nature of the American Empire' meant that he believed he became a credible and empowered figure in (re)imagining future American geopolitical concerns.

Film and other media are explicitly referenced by game producers and designers as key sources of inspiration. I have already noted in *Chapter 5* the linkages between the videogame series and the *Generation Kill* (2008) HBO series, but further admissions by developers shows a clear homage to cinema. For instance, *Tears of the Sun* (2003)<sup>32</sup> provided inspiration in the characterisation and appearance of the game character 'Soap' MacTavish - who resembles the character Lake in the film (Remo 2009: online). In drawing from the film, *Modern Warfare 2* lead character artist Joel Emslie suggests the desire to give certain characters instantly recognisable traits, such as a mohawk, in order for the character to be clearly visible to players.

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<sup>32</sup> *Tears of the Sun* (2003) is an action war film based around the deployment of US Navy SEAL team rescue mission amidst civil war in Nigeria. The film stars Bruce Willis who commands the team to rescue a US citizen caught-up in the civil war.

Mention of cinema can also be seen as positive and legitimating reference point for the games' producers and designers. As King and Krzywinska (2002 p.149) state this is due to "the greater cultural prestige enjoyed by both cinema (as an institution) and film (as a medium of expression)". There is a continual reference to the cinematic qualities of the *Modern Warfare* series. These discursive references to cinema, are seen largely "as a form of praise" (King & Krzywinska 2002 p.149), but, moreover cinematic influences are used as a defensive mechanism for the games' geopolitical and militaristic content. For instance, *Infinity Ward* producer Mark Rubin in discussing *Modern Warfare 3*, distances the game content from contemporary events and from the military campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. Instead, Rubin defends allegations that the games mirror contemporary conflict. A key point stressed was the desire to avoid any direct reference with current or contemporary events:

"The Call of Duty world has always been fictional, it's not the world we live in – the history is different. The history of New York, of 9/11, it's not the same in our game. This is the US versus Russia, so it's almost like the Cold War from the Eighties, but in the modern environment, with modern weapons. It's more of a "what if..." scenario than a reflection of our world today. We're not trying to make a statement, the game is not socially conscious, we're not promoting any political direction. We're making stories. And, you know, it's quite simple. These are 'guys in wars' stories, they're like the WWII films we've all watched, the space war films we've all watched... the human spirit wins. That's what it is. The press does tend to point at the games industry, but well, fifty years ago it was rock-'n-roll, before that there were book burnings. There's always someone to point at" (see Stewart 2011: online).

From the producer's perspective, the videogame is detached from contemporary events. He seeks to refute any linkages with current geopolitical associations. Moreover, Rubin is quick to point to the generic conventions of historical and contemporary war films as guiding the game's geopolitical narrative. Associating the game's narrative with previous cinematic depictions of war, serves to justify and legitimise the game's narrative both as apolitical, and as a credible form of entertainment.

This quote suggests how the games use historical geopolitical scripts, in this case the Cold War and the animosities between the US and Russia. Despite suggesting a distance between the game's fictional content and contemporary events, references are made to previous historical events as a means of

grounding the content. In relation to Zakhaev, the leader of the Russian Ultranationalists, developers suggest that the character:

“is cut from the same cloth as Stalin and wants to bring the Soviet Union back and wants to use the tools that Stalin had used to make the Soviet Union a preeminent power in the world, so this includes intimidation, assassination, massacre, blackmail...these are the tools of Zakhaev” (IGN 2007: online).

Here, the scripting of the Cold War, a bilateral conflict premised on ideological differences is reimagined in a current context. In wishing to extend Power and Crampton’s (2005) argument around the intertextuality of film and geopolitics, we can see how videogames can be seen to use particular frames for multiple purposes to “reflect, reify, explain, author, support, undermine and challenge hegemonic geopolitical discourses” (Power & Crampton 2005 p.195). Here, historical events and figures influence the development and shape the meaning of the game’s geopolitical scripts.

Within the processes of producing the *Call of Duty*, the intertextuality of videogames plays a definitive role in the creation of virtual environments. Cinema in particular offers a central influence in all aspects of the game including the characters, landscapes, and narrative and screenwriters are consulted in producing the narrative. Moreover, linkages between the *Call of Duty* and cinema are used to defend and legitimise the game’s geopolitical narrative.

### ***Constructing Virtual Worlds***

The *Modern Warfare* series virtually transports players to various global locations. As we have seen, in *Chapter 5*, these locations range from unspecified locations in Afghanistan and the Middle East, to globally recognised cities, such as London. The ways these geopolitical and geographical imaginations become envisaged in the game world is largely down to various sources being used in order to replicate the cultural, physical and environmental specificities of these localities.

In creating the various landscapes required, developers are encouraged to gain first-hand experiences to inspire the construction of the virtual landscapes. Research trips served to help the studios to translate the essence of these

places into the virtual worlds. This included organised trips to military bases in order to experience live shooting and military manoeuvres.

According to Glen Schofield, the general manager of *Sledgehammer Games*, direct experience of these places provides “competitive advantage”, and direct inspiration for creating particular game missions. Upon a visit to Somalia, while producing *Modern Warfare 3*, Schofield describes how the research played a role in remaking Somalia within the game. Additionally, the witnessing of a sandstorm became a timer feature and a part of the gameplay mechanics (Carless 2013: online). Beyond focusing on physical features and recreating them in the virtual worlds, the characteristics of place became integrated into the gameplay mechanics.

In addition to developers’ first-hand experience of landscapes and urban environments, other sources inspire the portrayal of landscapes within the game:

“Yeah, a good place to start would be Google Maps, we go to Street View and we just study it as if we were there. The concept team goes really deep and they study the set dressing, what people wear, just the culture things that's in that place, the architecture, you know. We try to get the overall impression down, right first. So when you come in there, within a couple of seconds you're like "Oh these feels just like it"”(OXM 2010: online).

Landscapes within the game are thus reproduced through first-hand research, but also through resources such as *Google Maps*. These largely open resources are increasingly used by a variety of different actors, having profound implications on the shaping of the understandings of geographical information (Haklay *et al.* 2008). Here, the producers suggest the ability to create an innate, naturalistic view of place in its entirety. These resources serve as authenticated reproductions of places which capture the cultural and social landscapes. With the use of these technologies, however, there are dangers of “naïve conceptualisations of geography as the location of factual objects in space” (Haklay *et al.* 2008 p.2034). As the above quote demonstrates, there is an uncomplicated understanding of the use of *Google Maps* and what it offers, in this case providing an essentialised view of place and the people that inhabit it. Observing place as a discursive material formation we can see how various social actors and material agents mobilize certain interpretations and

constructions of place within the context of the game world. Place construction in video games involves multiple social and material relations which must be negotiated in the final production.

However, issues in recreating landscapes were also balanced against what would make varied and exciting gameplay. A detailed interview with the lead designer of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*, Zied Rieke, and Technical Art Director Michael Boon, explored some of the issues around creating the landscapes of modern conflict. They attempted to pursue the same procedures adopted in creating the historical World War II landscapes, using popular movies, and also drawing explicitly from contemporary battles. However, as they suggest:

“[T]he problem with the adaption approach was that modern battles tend to be very lopsided and everything we saw was in desert environments. We needed battles where the opposing forces were well-trained and equipped, and we needed more settings. Eventually we decided to go back to the drawing board and change the high concept for the game” (Rieke & Boon 2008: online).

For the designers the games’ missions, and subsequent landscapes, meant that in referencing contemporary landscapes of conflict, there was ‘too much desert’. Instead, they were forced to “[re]build a fictional scenario that would enable us to take the game anywhere we wanted” (Rieke & Boon 2008: online). As such this included introducing the British SAS, as well as a second plot line in the form of the Russian civil war. Here producers established a balance between providing the veracity of where contemporary conflict takes place, and that of providing a multivariate, and sellable, experience of war. For the producers, the desert landscape, and alluding to contemporary American wars in the Middle East, thus provides a limited and aesthetically unvaried landscape which limits the gameplay. Instead, expanding and altering the geopolitical scripting of the game, allowed producers to create, develop and include varied places and landscapes. The setting thus becomes an important backdrop to the game’s geopolitical narrative.

Place was not just evoked via visual means. Sound was perceived, and elevated as a central key element that further shaped a sense of place that players engaged with. Indeed, the various places explored in the series have their own sonic resonances that engender a distinct sense of place. Within the

mission set in Pripyat, Ukraine (*Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*), the backing music was designed to be 'ghostly' to reflect the abandoned location and the historical significance of the Chernobyl disaster. In earlier missions set in the Middle East, Arabic sounds are used to resonate with the locale. These sounds are produced using unique methods:

"The Marines are often in Middle Eastern locales so we did use a lot of Arabic sounds - but often recorded in atypical ways, there's a lot of interior propulsive elements provided by the oud and bouzouki, but we recorded these after one of the orchestral sessions in studio 1 at Abbey Road, with a bullhorn in front of the strings to give them a sort of natural filtered distortion - in essence, the character of the sound of a muezzin delivering the call to prayer from a mosque. It's fairly subtle shift but an interesting colour I think" (Van Zelfden 2007: online).

Although often disregarded in the context of the primacy of the visual within popular geopolitics, sound plays an integral role in reaffirming the spatial composition of the campaign mode and aural motifs, such as the muezzin, are engineered to provide an authentic sense of place. Videogames, alongside other mediums, have been analysed through the visual representations of place, space and politics, yet, as I demonstrated here, the soundscapes are designed to reinforce, mirror, and constitute the places replicated within the gameplay. Moreover, the non-diegetic music heard in the background of the gameplay, serves as a device that helps to reinforce the game's geopolitical narrative. Composer Steve Barton notes:

"We thus tried to give with the music a persistent sense of the fact that you're always part of a team as well as a greater conflict, a much more geopolitical context, albeit a fictional one" (Van Zelfden 2007: online).

The music and soundscapes presented within the *Modern Warfare* series aim to mirror, yet also reinforce the geopolitical plot of the game, a soundtrack which is productive of a clear collective identity in the midst of a global military conflict. Evocations of the geopolitical are not expressed purely through visual means, but central here is how sound and music are important components in evoking the geopolitical scripts of the videogame (Pinkerton & Dodds 2009; Street 2013). Inspired by films, and through the repurposing of instruments, we see the detailed processes that extend beyond a primary concern with the visual, towards how the audio and visual are not incongruous but co-productive of the geopolitical scriptings of *Modern Warfare*.

## **7.5 Modern Warfare and the Military-Entertainment-Complex**

As I have noted there are a number of key actors involved in the production of *Modern Warfare*. Through the exploration of media interviews concerning the production of *Call of Duty*, notable credence is given to the military in informing the series' production. Along with other media forms, there is a growing collaboration between the military and the franchise. This relationship between videogames and the popular militarism intensified after September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 (Martin & Steuter 2010). The release of *America's Army* in June 2002 shows an explicit way in which the American military have been directly involved in the financing and production of a videogame for the explicit purpose of recruitment. This collaborative relationship has been defined as the 'military-entertainment-complex' (Lenoir 2000; Lenoir & Lowood 2000). Robinson (2012 p.505) suggests there is an increasingly "close collaboration between the military and videogames industry, the widespread development of military games and the spread of the military into the production of commercial games". While scholarship has largely centred on *America's Army*, little attention has been given to the commercially produced videogame titles that have an intimate relationship with the military. This relationship can be seen to be evident in the production of titles in the *Call of Duty* franchise.

This relationship has come under scrutiny from scholars, critiquing the military's aim to instil popular militarism into society via collusion with the entertainment industry. This cooperation is suggested to inculcate "a militarized worldview" (Payne 2009 p.241). Yet, the argument that the institutional and structural cooperation between the entertainment industries and the military is inherently problematic, has offered little evidence with which to reinforce these claims (Schulzke 2013a). It is therefore important to reveal how the military extends into the wider commercial and entertainment industries, how this materialises, and its resulting effect on the videogame production.

A range of interviews with the developers of the *Call of Duty* franchise cite the explicit involvement of the military and specialist subject matter experts, as key actors in the aiding the development and production of the final videogame. A promotional video for *Modern Warfare* reveals how the *Infinity Ward* studio visited Twenty nine Palms Base, a Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center

(MCAGCC) (Infinity Ward 2008: online) The site is described as one of the only places where the live firing of tanks can be undertaken. The series' animators and developers took reference photos and were able to directly observe a mechanised urban assault training exercise. Major Kevin Collins notes that the Marines facilitated the design of game content, providing the game's artists with access to "utilised weapons" which are "worn and [have] been to Iraq and back" (Infinity Ward 2008: online), in order to add this into the game content.

The experience, access and the ability to observe military personnel in action and vehicles undertaking live training exercises influenced and shaped the missions in the *Modern Warfare* game. This research is translated into the embodied movements of the soldiers using motion detection technologies to provide realistic militarised bodies in a conflict environment. Furthermore, the representation of current weapons in use and the language and dialogues expressed by characters within the gameplay mirror the military. As an explicit promotional video, the clip emphasises the authenticity of the game which is supported by the positive comments from military personnel who praise the games' purported depiction of military realities.

Military collaboration is further demonstrated in the series' development. Activision hired a military advisor for the *Call of Duty* franchise, in the form of retired Lieutenant Colonel Hank Kiersey. In 2003, he joined *Activision*, advising on the first *Call of Duty*, and remaining a key figure in the production processes throughout the franchise's history, and working with all the development studios. He had 24 years military service and experience in the American Airborne Infantry and has also taught at the United States Military Academy, West Point. Despite retiring from the Marines in 2000, Kiersay also undertook private contracting work in unspecified Middle East and African countries.

Kiersay has become central to the overall production of *Call of Duty* videogames for two reasons. Firstly, his self-described role is as a mediator between the developers and the final published videogame, overseeing the visual-audio authenticity of the militarised content. He defines the role of military advisor, as a consultant in various stages of the game's production:

"What the military advisor does he comes in at various times during the production process of the game, looks at the game, and makes sure –

from a guy that has been on the ground, not a gamer, from a guy that has done this before – that the weapons are right, the scenarios make sense, that the language sounds right... as close as you can get to authentic” (see GamerSpawn 2011: online).

Kiersay’s role as a mediator means he has an important influence on the ‘final’ videogame. As suggested, his role was to examine the ways the game developers created the militarised setting, weapons and military strategies and the practices of communication. In the first instance, he would meet the game developers, answering questions related to producing military movements, and subsequently he would intervene in aspects of the game that diverged from military realities, as expressed here:

“In the early days, I always noticed dialogue that was sounding off, or was correcting improper radio procedures. They [Infinity Ward] would listen to cop shows and have the usual ‘copy me?’, ‘copy that.’ An ice cream truck driver would use that shit. Soldiers would use ‘roger.’ ‘Over.’ ‘Out.’ ‘Wilco,’ which means ‘I will comply,’” “These are sacred words that are used by military forces, so I – we– really wanted them to be in there correctly” (Wright 2013: online).

Kiersay has become a key figure in providing an authoritative voice on the production of military authenticity and realism. He emphasises the importance and the need for integrity when representing the military. His interventions are largely concerned with the representations of military personnel, their appearance, manoeuvres, weaponry, and language within the game.

Besides being active in the production, Kiersay’s role extends to the promotion and marketing of the games. He provides a credible, authoritative figure which buttresses the games producers’ claims of military realism and authenticity. As such he has become a visible spokesman for the franchise, attending videogame exhibitions, and is regularly interviewed by the media to endorse the games. A useful way of understanding this position is by turning to a term used more prominently within the publication industry. ‘Platform’ is defined as “the position from which an author speaks – a combination of their credentials, visibility and promotability, especially through the media” (Thompson 2010 p.86). Kiersay’s career credentials are regularly discussed in media appearances and serve as a ‘platform’ justifying the producers and the game’s claims to military authenticity.

Initially, Kiersay describes how he was suspicious of helping out at first due to his negative preconceptions of video gaming in general. However, he describes how he was won over by the developers values and ethos, by their 'authentic' recreation of World War II in the earlier iterations of the series, which he deemed a "tribute to the legacy and courage of a great generation [and] not only just a videogame" (Game Almighty 2007: online). This compliment is similarly extended to the *Modern Warfare* series. The *Modern Warfare* series, for Kiersay, is "made people kind of respect what soldiers are doing in the field" and more specifically in "places in Afghanistan and formally Iraq..." (Zoomin.TV Games 2013: online). Besides his admiration for the hard work ethos of the developers and producers of *Modern Warfare*, he highlights the games' ability to cultivate both gamer and public admiration for the military and the values they espouse. The *Modern Warfare* series becomes a cultural outlet that is seen to connect and mirror contemporary geopolitical events by "promising players a way of virtually paying tribute to soldiers by buying and playing the game" (Payne 2012 p.315). In the case of Kiersay, he portrays and credits the series with providing a key cultural vehicle in the upholding and revering the military for the purposes of social good.

This is not just expressed by Kiersay, but the producers see themselves as key figures in communicating perceptions of war, conflict and military violence. Again, these militarised notions of authenticity are continually reworked and developers of the game are seen to reflect on the representing of military violence within the games. This tension between creating an entertainment product and sustaining these claims of authenticity and realism has to be constantly negotiated. *Call of Duty: World at War* differed to previous games in the way death is represented. While military-themed videogames are often critically discussed in terms of their clean, sanitised depiction of war (Salter 2011), in *World at War*, more gore, blood and graphic details were present in the death of virtual characters. This decision was defended by the game's developers:

"But the thing is, if you shoot someone with a shotgun and the limb doesn't come off, at the end of the day, it's almost doing a disservice to the war. Even when we talked to some of the ratings boards, they would

say you're showing war the way it was. So that started bleeding through the entire game, no pun intended” (OXM 2008: online).

Further to these claims of representing a truthful account of warfare, the developers note an obligation to present a particular imagery of the consequence of military violence:

“It is ultimately disrespectful to everyone involved in the war to have someone hit by a tank shell and just walk over. That's teaching everyone that war is nothing to be afraid of and is not a big deal” (OXM 2008: online).

Here, developers discuss their efforts to provide a ‘realistic’ version of warfare that accounts for the ‘horrors of war’. This is negotiated between the creative visions, technological capabilities as well as external intermediaries, such as regulation bodies. This desired message is also deciphered by audiences and these choices and decisions are open to interpretation. Nonetheless, there is a close relationship between the military and producers in which similar values around the military become embedded in the final videogame.

The franchise’s relationship with the military is further channelled by activities outside of the videogame world. Set up in 2009 by initial donations from *Activision Blizzard*, the *Call of Duty Endowment* (CODE) fund is a non-profit initiative which “provide[s] our former service members with job placement, training and educational services in their post military careers” (Call of Duty Endowment Website 2013: online). The endowment thus becomes implicated in facilitating wider civil-military relations by explicitly helping US military veterans find and rehabilitate into civilian work.

Under the franchise’s name, the organisation receives donations from the publisher *Activision*, commercial corporations and individual contributions. An example of this is a recent enterprise calling for players to undertake a ‘gameathon’ in order to raise money for Veterans Day on 11<sup>th</sup> November 2014 with the money going to the *Call of Duty Endowment*.

Messages from the organisation are promoted and disseminated through social media such as *Twitter*, *Facebook* and *YouTube*. These outlets offer a highly visual presence in which ideas of remembrance, commemoration and gratitude are reinforced in regard to both current and past military service personnel in

America. Although ultimately a global product and franchise, CODE is devised primarily as being beneficial to the American military and connects with the 'support our troops' rhetoric which pervades American culture (Stahl 2009). This publicised charitable work emphasises the relationship with the military which goes beyond the screen. The initiative reveals the game's producers wider commitment to upholding and maintaining civilian-military values, which extends beyond the virtual world.

### ***Balancing Authenticity and Realism***

Authenticity, realism and verisimilitude are continuing themes discussed by individuals involved in the production. The franchise has an amicable relationship with the military, and the employment of a military advisor aids in the franchise's claims for authenticity. However, ideas relating to authenticity are socially constructed by the cultural industries and are also used within marketing as a means of selling products to consumers (Jones *et al.* 2005). Moreover, individuals involved in the production of authenticity indicate the tension and the limits to creating authentic and realistic game content.

One persistent theme that requires constant arbitration is the drive for authenticity and realism and how the various individuals appropriate militarised cultures, logics and understandings within the game's ludic and visual structures. This faithfulness to militaristic realities is constructed through various internal and external actors that provide the basis for creating an authentic (re)imagination of a western soldier in an unstable geopolitical world. In the first instance, there is a tension between translating military realities into the virtual world, while creating a 'fun' entertainment product.

The authentication of the military within the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series is realised through the production values of the game and the ethos of the developers which is translated by multiple actors and knowledge practices. Whether this is creating lifelike militarised squadron movements, familiar urban locations, or military technologies and vehicles, these are constantly reworked between social collaborations and technological capabilities.

Throughout this process there is an inherent tension between creating a commercial 'playable' entertainment product and a product that is visually and

interactively authentic. The ultimate commercial aim is to make a product that is 'fun' where the design, logics and representations are guided towards keeping the players playing. Ideas relating to authenticity and realism remain contested within the development of the game. Vince Zampella discussing *Modern Warfare 2* suggests that the development teams "go for authenticity not realism...we're not making a sim, we're making entertainment'. We want it to look real like an action movie" (Bishop 2007: online). Drawing specifically from cinematic conventions, producers discuss those spectacular moments within the gameplay that are premised on believability, stretching the boundaries of possibility while maintaining credibility. What is believable and what is not, is openly discussed by fans of the franchise who outline the plot holes and inconsistencies.

The process of translating the realities of military action and the geographical locations into a videogame thus becomes negotiated by the developers of the game. Designers discuss this inherent tension between creating a faithful depiction of weapon mechanics and operation, without detracting from the game's playability and entertainment value. In relation to balancing realism with 'flashiness,' Chance Glasco, an animator at *Infinity Ward*, discusses the construction of weapons:

"This is actually one of the most difficult aspects of my job, especially as time goes on and I've worked with so many weapons. Before I start, I usually research how the weapon is operated if necessary. I do try to keep it realistic to a point. I don't go full realism because it's often boring and flat. If you want to be tactical, for example, you should always keep your rifle pointing forward when reloading, but frankly, that doesn't make for a very interesting animation. So, often I will meet a weapons expert and they'll tell me that I made a mistake here or I should have done this. Usually that 'mistake' is a creative choice to show off the weapon or make it feel unique or special. I do keep it balanced though, as I don't really add super flashy actions to my animations like twirling a pistol or flipping a magazine before inserting it" (see Petite 2012: online).

As explained in this quote, there is a requirement to keep things balanced, where compromises are made between imaginative expression and a true visual and animatronic recreation of weapons. While the authenticity has been a guiding principle with the games, epitomised by the relationship with the military, this is negotiated by the game developers. In this instance, the

animator suggests how he has agency and is able to make creative decisions that go against the subject matter experts. Moreover, fidelity has to be balanced with playability. Explicit in this process are exchanges between various actors that are constantly reworking the boundaries of authenticity and realism, war and play, entertainment and simulation.

In *Modern Warfare 3* the turn towards familiar local settings also presented compromises. In replicating the streets in Paris it was noted that while state owned buildings and architecture, such as the Eiffel Tower, are permitted to be depicted in the game, private buildings are susceptible to copyright regulations. In a mission set in the London Underground, for instance, level designers had to adapt the surroundings in order to differ from the current logos and colour scheme found in the actual underground.

This, again, affected the ways places are constructed within the game as various concessions are made:

“So when they try to recreate them, it can look a bit like a theme park. But then, if you're too authentic, you may not be giving people what they want. You can't give them Paris and not the Eiffel tower – they need to at least see it. It's a balancing game...In Paris, for example, some of the streets were widened, and the main intersection featured in the Iron Lady mission is a mix of two real avenues” (Stewart 2011: online).

Müller (2012 p.386) indicates the need to consider the material relations and, for example, to consider how technology is “implicated in making geopolitical power possible or impossible”. The production of videogames requires developers to engage with various technologies to construct the virtual worlds and the game’s narrative. Despite creative director Brett Robbins of *Modern Warfare 3* suggesting that the development team are not “just limited by our own imagination because the engine, the technology and our techniques... kind of allow us to do whatever we want to do...”, there are instances where technology shapes what producers can do.

For instance issues arose in creating these virtual worlds as the increase in size and scale of *Modern Warfare 3* presented technical demands that required software and code redesign:

“...it's not as simple as just 'oh yeah, go build London'. There was a lot of engine re-writing in order to make a big city work in our environment, in our technology, and still work at 60 F[rames] P[er] S[second]<sup>33</sup>” (Stewart 2011: online).

The increased scale and detailed urban environments supported in *Modern Warfare 3* thus presented new challenges in terms of retuning the technical capabilities, but also allude to material limitations. Most notably the grander scale and design detail increases pressures on the memory of the disc. Art assets (the in-game objects and content used in level design) used in *Modern Warfare 3* had to be cut down in order for the game's content to fit on the actual disc (Stewart 2011: online). Technological capabilities have a key role in what game is created and an explicit role in allowing, or limiting the games' content.

## 7.6 Concluding Remarks

This chapter has provided a perspective on the processes, practices and structures that effect the production of geopolitical scripts in the *Call of Duty* series. This analysis moves beyond a focus on the videogame itself and captures the relations and creative decisions that define the finished product. To achieve this objective, I have argued that attending to the production of popular geopolitics requires a 'integrated approach' – drawing on the macro and micro processes that influence what geopolitical scripts are embedded into the final videogame. By examining the macro political economic structures of the *Modern Warfare* series, the tensions over creative control between publisher and studio became clearly evident. In this case we see the conflicts over creative control of the series. *Activision* desired a more conservative approach, while *Infinity Ward* pushed for more creative control which would allowed them to take the franchise from a historical epoch to a more contemporary setting. The contractual agreements show how the geopolitical scripting of the game was dictated by temporal periods. This thus revealed the need for geopolitics to not just consider space, but also time (Klinke 2013).

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<sup>33</sup> The higher frame rate allows increased realism in the form of interactions, fluidity and motion in relation to interaction with the game's content. The increased FPS also increased demand on the software and hardware which can mean compromising on other aspects of the game content.

However, the analysis of these structural relations overlooked the finer, everyday scale in which cultural production takes place. While methods such as direct interviews and ethnography were not available due to issues with accessibility, media articles provided insights into the influences, relations and practices that defined the 'final product'. Here a number of observations were made. Firstly, the *Modern Warfare* series is entangled within the 'military-entertainment-complex'. Central to this is the role of military advisors, such as Hank Kiersay, aiding in the construction of military 'realism' and 'authenticity'. Here, particular understandings of the military were negotiated between the advisors and the game designers creating a fun, entertainment product. Secondly, the chapter noted the creative decisions and individual motivations of the game designers. A range of inspirational material was considered including the research field trips, cinema and other media texts in creating the game worlds and geopolitical scripts. This reveals the intertextual nature of the virtual worlds and the ways geopolitical logics, sensibilities, and narratives are drawn from a range of other sources. By examining the production of the *Modern Warfare* series we can note the complex relations and creative decisions which govern the final geopolitical narrative and content.

While it was beyond the scope of this chapter to draw attention to all the practices and actors involved in the production, audiences also need to be considered as key to the production process. As scholars have noted, it is important to consider the ways audience feedback into the overall production (Dittmer & Larsen 2007). In the case of videogames this process involves employing videogame testers and using focus groups; releasing BETA<sup>34</sup> versions of the game; and looking at comments received from various social media outlets. Developers need to appease the hopes, desires and expectations of the players. Indeed, the franchise is suggested to listen attentively to feedback from players, shaping changes to the overall game. Further research needs to better understanding the blurred lines between the audience and producers, and the influence they have in shaping the geopolitical narratives of popular cultural items.

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<sup>34</sup> Videogames made available prior to the official release for purpose of testing and receiving player feedback.

In the final analytical chapter, we will go from the production to the marketing of the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series, drawing attention to the ways advertising and promotions reinforce the series' geopolitical script, beyond the screen and prior to its release.

## Chapter 8. Marketing Geopolitics

“MW2 [Modern Warfare 2] is the game that brought me back into the *Call of Duty* franchise with a vengeance. I remember watching the trailer over and over prior to the actual release, consciously feeding my desire to play it as soon as possible. The trailer itself was a sight to behold, with production values which I’d rarely experienced from a games company (not to mention excellent use of the Eminem track ‘Till I Collapse’). The only company within the industry which can rival and exceed such finish with their products is Rockstar Games (of whom I am a massive admirer). Aside from them, these kinds of production values are generally the staples of Hollywood, or the age old popular culture icon that is Music Television. Not games”

(*Keith*: Email Interview).

One of the main threads within this thesis has been the argument for a popular geopolitics that goes beyond a focus on a cultural artefact itself. Concentrating solely on the media or popular cultural text ignores two things; firstly; the audience and their capacity to generate meaning, and secondly; the processes of production that shape what geopolitical narratives are told. Such an analysis ignores other processes significant to the cultural circuit of popular geopolitics. Another aspect that needs to be considered is the role of marketing. The above quote from *Kasper* indicates the role of promotional material in creating player expectations, of revealing snippets of the game’s content, and of cultivating hype - *prior* to its actual release. This points towards the excessive qualities of popular culture (Horton 2008). Accompanying the videogame are a plethora of other texts, such as advertisements, which promotes it and prepares the consumer for the virtual world. Indeed, as this chapter will argue, promotional activities and texts are key sites in shaping geopolitical (pre)conceptions and meanings of the videogame world itself.

In taking our focus ‘beyond the screen’, the chapter is attentive towards the spaces/places in which geopolitical narratives, texts and discourses operate. As demonstrated in the previous chapters, I have noted the domesticated setting in which playing *Modern Warfare* takes place (*Chapter 6*), and how the players’ engagements with the game finds expression in particular places. Popular geopolitical analysis however has ignored the excessive qualities of popular culture and its complex spatialities.

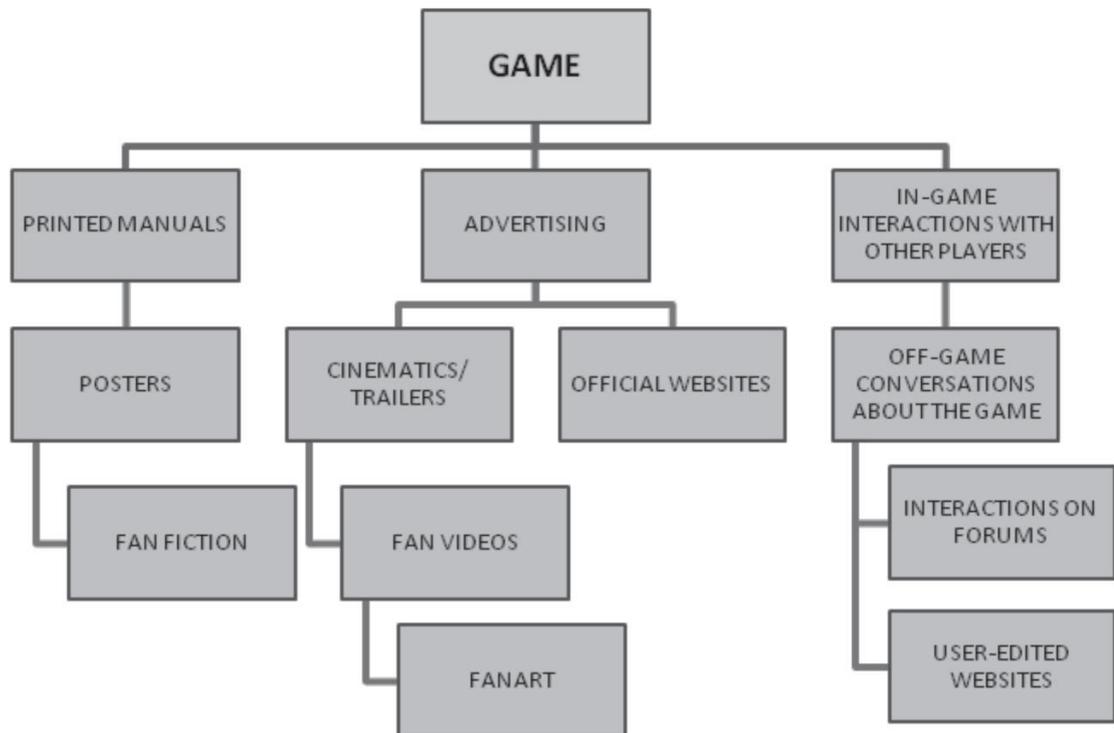
In thinking through these shortcomings, this chapter is organised in the following way. Initially I will set-up the conceptual and theoretical framework of the analysis, conceiving an understanding of popular geopolitics beyond the screen. Popular geopolitical discourses are not just experienced through the media or cultural text in question, but other events and ‘texts’ play a role in mediating, negotiating and reinforcing the geopolitical meaning - often *prior* to ‘final’ texts release. While I find Gray’s (2008; 2010) attention towards ‘paratexts’ – the various official and unofficial texts that accompany the main texts, helpful – I argue that his ideas have yet to adequately explore the everyday, material and spectacular ways popular culture finds expression in place. Encounters with popular culture can occur within prosaic spaces, public spaces, or as this chapter shall explore more spectacular events. As such, I go on to explore my own ethnographic data obtained from the *Modern Warfare 3* videogame launch night which occurred in London, November 2011.

Set in a venue on the River Thames, London, the event saw invited guests, celebrities, various media outlets, and the actors involved in the game’s production celebrate its midnight release. I argue that the launch night of *Modern Warfare 3* can be seen as a ‘media spectacle’ (Kellner 2003), a highly visible event where the virtual militaristic and geopolitical sensibilities from the screen found expression in situated place. The launch night saw the game’s militaristic and geopolitical content of the virtual world spill out into venue and onto the streets of London. The analysis will focus on the ways this was projected, performed and enacted within the urban landscapes, and argue that the evening further reinforced ideas of unproblematic understandings of military violence and the militarisation of urban spaces.

### **8.1 Popular Geopolitics: Beyond the Screen**

Within popular geopolitics research has concentrated is the final product as the mediator of geopolitical meaning. This, however, overlooks the assortment of texts that accompany, reinforce, and deviate from the meaning of the final text. If we take the example of videogames, Masso (2009 p.157) suggest that they themselves are part of, and contribute to, a wider “text chain”. As *Figure 8.1* demonstrates, official and fan-made texts provide additional outlets which establish the meaning of the virtual world. In the study, Masso (2009) uses

websites to explore the ways gender difference is played out in games, such as *World of Warcraft* and *Diablo*.



**Fig 8.1:** The ‘text chain’ for *Diablo* and *World of Warcraft* videogames (Source: Masso 2009 p.157).

Masso (2009) considers a wider form of analysis which extends beyond the screen to reveal how a variety of ‘official’ texts, from the original producer and ‘unofficial’ texts i.e. fan generated materials - present and compliment the discourses of the videogame itself. These can include official and unofficial sources such as guidebooks, manuals, reviews of games, user-generated content, fan fiction, and advertisements (see *Figure 8.1*). Players can thus be exposed to other texts which shape their meaning-making process.

Within popular geopolitics, however, these texts remain largely unaccounted for. Such texts, for Dittmer and Dodds (2013 p.77), are defined as “prefigurative materials”, and rather than disconnected from popular geopolitical enquiry, they are increasingly “important in providing interpretative cues for multiple audiences”. Thus prefigurative material has a role in shaping the understanding of geopolitical meaning found in the final text. Turning back to videogames, and the wider texts in action, Payne’s (2012) research draws explicit attention to the marketing of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* and the promotional material and texts that sell “the pleasures of playing virtual war” (Payne 2012 p.305). This

research draws attention to the ways advertising - such as *YouTube* videos - shape (geopolitical) meaning. While directly implicated in the processes of economic profiteering and generating hype, Payne (2012 p.306) suggests how promotional material works to generate:

“particular textual readings over others with the goal of insulating Call of Duty’s war play from interpretations and criticisms that might link the violent play on-screen to the worldly violence unfolding in Iraq and Afghanistan”.

In other words, the promotional and advertising materials have a significant effect on structuring the geopolitical reading of the final text, or the videogame itself – a reading which may suppress critical readings of the videogame and the realities of the geographical enactment of military violence.

However, despite these prefigurative materials being briefly alluded to by Dittmer and Dodds (2013), there has been little attention, nor theoretical discussion to suggest their significance within the field of popular geopolitics. Instead, I turn to media and cultural studies for further guidance on the matter. Gray’s (2008; 2010) work has called for further attention to consider the range of other materials accompanying media texts. In doing so, he builds on the work of literary theorist Gerald Genette (1997), who defines these other texts as ‘paratexts’. The term considers the additional materials largely associated with books, such as the forward, front cover and book synopsis which, rather than peripheral, are considered important elements that can shape the overall meaning and interpretation of the audience. Gray’s (2008) use of paratext, on the other hand, is extended to focus on how media texts are accompanied by other materials, in this case advertisements for television programmes, which prepare the viewer for the ‘final’ programme. As Gray continues (2008 p.37-38) Paratexts are therefore suggested to “guide our entry to texts, setting up all sorts of meanings and strategies of interpretation, and proposing ways to make sense of what we will find ‘inside’ the text” (Gray 2008 p.38). Films, television shows, and videogames are accompanied by a proliferation of ‘other’ texts.

If we turn to advertisements, these texts offer a first encounter with the product and they matter in terms of how they frame the meaning of media texts for potential audiences:

“They tell us about the media world around us, prepare us for that world, and guide us between its structures, but they also fill it with meaning... and give us resources with which we will both interpret and discuss that world” (Gray 2010 p.1).

Thus before the media text is encountered in its entirety, potential consumers are presented with particular meanings and ways of interpretation, encouraged by paratexts that precede the release of the final media text. The final text is therefore not the only informative source, but consumers’ understandings are shaped, defined and experienced via paratexts.

This illustrates the “excessive property of popular cultural phenomena” (Horton 2008 p.400) and the quotidian experiences and spatial context in which popular cultural texts operate. They are visible in everyday life through a variety of mediums, materials and other texts. Certainly, the excessiveness of the *Modern Warfare* franchise has been identified during this research project including *Call of Duty* clothing, posters, toys, and comic books. As such, I argue that:

“[*Call of Duty*] can be simultaneously encountered in multiple material and/or textual forms, in multiple representational contexts, with multiple attached meanings and/or evoked idea(s)” (Horton 2008 p.406-407).

*Call of Duty* is not one unified text understood only through the interface between player and screen; other texts exist which can reinforce, negotiate, or subvert the original or intended meaning. I want to specifically focus on the role of marketing and the often structured, pre-planned and organised forms and occurrences produced *before* the release of the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* games. The importance of paratexts in establishing the meaning of the entertainment texts prior to their release is key here.

Whilst Gray’s notion of paratext is an important intervention in focusing on the wider excesses of popular culture, others remain less convinced about its applicability in cultural and media studies. The term ‘off-screen’ itself is considered a “misnomer” (Johnstone 2011 p.422), as many of the examples given by Gray are in fact viewed by audiences via a screen. In addition to these points, what the term actually encompasses may also be questioned. Popular

cultural and media phenomena can be considered in textual form, but they also manifest in a more extraordinary and performative manner. Spectacular events such as premieres, festivals and one-off events are thus overlooked. For example, the promotion and advertisement of popular culture often involve a range of publicity stunts, or forms of ‘experiential marketing’ (Schmitt 1999). These are often held in public spaces and often take the form of visual and interactive spectacles. Indeed, running up to the release of *Modern Warfare 3*, a variety of events were held in order to promote the series. In this chapter, I turn now to examine how spectacular events and promotional stunts are utilised to gain visibility, but also reinforce the game’s militaristic and geopolitical meaning.

## **8.2 The ‘Game World’ in the ‘Real World’**

In the wake of increasing economic competition, cultural and media industries aim to achieve mass global visibility and the projection of their product. Recent videogame launches have involved spectacular events. The military genre of games have perhaps been the most noticeable. Performances of military spectacles are becoming a common trope of the marketing campaigns (see Halter’s account of the release of *Americas Army* at E3; (Halter 2006 p12-13)). These events invite potential consumers to observe and experience the virtual game worlds in reality.

There are a number of examples of this. *Battlefield 3* released a couple of weeks before *Modern Warfare 3* in late October 2011, deployed its own marketing and promotional stunt. On the 27<sup>th</sup> October 2011, a day before the game’s release, the publisher *Electronic Arts*, hired a number of military vehicles including FV433 Abbot Tanks, to navigate the streets of central London (see *Figure 8.2*). Displaying the *Battlefield 3* logo, the vehicles moved around central London, gathering commuters at specially designated ‘Tanksis’ stops, and alighting them at their place of work – free of charge. Commenting on this promotional stunt, Tom Goldberger from *Electronic Arts*, said:

“Tanksis have been brought to the Capital to make the urban battlefield that is London’s roads more of a joy than the daily chore they currently are” (The Mirror 2011: online).



**Fig 8.2:** ‘Tanks’ on the streets of London (Source: The Daily Mirror 2011: online).

Not only acting as a visible spectacle in the heart of London, the choice of this particular stunt specifically relates to the ability of players of the game to enter and drive a variety of vehicles including; military jets, boats and, of course, tanks. Furthermore, it indicates the close relationship between the military and popular culture and how this is expressed in particular places.

Not to be outdone, the *Call of Duty* franchise’s promotional events have become renowned for their extravagance. Between September 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> 2011, the *Call of Duty Experience* took place at Los Angeles. This huge event provided 6,000 paying guests a first glimpse of the multiplayer option of the yet-to-be-released *Modern Warfare 3* game. There were also opportunities for attendees to extend their virtual experience beyond the screen, allowing them to try out a military-style zip line and partake in a jeep course where they were able to “navigate obstacles inspired by the epic storytelling of the *Call of Duty* franchise” (Call of Duty XP 2011). Further the blurring the line between game and ‘real’ world, participants could test their skills in a team paintball scenario, modelled on a game level in *Modern Warfare 2*.

Here, we can see uncanny parallels to the ways the American military have created specially designed settlements, styled on contemporary battlefields and simulating warfare for the purposes of military training (Graham 2010; Der Derian 2009). These exercises take on 'game like' qualities, where military games for recreation blur with simulations used by the military (Yarwood 2015). Graham (2010 p.220), defines these as "hyperreal constructions – simulations of things that don't exist – through which war and violence are constructed, legitimized, and performed". In these cases the game world bleeds into the real world, as a hyperreal construct, through:

"which the violence of the 'War on Terror' can be generated and performed, and which require their power from their radical dissociation from any meaningful connection with the real places (or, less commonly, real people) they are said to represent" (Graham 2010 p.220).

These events are important as they extend beyond the places in which they are enacted, gaining wider publicity via other media outlets. As such, they are carefully organised and performed in order to gain mass media and public attention, communicating the brand and its military ideological values through various media relations.

### ***Spectacle***

How might we come to understand these events that extend beyond the screen and their significance in the public domain? In considering spectacular events, geographers have turned to Guy Debord's (2009 (1967)) notion of the spectacle (Rech 2015; Jeffrey *et al.* 2008; Kong & Yeoh 1997). For Debord (2009), society is dominated by the 'spectacle'. The spectacle is referred to as the rise of mass consumerism, where visual advertisements suffuse and colonise everyday life. But, rather than seen simply as "a collection of images, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (Debord 2009 p.2). These representations and visual images serve to politically distract, disengage and alienate spectators. Kong and Yeoh (1997) have examined the spectacle of the national day parades within Singapore. For them the parades are seen as the "state's attempt to develop national pride, construct national identity and inculcate loyalty" (Kong & Yeoh 1997 p.216). For Kong and Yeoh (1997) these events and spectacles are designed to be highly visible and theatrical, characterised "through pageantry, fanfare and show" (Kong & Yeoh 1997

p.216). More importantly, however they are seen as “an effective means of social control” (Kong & Yeoh 1997 p.216). The spectacle of the National Day parade, through theatrics, creates awe and wonder, which works to reinforce a sense of belonging and national identity.

I want to argue, in the same light, that the launch night can be seen as a spectacle that inculcates particular understandings of the military and national identity via non-state actors. Kellner’s (2003) work is useful here as it attempts to engage with grounded empirical manifestations of spectacles and how they are constructed and enter the everyday via the media and entertainment industries. Kellner (2003 p.2) points to the ways that the “media and consumer society [is] organized around the production and consumption of images, commodities, and staged events”. It is important to understand the implications of these spectacles and what they tell us about contemporary societies, as Kellner (2003 p.27) suggests:

“Major spectacles provide articulations of salient hopes and fears, fantasies and obsession and experiences of the present. Media spectacles also put on display the politics of representation, encoding current problematics of gender, race, and class”.

In the case of the promotional spectacles as outlined earlier, militarised worlds are enacted and performed in the ‘real’ world where military values enter the social field. In turning to the politics of these spectacles, Kellner (2003) notes how such events “naturalise and idealise the given in that social system” – in this case they shape an understanding of the military. This is discussed further through the work of Stahl (2010) who highlights the relationship between the spectacle, the military, entertainment industry and the citizen.

Stahl traces the historical significance of this relationship firstly noting the presentation of war as a spectacle. Here he describes how as images and mediations of war came to dominate everyday life, “war became a festival of fireworks and machinery, asking no more of the citizen than a ball game or an action movie” (Stahl 2010 p.35). However, in the years following the first Gulf War, Stahl suggests that this notion of ‘spectacle war’ has been overtaken by an ‘interactive war in which citizens are increasingly invited into the battlefield.

Working similarly to spectacle, “the interactive war is a discourse that operates through consumption and the production of pleasure” and, as such this involves

“not simply watching the machine in motion but wiring oneself into a fantasy of a first-person, authorial kinetics of war” (Stahl 2010 p.43). Rather than being seen through the citizen-spectator model, this interactive war is productive of what Stahl refers to as the ‘virtual-citizen soldier’, where people are increasingly provided with opportunities to engage directly with war. This is evident in the medium of videogames which allow players to navigate, interact and participate in military violence. As Stahl stresses in his thesis, these civil-military engagements “have increasingly been programmed to redirect civic energy away from actual participation in war policy or its deliberation” (Stahl 2010 p.48). These interactions, as we shall see, are not just experienced between player and the screen but through the practices of marketing and advertising. Through these sites individuals are invited to uncritically consume and experience the militaristic values conveyed by the game and beyond the screen.

### ***Why the Launch Night of Modern Warfare 3?***

There are numerous possibilities for examining the excessive qualities of the *Modern Warfare* series. In this chapter, however, I want to limit my analytical focus to the videogame launch night. There are a number of reasons for doing so.

Firstly, released close to its rival competitor *Battlefield 3*, in total both franchises spent \$200 million on marketing their games (Dutton 2011). The launch night thus became a key promotional event and was defined as ‘the biggest entertainment launch ever’ by the publisher (Chacksfield 2011). While the launch night occurred in a specific place, the attendance of media outlets meant the event was widely publicised. Furthermore, concurrent launch night events occurred around the Europe including Paris and Berlin. These events were significant in generating media and public attention and thus circulated understandings of the game’s geopolitical and militaristic content.

Secondly, the organisation of the event saw the game’s military and geopolitical content spill out into the venue and surrounding area. Here, actors dressed in military uniform patrolled the venue and surrounding area, invited guests were escorted in military jeeps adorned with the *Call of Duty* logo, and guests were able to interact with a variety of stalls relating to the game’s militaristic content.

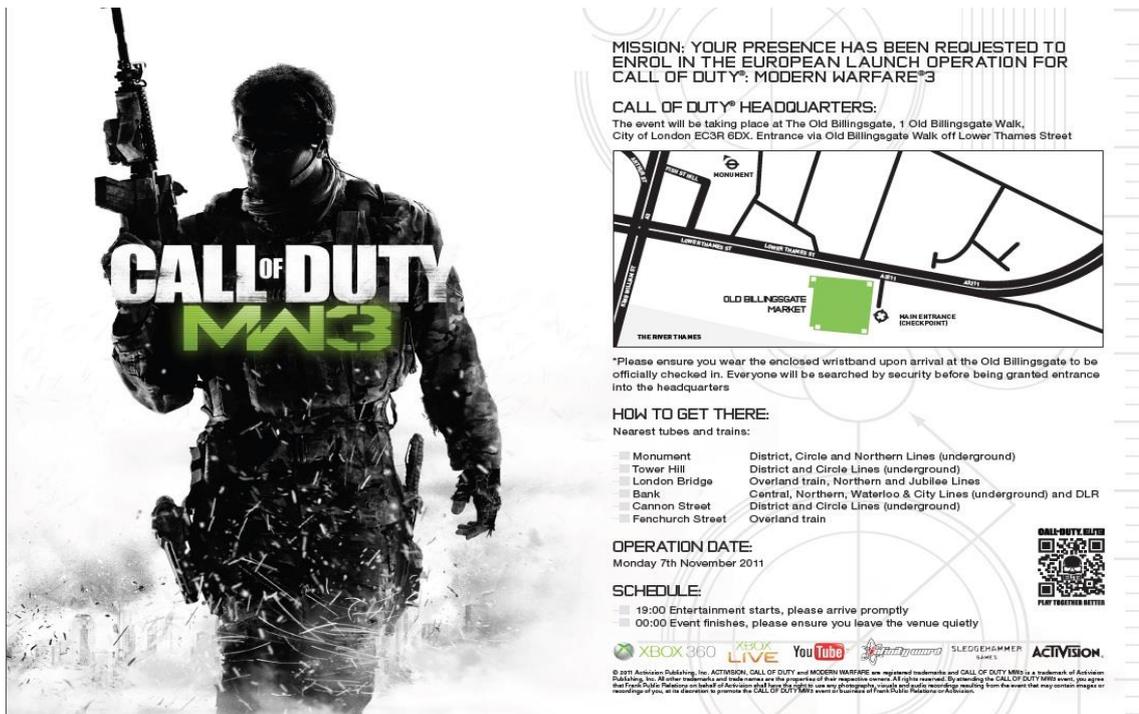
As such, the launch night offered a place where apparent clear cut distinctions between 'reality' and 'virtual' were broken down. The launch night draws attention to the popular geopolitical visual cultures that emanate, and operate beyond the screen and in particular places, and through different people.

Thirdly, popular geopolitics has often overlooked the actual spaces and places of media. While spaces and places have been analysed in terms of their mediated presence in cultural texts, there has been less attention paid to the places and spaces in which they operate (Adams 2009; Horton 2012). Thus the launch night offers a situated and grounded understanding of the ways popular geopolitical and militaristic content finds expression in particular places and spaces.

Finally, these events are infrequent and the exclusivity of the event meant it was difficult to gain access. In attending the launch night event, I was able to make detailed observational field notes, take photographic and video evidence, and spoke to various attendees. During the evening, I also attended the midnight opening at the *Game* store, on Oxford Street, London. This offered the public the chance to purchase *Modern Warfare 3* at midnight. While a separate event to the invitation-only 'premiere', aspects of the evening's spectacle did transfer to the midnight launch, as I will discuss. The observations and notes made at both of these events contribute to the chapter's argument.

### **8.3 The Launch Night**

The launch night of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* was a marquee event to celebrate the game's release set in the centre of London and had been meticulously planned and staged. The venue was set on the banks of the River Thames, and in view of iconic sites, such as Tower Bridge.



**Fig 8.3:** Invitation for the ‘European Launch Operation’ of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*, London UK.

The event was exclusive, open to invited guests only. Game developers and designers, celebrities and guests gathered at the venue which was decorated with the themes and aesthetics of the game, while various interactive experiences and spectacles proceeded to further establish the game’s narrative and meaning.

As I arrived the final touches were being made, cameras were mounted, lighting and visuals tested and the ‘green’ carpet which led into the venue, was being aligned. Fans of the franchise had begun to observe the proceedings from behind erected barriers. The launch night used a range of techniques such as visual displays, lighting, pyrotechnics, and performing actors to celebrate the game’s release. Similar to a film premiere, the launch night can be considered a “pseudoevent – an event artificially created to attract media attention” (Lubbers & Adams 2001 p.168). Furthermore this pseudoevent was designed to be closely associated with the game and its geopolitical and militaristic content providing a visual and spectacular event which mirrored the game world. As such, despite the event itself being invite-only, the event was communicated beyond the initial confines of the venue. A live stream was enabled for viewers across the world, while coverage by major media outlets, such as the BBC (2011), also highlights the significance of the event beyond its initial locations.

Ideas about the game and its cultural and geopolitical meaning can be seen to be negotiated and propagated beyond intended consumer audiences.

By turning towards place-specific examples we note how geopolitical narratives extend beyond the screen. In doing so they are made meaningful in place-based contexts (Nicley 2009; Rech 2012). The launch night became an event, intentionally designed to communicate the game's geopolitical and militaristic narrative. As we noted in *Chapter 5*, these geopolitical narratives are consumed, understood and experienced in particular environments, whether this be in the domestic setting, or through the experience of attending the game's launch.

I will now consider what this event tells us about the game, but more specifically how it reinforced the game's geopolitical narrative and how ideas about the military were performed, enacted and engaged with by audiences. We begin to unpack and illustrate the liveliness and complexity of geopolitical discourse and the ways it moves and is experienced beyond the initial media text.

#### **8.4 Marketing the Geopolitics of *Modern Warfare 3***

The marketing campaign for *Modern Warfare 3* mirrored the game's storyline, conveying the notion of an increasing global conflict and terrorist activities occurring in key global cities. Among these were London, Paris and Berlin, each becoming host locations for the European launch of the game. The locations of these launch nights were not just important because of their global significance and potential to increase brand visibility, but they allowed the game's world and 'real' world to blur. Discussing the game and the launch nights in Europe, Michael Condrey, co-founder and studio head of development for *Sledgehammer Games*, professed:

“In *Modern Warfare 3* we are going to take you around the world to some amazing set pieces. Paris is in the game in a big way... some really amazing gameplay and some unique experiences happen right in the heart of Paris, and to be there on launch night, to see the virtual world in reality and vice versa...is pretty special to me” (COD MW3 Launch 2011: online).

The launch nights were chosen to reflect the geographical narrative and allow the game world to come to life, to be experienced by attendees and also contributed to “a disappearance of the distinction between factors such as real

and imagined” (Gillings 2002 p.20). The opening night was a key event for the game as the spectacle generated mass media hype, but furthermore it helped reinforce and project the game’s geopolitical and militaristic meaning beyond the screen to a wider audience, prior to its official release.

The specific locations used were important as they served as convenient places where the videogame could gain visibility. For instance, the launch night in London was set in the heart of the city. The surrounding “built environment” was utilised as a “tool in the production of commercial power” (Rosati 2007 p.1003). As such the event’s stature was amplified by the fusion of light and sound which occupied the venue and surrounding area. Images of the game’s front cover nestled in the archways of the building’s exterior and green lights illuminated the area.

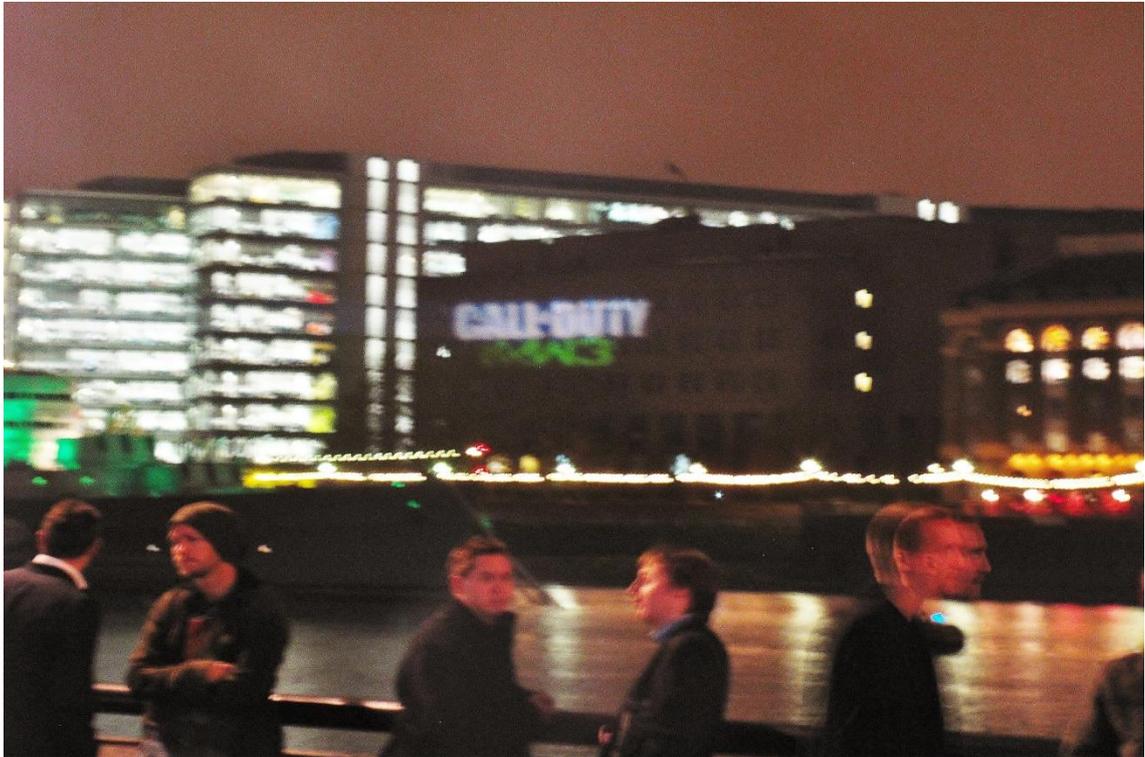


**Fig 8.4:** Image showing the exterior of the venue. Images of the *Modern Warfare 3* game are positioned in the arches and journalists set-up their equipment prior to the arrival of guests (Source: Author).

Edensor (2012 p.1106) suggests how lighting has increasingly been put to economic and commercial purposes, used to “broadcast commercial advertising, fashion signposting, selectively highlight buildings to reinforce state and corporate power, promote festivity”. Here, lightning and illuminations reinforced the brand’s power and illustrated the magnitude of the series’ success. Furthermore, advertising is important as it encourages the “*material transformation of places*” (Law 1997 p.23 emphasis in the original). As we see,

the architecture of Old Billingsgate and beyond became places which promoted and advertised the *Call of Duty* brand.

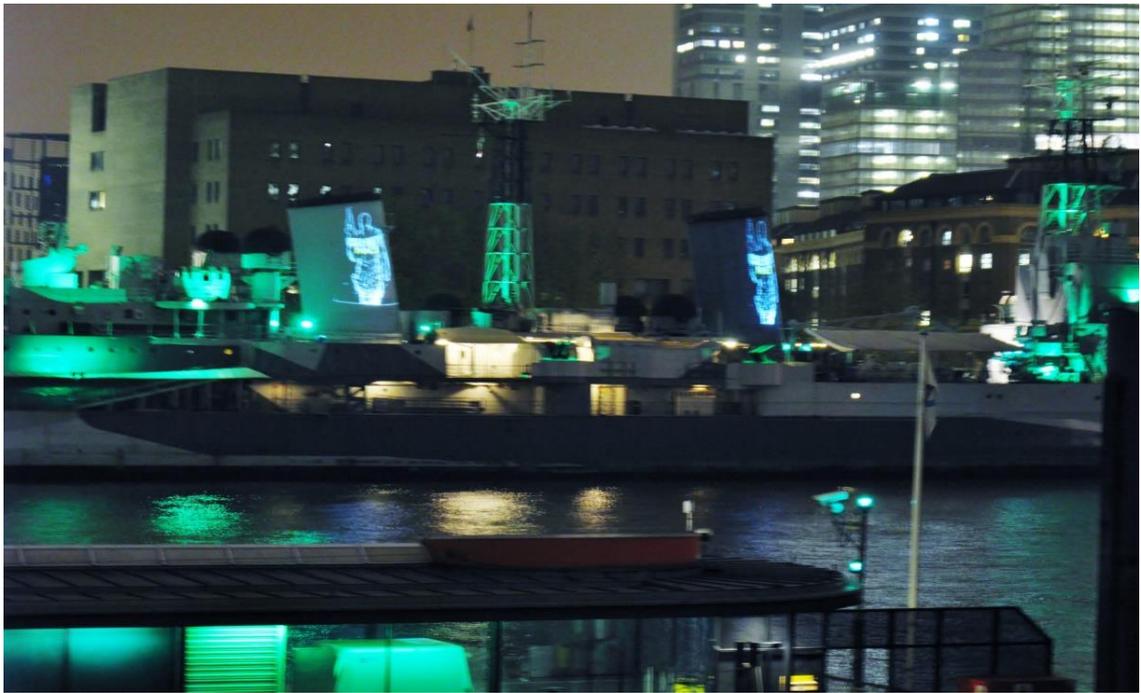
Beyond the initial lighting within the venue, a spotlight with the game's 'MW3' logo was projected on the opposite side of the River Thames, traversing the architectural surroundings on the bank of the river.



**Fig 8.5:** The *Modern Warfare 3* logo is projected onto the buildings onto the opposite side of the River Thames (Source: Author).

The building and the surrounding urban landscape was visibly and temporarily dominated by the game's imagery and its colour scheme. This technique of projecting animations on urban sites has increasingly been employed in the commercial world for brand visibility (see McNeill 2005 p.47). As such, the venue and the surrounding area were engulfed in a hue of radiant green, the game logo and specific imagery were projected on to various places.

With the material transformation of place, it also mattered what materials the brand illuminated. The near-by decommissioned *HMS Belfast*, a former Royal Navy light cruiser, moored near Tower Bridge, was adorned with the game's cover image which intermittently appeared on the funnels of the ship, and, similar to the venue, a green hue illuminated the cruiser.



**Fig 8.6:** The *Modern Warfare 3* cover projected on to the funnels of HMS Belfast opposite to the venue (Source: Author).

As a symbol of British military past, the now floating museum owned by the *Imperial War Museum*, was appropriated as a backdrop for the advertisement of the game. The projection onto *HMS Belfast* further served to establish the game's relationship with the military. This further illustrates the intimate relationship of the military-entertainment-complex, not just evident in the practices of production of the videogame, but also through advertising and promotion. Military vehicles, technologies and materials have been used in advertising as a way to solidify the military realism and authenticity which the game claims to depict.

It is important to recognise not just the form, or projection of these images, but to consider the politics of representation. The use of new lighting technologies allowed a short animation to be projected on to the building. Furthermore, it gave an opportunity for the game's geographical narrative to be revealed. A moving-image was projected on to the Old Billingsgate building alluding to the game's geopolitical narrative (see video clip by JodaCast 2011: online).

MacDonald (2011) suggests how aesthetics and the use of colour should become key considerations in acknowledging the ways visual geopolitical sensibilities are made meaningful. The visualisation drew on previous advertisements by reinforcing the specific locations used in the game. Keeping

with the dominant colour of the game, green lines buzzed, flickered and zipped around the stone frontage, depicting scenes and visuals from the game. A cartographic depiction of the globe centred on Europe was displayed with a red arrow emanating from North America, moving to the UK, France, Germany and Russia. As the arrow moved red circles rippled from each area emphasising the global connections within the game and the red connoting a sense of danger and threat.

The short video presented visual motifs and imagery that conveyed the geopolitics of the game's narrative. Specific iconic representations of countries were projected onto the screen and the letter 'E' was replaced with 3 connecting the locations specifically to the *Modern Warfare 3* game. Here, 'AM3ERICA' was presented on the wall along with the Statue of Liberty, for 'G3RMANY' the angel atop the Siegestaule, 'FRANC3' the Eiffel Tower and for '3NGLAND' Big Ben. The specification of place indicates the centrality of geography to the game's narrative.

An unspecified threat, which through the game series we understand to be a Russian military force, is seen to spread from the US and into the major cities of Europe. The visualisation ends with the letters WW3 (signifying World War 3), which transforms into MW3, signifying a global conflict. However, the game's actual content is specifically focused on urban locations, such as London, rather than the wider geographies of England. Indeed, as explored in *Chapter 4*, the familiarised urban landscapes have become a key popular cultural imaginary of the securitisation and the militarisation of urban environments (Graham 2010). In this case, while popular geopolitical imaginaries situate violence at a distance, *Modern Warfare 3* brings warfare into the heart of metropolitan areas, such as London.

However, as the video demonstrates, the projection was not purely visual in form. Rather than consider only the representational aspects, the "referential qualities are complemented by atmospheric and nonrepresentational properties of glare, brightness, colour, animation, sparkle, and glow" (Edensor 2012 p.1113). Indeed, accompanying the visual and light show, melodramatic music fused with the animation, fluctuating and climaxing, furthering the atmospheric qualities. Rather than the animation having purely textual properties to be

decoded by audiences, encountering the animation and the sounds encouraged a multisensory affective experience. The music amplified and further dramatized the animation, coproducing affective states of danger, insecurity and intrigue. While the representational aspects of the short video draw specificities of place in the game, the music further amplifies the game's geopolitical context and the evening's proceedings, indicating the spread of threats and the insecurity of these locations.

Place was a significant and continual reference point outside, but also inside, the venue. Within the venue itself, further references to these playable locations were made. The main centre piece of the venue was a huge black circular table, bearing a striking resemblance to the iconic table in the war room in the film *Dr Strangelove* (see *Figure 8.7*). Screens had been set up around the table which allowed players to compete against each other.



**Fig 8.7:** Centre table showing the map of playable locations and attendees playing the multiplayer option of the game (Source: Author).

Similar to the projection discussed earlier, the map focuses on key countries, with further information on the labels stating that '*Am3rica is under siege*', '*G3rmany in Chaos*' '*Battle for Franc3*' and '*Attack on 3ngland*'. Key iconic locations in the heart of Europe are labelled as in danger and under threat. Here attendees could play through these locations in multiplayer matches.

The transnational nature of the narrative and these key locations were further conveyed through the ability within the game to connect and compete against a global community of players. This connection was demonstrated when Joey Barton, a premier league footballer, competed against other celebrities from the different launch nights in Berlin and Paris, and beyond. In the venue, and broadcast on a big screen, a crowd gathered to watch, as Joey Barton “battled for England”, against other international competitors.

The evening thus drew on multiple scales, focusing on the national sense of place and identity through to a global sense of conflict. As such the:

“locationally specific content [presented at the launch night] builds a bridge from a nationally particularistic sense of place to one that is transnational in scope, a form of geopolitical jumping of scale”. (Morley & Somdahl-Sands 2011 p.69)

The constant references to places involved in the game demonstrated the wider transnational appeal and global scripting of the game and its overall geopolitical narrative, which envisages military warfare and security threats occurring in western locations. The geographical specifications at the launch night were made apparent through the actual locations of the launch nights, the depiction of places, and the connections made between these places during the evening.

The aim of the night was to make specific resonances with the game’s geographical narrative, placing the launch night at locations, in this case, in London. This allowed attendees to imagine and be a part of the game’s geopolitical story – an unstable world where war, conflict and acts of terrorism are encountered in key European cities. Adding to this context, the blurring between the virtual in-game battlefield and these places were evoked through the presence of militarised spectacles and interactive opportunities for attendees to live, experience and become part of the game.

### **8.5 Military Spectacle**

While the geopolitical narrative became a prominent feature of the evening, so did the militaristic content. Official spectacular forms of militarism have been manifest in place specific contexts, whether this be through specific sites such as the air show (Rech 2015), or through military parades and repatriations (Jenkins *et al.* 2012). This grounded approach further reveals how

“militarization occurs in contingent and place-specific ways” (Bernazzoli & Flint 2010 p.164). Yet, while official events have been analysed, there is limited attention to the ways popular ideas of militarism are expressed by actors other than the military themselves. Enquiry should turn attention to the geographies of performance and practice, and the geographies in which popular understandings of geopolitics and militarism find expression and are enacted. The launch night emphasised the links between the military and the game which were enacted, practiced and performed throughout the venue and surrounding area.

These spectacle events “temporarily blur the lines between real and imaginary, live and virtual” and “further convey a sense of military “realism”” (Halter 2006 p.xiii). They reveal how specific places in London, such as the launch night venue and the Game Store on Oxford Street, became temporary places in which ideas about the military are performed. This connects with the turn towards the performance, practice and embodiment within geopolitical and more broader geographical enquiry (Nash 2000; Bialasiewicz *et al.* 2007; Williams 2014). By turning to performativity scholars have moved beyond a constructive focus – which has a tendency to locate meaning in discourses, rather than towards practice and the material. Bialasiewicz (*et al.* 2007) argue that discourses are performative, as “discourses constitute the objects of which they speak” (Bialasiewicz *et al.* 2007 p.406). As argued in earlier chapters, the *Modern Warfare* series contributes to particular popular geopolitical imaginaries which constitute the ‘homeland’ as threatened, and under attack. The *Modern Warfare 3* launch night served to reinforce this through the materialities and performances offered there.

In this case, an imagination of London under attack from the game world was reiterated in the material spaces of the launch night. Awaiting attendees as they joined the green carpet were various actors dressed in military attire. Around half-a-dozen individuals (see *Figure 8.8*) wore black military uniform held replica M4 rifles, and had smudged camo face paint.



**Fig 8.8:** A military clad actor at the entrance of the *Modern Warfare 3* launch night (Source: Author).

Appearing meticulously dressed and equipped, some of the individual's uniform also had the British flag imprinted above the breast pocket, which appeared to be a reference to the British SAS. These actors demonstrated here is how "bodies also became advertising sites" (Law 1997 p. 26). The details were not just in the presentation of the uniform, but also through their embodied performance (Woodward & Jenkins 2011). They stayed fixed at particular positions, surveying the crowd while exuding a militaristic display of discipline, preparedness and authority. They were certainly less interactive than the virtual avatars they were signifying, standing stoically overlooking the queue poised with replica guns in hand. Having asked about the origins of his weapon, this actor curtly replied it was an "M4 replica" and appeared reticent in talking, instead gazing sternly at the incoming crowds and keeping in check his characterisation for the evening. These embodied performances remind us that militarization is a process that extends beyond the state-level, and is

experienced, enacted and practiced in the everyday (Dowler 2012). Yet, rather than being unremarkable, the media spectacle was designed to promote visibility of the franchise and its claims of military veracity.



**Fig 8.9:** Two military clad actors at the front of the launch night venue in London (Source: Author).

The game's claims to military realism were channelled into the launch night not just in the detailed representative material arrangements but also the embodied performances offered by actors to the onlookers. On the green carpet, one actor was more willing to engage with the gathered media cameras and journalists. He quickly and efficiently reloaded his replica gun in the gaze of the on-looking cameras. As one onlooker observed "he looks deadly with that weapon" (Author's Field Notebook 2011). Further exhibiting this connection between the game worlds, one individual appeared as a direct double of one of the main characters of the series, Captain Price, wearing similar attire along with a distinctive handlebar moustache. Others were lined separately along the outer archways of the building. The military presence in urban locations depicted through the screen world was now being performed in central London. The event offered a hyper-real simulation where the virtual militaristic world entered the streets of London.

The military performances were not limited to the launch night venue, but were also performed to the crowds gathered at the Game Store on Oxford Street. To

confirm the game's release, a final spectacle was performed which involved the game's delivery to the store (see Video: Gem Mint 2011: online). At around 11.30pm, the gathering began to gaze upwards as a plume of green smoke billowed from atop the ten storey building. A rope was dropped to the floor below and two military clad actors were seen peering down. Manoeuvring over the edge of the building, they attached themselves to the rope and began abseiling towards the ground as cheers and applause rang out from the crowd below. The scene struck an uncanny comparison to the Iranian Embassy siege in 1980, where British SAS abseiled and stormed the embassy to release hostages, a few miles away in South Kensington. The militarised spectacle thus drew connections with notions of the skills, competences and performances previously enacted by the British Special Forces. As they hit the ground they were greeted by other soldiers, adopting militarised manoeuvres, poising themselves to enter the shop. The videogame was handed to the ground troops with one actor declaring "Operation is go go go!" The crowds watched on cheering with camera phones in hand, and the actors entered the storefront cautiously, in military formation with their replica guns seeking out potential threats.

However, this was not celebrated by all. Confused by the on-going action, a concerned passer-by asked me what was going on. When I replied it was for the purposes of a marketing a videogame, he replied "Ah, just for fun" (Author's Field Notebook 2011). While the spectacle of the launch night can be considered to be celebratory in its strategy, the nature of the militarised events also stimulated bemusement, confusion and dispositions of anxiety for some onlookers. Kong and Yeoh (1997) suggested two designs of spectacle, of a punitive strategy based on fear, and that of a celebratory one of awe and wonder. In this case the distinctions are not so clear cut – blending a celebratory event, with an apparent demonstration of military might and presence within London city centre.



**Fig 8.10:** The outside façade of the Game store on Oxford Street, London (Source: Author).

This example notes the infiltration of military values into public spaces and culture. Through cultivating cultures of fear and insecurity “public spaces on the domestic front are increasingly being organised around values supporting highly militarised, patriarchal and jingoistic culture” (Giroux 2004 pp.211-212). In this case the streets of the London were visibly militarised for the purposes of marketing the game.

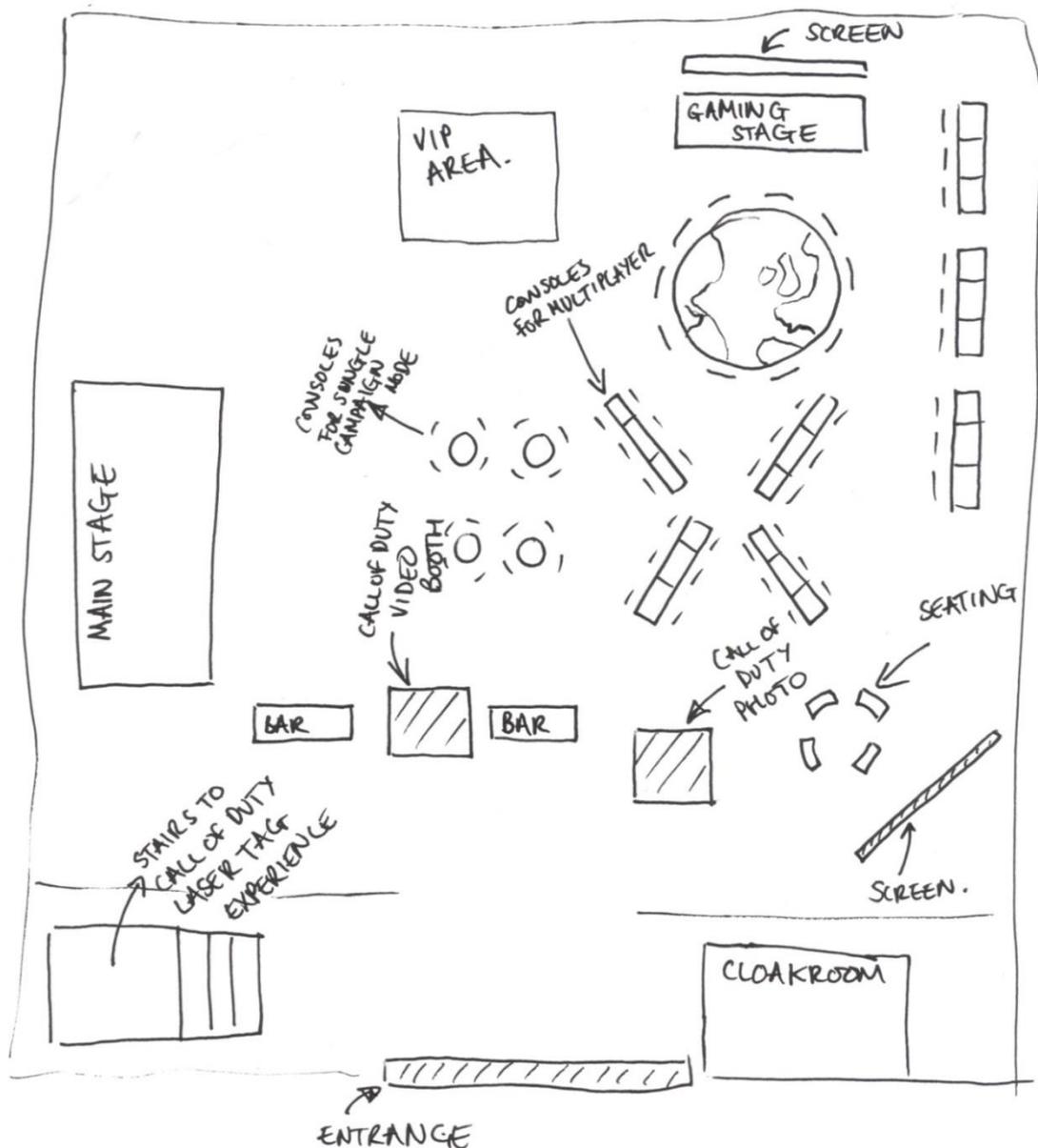
Cindi Katz notes how everyday landscapes and environments post 9/11 are becoming increasingly suffused with signs, practices and performances of security that reinforce “banal terrorism” – the “every day, routinized, barely noticed reminders of terror or threat of an always already presence of terrorism in our midst” (Katz 2007 p.350). While Katz is concerned with the state apparatus and actually military presence, the launch night alludes to the spectacular manifestations of the militarisation of urban environments performed outside of the state’s involvement. Instead, this highlights the role of other mediators, such as the marketers of the videogame, who are implicated in the processes of the militarisation of spaces and places.

As such, the game's purported 'realism' was performed and represented through the use of military-clad actors and military style performances. The launch night became an opportunity where the military screen world was presented off-screen through these displays and performances. This reveals the ways militainment, the pleasurable and celebratory ways military violence represented by the entertainment industries (Stahl 2010), can be projected beyond the confines of the screen world and into specific places. While the launch night provided a spectacle of military activities, it also served as an opportunity for interacting with the game, especially within the launch party.

### **8.6 Interacting with *Modern Warfare***

Beyond the performances of military clad actors, the launch night also, importantly, provided a means for attendees to directly consume and interact with *Modern Warfare 3*. Beyond the dozens of screens allowing interaction with the videogame, every aspect of the venue had been tailored to become a "total environment of consumption" (Rech 2015 np). The logo and aspects of the game were present throughout the venue often in mundane items. For instance, umbrellas branded with the *Modern Warfare* logo protected attendees from the drizzle outside, guests were treated to luminous green cocktails mirroring the game's colour scheme, and food was distributed in packaging decorated with the *Modern Warfare* logo. At every opportunity, attendees were given opportunities to consume the brand. Furthermore, they were able to be part of and interact with the game and its military values.

The venue itself was designed for attendees to engage, spectate and interact with the brand (see *Figure 8.11*). Scattered around the venue were Xbox consoles connected to HD screens which allowed attendees exclusive opportunities to play the game before its official release. The variety of game opportunities, such as single play campaign, multiplayer, and Spec Ops options were all playable on the night.



**Fig 8.11:** Field sketch indicates the layout of the venue for the *Call of Duty Modern Warfare 3* Launch Night (Source: Author).

Within the venue a number of interactive stalls allowed more direct interaction, such as an i-Vox video diary booth. Here, individuals and groups stood in front of the graphical representations of the game where users were video recorded discussing the game and the launch night. The company involved in setting up the diary booth, i-Vox suggested, that the interactive booth provided “a broad spectrum of feedback...along with some celebrity clips to use on their [Call of Duty] future campaigns” (i-Vox 2012: online). Feedback from audiences is important to the game and illustrates how different methods are used in order to obtain insights into consumptive practices and desires.

In the basement of the venue a 'Laser Tag' event had been organised claiming to offer a real life *Call of Duty* experience. Individuals were dressed in military attire and equipped with replica laser guns while taking out specified targets. This opportunity allowed attendees to live out gameplay in reality and was a direct "invitation to cross over and try on a soldier identity" (Stahl 2010 p.92). This was perhaps more evident as attendees were given the chance to have their photo taken dressed in military attire. A camouflaged jacket, along with replica M4 gun and sunglasses were carefully placed on to individuals.



**Fig 8.12:** Two attendees are dressed in military attire and their photo taken replicating the game's cover (Source: Author).

Individuals were directed to strike a similar pose to the game's front cover and a photograph was taken, edited and printed out for attendees. This provided a unique, individualised front cover of the game to take home and keep and also to upload social media, such as *Facebook*.



**Fig 8.13:** On the left a customised image from the launch night, on the right the image used on the actual front cover of the *Modern Warfare 3* game (Source: Author).

The evening became a direct invitation for the player to imagine and become the virtual citizen-soldier. The interaction with the military virtual worlds was no longer defined through the player and the screen; instead attendees were able to physically embody the soldiers represented in the game world. Through 'becoming' the virtual characterisations, or through the embodiment and performance of in-game action, attendees were presented with an intimate engagement with the game's militaristic content.

The launch venue thus mixed spectacle with the practices of interactive consumption which temporarily collapsed the real and virtual worlds, inviting attendees to engage with the *Modern Warfare* series and its militaristic content. This provided an extension beyond the screen which rested on an unproblematic consumption and interaction with military cultures and values.

The military identities expressed in the game were also experienced in the gendered make-up and performance of the room. The militarised masculinities that are encapsulated in the *Call of Duty* series, were reinforced, enacted and performed within the setting of the launch night. The makeup of the launch party was unsurprisingly predominately male. Occupying the majority of the videogame consoles in the venue were male players. Female attendees

distanced themselves from the game, either observing from afar, or sitting next to male partners playing the game.



**Fig 8.14:** The venue. There were a number of opportunities to play the game (Source: Author).

In addition, this connection between the game and masculinities was vocally expressed by a range of celebrities on the ‘green’ carpet, one in particular who discussed how the game tapped into an underlying male, natural, violent instinct and a male tendency for violent behaviour. The heteronormative roles were clearly defined with journalists asking females “If they actually like videogames, or if they’re “just here for the party?”, or professing ideas about the game being an opportunity for male players to live out their fantasies (Author’s Field Notebook 2011).

Here, it is also important to recognise the role of celebrities as actors in promoting and objecting political causes. For Benwell *et al.* (2012), celebrities can be noted as ambiguous geopolitical actors, complicating the categories, blurring formal and popular geopolitical boundaries. As they suggest celebrities are imbued with high levels of social capital, or what they term ‘star power’ which “can be mocked, ridiculed and trivialized as well as lionized and admired... his or her geopolitical intervention, is contingent and context-dependent” (Benwell *et al.* 2012 p.405). In this context, celebrities were key

actors' in generating publicity for the game. Furthermore, they suggested particular understandings of the game's militaristic content, in this case that the game offered an opportunity for players to live out an innate masculine fantasy of violence. Mirroring the game's construction of gendered identities, as detailed in *Chapter 5*, the launch night became a place where these were imagined and evident beyond the screen. Forms of masculinity associated with soldiering were channelled into the evening, which produced a setting in which military masculinities were reinforced.

### **8.7 Interpreting the Launch Night**

As shown, the launch night, through using different techniques and practices, centred on the specificities of place and of militaristic identities, which consumers were invited to adopt. However, the meaning of the spectacle is not stable and it brought out alternative readings and interpretations (Kong & Yeoh 1997). For instance, the marketing campaign that had preceded the night's events had prompted criticisms. One promotional video, which revealed images from the game showed an underground train derailed and exploding, which drew comparisons with the terrorist attack on the London underground in July 2005 (see Daily Mail 2011). Despite the evening being about promoting the game's content, the launch night also became an opportunity to voice criticisms and force producers and developers to defend the game's content.

When challenged about the criticisms directed about this the executive producer Mark Rubin was quick to distance the content of the game from reality:

“You have to see the game in its context so I think any statements outside of that context and you are kinda losing your points. The other thing is the game takes place in todayish times, for a period, but it's in a totally fictional world you know. In our world there is no 9/11 there is no Iraq war, no Afghan wars... none of that exists it's a totally fictional world so those kinda points of trying to connect them to things that happen don't really work and everything we do, we do from a purely cinematic standpoint...”  
(Game On 2011: online).

Here the executive producer was eager to distance this particular videogame from current contemporary geopolitical events He defends and legitimises the series through emphasising its resonances with cinematic conventions. The series is thus rendered apolitical, a form of entertainment that cannot be linked,

or contemplated in any other way. However, as we noted in the previous chapter, the virtual worlds of *Modern Warfare* promote discourses concerning contemporary geopolitics, explicitly and implicitly developed into the videogame. The military advisor involved in the production, for instance, notes the resonances of the *Modern Warfare* series with conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq (see p.204). Moreover, the meaning projected by the promotional campaign was not containable. The marketing campaign was not directly organised, created or fashioned by the game's developers themselves and therefore was open to different readings and interpretations. This was noticeable when one interviewer finished an interview with a celebrity by asking if he had "anything to say to the troops in Afghanistan and Iraq". Despite the Executive Producer's position in distancing the fictional and real world, the game world can encourage wider understandings and reflections of current geopolitical events.

Beyond the launch night itself, thousands of fans had queued at videogame stores across the country to obtain copies of the game at the stroke of midnight. At Oxford Street on the evening of the launch a queue was already snaking around the Game store. The shop itself had been revamped and transformed for the night proceedings. The façade of the shop was covered in the game's front cover imagery. The distinct Game logo had also been generated using the same stencil style as the game itself and, rewritten as 'Gam3'. The game world was also represented and enacted at the game store. The internal layout of the store was draped in camouflage netting and members of staff wore *Modern Warfare* slogan t-shirts and also sported camouflaged face paint. The costumed actors, who were based at the premiere, now patrolled the streets, overlooking the gathering crowd.



**Fig 8.15:** The 'Game' store entrance Oxford Street, London (Source: Author).

Along with the actors patrolling the streets, people in the queue also expressed their relationship with the game. Some members of the queue had dressed-up. The launch night was thus an opportunity for fans to show their affiliation to the series and to embody and perform characters from the screen world.



**Fig 8.16:** Two people dressed in military attire queuing outside the 'Game' store Oxford Street, London (Source: Author).

*Figure 8.16* shows two individuals were wearing balaclavas worn by the character, *Ghost* and dressed in miscellaneous militaristic items of clothing.

The length of the queue demonstrated the level of devotion towards the game. One individual had queued at the store for over 80 hours, camping overnight on the street to ensure he would be first to obtain a copy. Speaking to people in the queue their motives varied with some suggesting how the evening was a social opportunity, allowing fans of the game to meet in real life, and to share gamer tags. Others simply wanted something to do and to experience and be a part of the evening. Individuals also mentioned the desire to “be one of the first to get the game” (Author’s Field Notebook 2011) and to add to the collection and complete the *Modern Warfare* series.

While some discussed their desire to buy the game based on the previous familiarity with the game series, the marketing campaign’s central focus on specific places had resonance for people. Individuals discussed their excitement, desires and expectations in being able to navigate familiar locations. The series’ move towards western locations was seen as a novel and unique move as another individual mentioned “being in London it is kind of cool, like not a lot of games are based in London” (Author’s Field Notebook 2011). Indeed, the rarity of videogames that depict and allow players to navigate the familiar was a pull for consumers of the series.

The idea of World War 3 promoted in the game also promised an alternative perspective as one person mentioned the chance to “see conflict in a different way and to see what conflict does to the world” (Author’s Field Notebook 2011). A sense of believability was also key as one person mentioned “It’s good, it gives you a bit of an idea it gives you situations you can almost understand” (Author’s Field Notebook 2011). The scripting of the game and its move into familiar locations was intelligible to players and was seen as “a situation that could happen” (Author’s Field Notebook 2011). The location was particular important to these individuals as the game allowed them to explore the streets of London in the game world. Furthermore, there was a sense that the game provided an opportunity to play through a possible geopolitical conflict. The promotional campaign centring on place and the discourse of World War 3 was

largely received and expressed as a significant appeal for purchasing the game. Geopolitical discourse is thus not just contained with the interaction with the game itself, but it is also broadcast and understood in different places, through different people and practices, and prior to the game's release.

## **8.8 Concluding Remarks**

This chapter has sought to expand the scope of popular geopolitics, to acknowledge the wider textual and eventful web that popular cultural items are involved in. While studies have been attentive to the final product, they have also overlooked the plethora of official and unofficial materials which generate and shape the meaning of the text. As demonstrated in this chapter, the marketing, promotion and advertising of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* showed how the events of the launch night, were used to sell the game's geopolitical and militaristic content and extended analysis beyond an initial focus on the screen world. Focusing on the launch night, we noted how the game suffused spectacle and interactivity into the urban landscapes of London.

The spectacle of the launch night became a highly visible presence within London, through the use of lighting and projections which was emblazoned on the urban landscape. Reflecting the game's content, the projections reinforced the game's narrative in which warfare spreads to key western metropolitan places. Moreover, the launch night was an event which encapsulated the blurring lines between the virtual and real worlds, as the venue and surrounding area became militarised through the performances of military-clad actors. It showed the temporary militarisation of public spaces via popular cultural mediators. Overall, the chapter has demonstrated the need for popular geopolitics to account for the excessive nature of popular cultural phenomena and the ways they become lived, experienced in understood in particular situated contexts.

## Chapter 9. Game Over?

This thesis has set out to explore the relationship between popular culture and geopolitics. To do so I have provided a detailed case study into the hugely successful and popular military-themed videogame series; *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*. This thesis has argued in order to consider the wider geopolitical significance of popular culture, scholars need to attend to not just a critical analysis of the item in question, but to also consider its production and its consumption. Critical studies of military-themed videogames have been narrow in focus and they have largely been void of empirical evidence in which to support their critiques (Schulzke 2013a). Central to this aim has been the endeavour to move beyond a singular critical analysis of the videogame worlds, but to consider its wider geopolitical significance. Therefore, the key strength of this thesis has been its commitment to providing a grounded and empirically driven insight into the ways popular geopolitics is (re)presented, consumed and produced *vis-à-vis* the videogame series *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*. I have gone further than previous studies, having adopted an holistic approach to investigate the ways geopolitics is represented in the *Modern Warfare* series, the everyday experiences and interpretations of players, and the processes of production in which popular geopolitical ideas, scripts and narratives come to be. This final chapter will seek to summarise the main findings of the thesis, outlining the empirical, theoretical and methodological contributions to the field of popular geopolitics, and finally, consider some fruitful areas in which these can be usefully taken forward.

### 9.1 Thesis Summary

This thesis has positioned itself within the field of popular geopolitics. While offering opportunities to legitimise the analysis of popular culture items and consider them as powerful outlets in shaping geographical imaginations, the field has been rather restrained in its analytical focus. Here, studies have been narrowly focused on the textual, discursive and representative ways in which world views are presented in a range of items (Dittmer & Gray 2010). To move beyond this, the thesis has opened up different sites to show how popular geopolitical knowledge is produced, negotiated and enacted. In order to do this,

I have utilised a case study analysis of the videogame series *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* and utilised a framework which explores the game, the players and its production. As a result, the thesis has responded to a number of calls for more grounded, empirically driven studies of everyday geopolitics (Dittmer & Gray 2010; Pain 2008); a consideration of audience interpretations (Dodds & Dittmer 2008; Woon 2014); the affective, emotive and embodied experiences of geopolitics (Ó Tuathail 2003; Müller 2013); and the ways popular geopolitical scripts, narratives and logics are produced (Carter 2008; Coulter 2011). The multiperspectival approach has allowed an intimate understanding of the *Modern Warfare* series beyond the initial geopolitical content, to how it becomes appropriated, practiced and internalised in everyday life.

In exploring the games, *Chapter 4* provided a detailed analysis of the *Modern Warfare* series. By attending the games' narratives, characters and landscapes, I argued that the series mirrors contemporary geopolitical discourse. Special attention was given to the virtual landscapes in which the player navigates. While landscapes are an important consideration for geographers, there has been little attempt to consider the significance of virtual landscapes (Woodward 2014). The thesis notes how the landscapes both situate military violence in distant locations that mirror the geographies of contemporary conflict, but also they utilise landscapes of familiar western urban locations which resonates with the increasing securitisation and militarisation of metropolitan areas (Graham 2010). The representative schemas are important to consider as they normalise and legitimise popular geopolitical imaginaries of where military violence operates.

Furthermore, the thesis indicated the specific ways in which the videogame series articulates geopolitical discourses (Dittmer 2007). Here I considered the importance of the cutscene – a narrative technique utilised within videogames. Within the series it is used to connect disparate locations, contextualise the prosecution of military violence, and provides narration of the game's overall geopolitical story. I argue that the cutscene used in the *Modern Warfare* series presents a geopolitical device *par excellence* offering a top-down visual perspective of the world, demarcating spaces of danger and threat and promoting the utility of military violence in the global politics. These findings

have significant implications for the understanding of how videogames actually come to (re)present geopolitics, considering not just the virtual worlds, but devices unique to the medium such as the cutscene.

However, the fact that the cutscene can be skipped over by the players raises questions regarding the way the geopolitics of *Modern Warfare* is interpreted, experienced and understood. *Chapter 5* focused on player's interactions with the geopolitical scripts of *Modern Warfare* and the ways the series shapes political and cultural subjectivities and identities. Rather than being conceived as passive dupes, the study considers how players' actually relate to the series' geopolitical and militaristic content. This provided rich insights into the interpretative engagements of players. It sought to overcome the universalising tendencies of previous studies by highlighting the differential readings, investments and experiences professed by the players of the series. However, the study was also important as it considered how players drew connections between the game and contemporary geopolitical conflicts. Furthermore it also suggested that players performed critical readings of the games' content, adopting a 'gaming point of view' to overcome the politicised content, or even refusing to play particular military-themed games due to their content. Turning to the players is essential as both playing war is both experienced and interpreted differently.

In *Chapter 6* I employed a video ethnography in order to further consider playing virtual war *in situ*. This brought an empirical focus to the 'more-than-representational' ways geopolitics is experienced, noting the highly affective and embodied states of playing war (Shaw & Wharf 2009). The data revealed how a range of considerations such as haptic technologies, the different gameplay modes, and the visual-audio schemas worked to amplify the affective states of the player. The video ethnography also brought to the forefront the assemblage of human and non-human entities involved in playing war. In this respect play needs to be considered as an event which is contingent on the relations between heterogeneous elements that have the potential to heighten but also disrupt player's experiences of playing war. The study should prove to be particularly valuable to considering everyday ways popular geopolitical discourses are embodied and experienced.

*Chapter 7* examined the production, an aspect that has been rarely analysed within popular geopolitical scholarship. By examining documentary sources, this chapter considered the structural and organisational relationships, alongside the agency of individual producers in developing the characters, landscapes and geopolitical plotline of the *Modern Warfare* series. A political economic approach revealed the power relations between different actors. Here, the legal dispute between *Activision* and *Infinity Ward* revealed the contentious power relations over the creative control of the series. Contractual agreements illustrated the politics behind the practices and processes of production that define what final videogame is made. The data revealed the structural conditions in which the creativity of the game's developers was contested by the publishers who defined the game's temporal narrative.

Besides the power relations between developer and publishers, the chapter noted the social-material relations involved in creating the content of the game. This provided a number of important findings including exposing key actors in the production process. The series has a close relationship with the military, and revealed the ways military knowledge, values and logics enter the game worlds. Overall in order to consider the ways popular geopolitical narratives are constructed, I argue that revealing the practices and processes behind-the-scenes highlights the different actors, negotiations over creative control, and the contractual obligations which shape the geopolitical narrative and content.

*Chapter 8* turned to the marketing, promotional and advertising activities of the *Modern Warfare* series. The chapter provided an analysis of the launch night of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* in London which saw the game world explicitly seep into the 'real' world. The media spectacle saw how the game's geopolitical narrative became lived, performed and enacted in the streets of London. The launch night thus became an event in which the game's geopolitical narrative extended beyond the screen into everyday life. The chapter provides an important consideration into the spatialities of popular geopolitics that extends beyond the screen. Furthermore, it points to the complex spectacular and banal ways in which the series and its geopolitical narratives are encountered in particular places beyond the screen.

## **9.2 Contributions to Knowledge**

Overall this thesis has made a series of conceptual, empirical and methodological contributions to knowledge. In undertaking a multiperspectival approach to popular geopolitics, it has opened up a number of different research avenues and trajectories. This has been less concerned with a focus purely on the videogame in and of itself, but rather has been aimed at exploring how geopolitical meaning is shaped, negotiated and contested via different actors, stages and sites. It has also explored the importance of military videogames in shaping ideas about space, place, identity and statecraft. Here, I want to outline a number of contributions this thesis offers to the field of popular geopolitics and the wider discipline of Human Geography and critical International Relations.

### ***Popular Geopolitics 3.0***

This thesis has argued for popular geopolitics to expand its analytical focus. Thus far studies have focused on the cultural artefacts themselves, leaving the call for popular geopolitics to renew an analytical focus on to the everyday practices and performances, what Dittmer & Gray (2010) define as popular geopolitics 2.0. This approach offers a way to move beyond a focus on a purely representational focus, and to consider the complexities of popular culture. While this sketches out useful theoretical directions in which this turn to the everyday can be realised within popular geopolitics, I argue that this approach runs the risk of overlooking representations, but also the matters in which popular geopolitics gets produced. Instead, I have argued for an holistic analytical framework that considers the 'whole equation' (Carter 2008), this I call popular geopolitics 3.0. This provides a heuristic framework in considering the ways geopolitics is represented, produced and consumed. This offers an important consideration in expanding analytical focus away from representation, as Campbell (2007 p.361) has argued:

“images cannot be isolated as discrete objects but have to be understood as imbricated in networks of materials, technologies, institutions, markets, social spaces, affects, cultural histories and political contexts”.

A key strength of the proposed framework is that it refuses to consider cultural artefacts as discrete objects in which critical readings can be performed. Instead, as this thesis has shown geopolitical meaning needs to be considered in relation to wider political, social and cultural contexts. Adopting such an analytical framework allows a more holistic, detailed and insightful way in to how geopolitics extends beyond the screen, how it is negotiated, interpreted and understood within different contextualised settings. It offers a framework to go beyond previous accounts that concentrate on the generation of geopolitical meaning at the site of the media, or cultural text. Instead popular geopolitics can begin to integrate more complex understandings of the spatial construction of popular geopolitical imaginations through cultural items. Moreover, it opens up a discussion concerning the complex interplay between agency and structural factors such as the matters of production and how they unfold. This opens up analysis of different voices, going beyond the academic analytical standpoint, to incorporate the perspectives of audiences, alongside the producers of these items.

However, it is also important to note that these categories of text, production and audience should not be seen as distinct but rather that they overlap and, at times, are hard to separate (Bollhöfer 2007). Indeed, it is important to recognise the ways that audience feeds back into the production process (Dittmer & Larsen 2007). Audiences and their expectations are often considered by the producers, and in the case of *Call of Duty*, social media offers a key outlet in which producers are able to communicate with and 'listen' to the players. Popular geopolitical scholarship needs to be attentive to these overlaps and blurring lines.

This research provides a framework for the exploration of other case study examples within popular geopolitics. Despite being difficult to make generalizable claims, the purpose of implementing case study research is to provide a detailed contextualised understanding of the conditions and forms in which popular geopolitical meaning takes. Thus far studies have lacked grounded and detailed empiricism. Adopting such a framework with other popular cultural items can help illuminate and explore the significance of the relationship between world politics and popular culture. Detailed case study

research can help overcome this by attending to understandings of the everyday significance of popular cultural items and to investigate how popular culture actually shapes (geo)political identities, imaginaries and subjectivities. Popular geopolitics 3.0 I argue offers a heuristic framework that can help renew and develop rich empirical insights into the significance of the representation, consumption and production of popular geopolitical imaginaries in a range of cultural products.

### ***Popular Geopolitics and Methods***

This thesis makes an important methodological contribution to the field of popular geopolitics. An essential part of the adopting the above framework has been the implementation of a range of methodological approaches and techniques to consider videogames, players and their production. This has meant adopting and adapting a range of methodological techniques that have yet to be utilised or considered in popular geopolitical scholarship.

Firstly, the project was sensitive to the medium being studied, in this case videogames. While the ludological school of thought remains sceptical of a focus on the narrative of videogames, the thesis has argued and shown that, in the case of *Modern Warfare*, the storyline is a major element of the game play experience. However, there was also a need to be attentive to how this narrative was told, and as such, a need to attend to the device of the cutscene. In analysing the discursive properties of popular cultural items methodological approaches need to consider the particularities of the medium and specific ways in which they articulate geopolitical discourses.

Secondly, the study incorporated methods to acknowledge the players themselves. The utilisation of interviews was important in understanding people's actual everyday experiences and the ways geopolitics finds expression in their everyday life (Sturm 2008). In other words, there is a need to consider actual efficacy of popular culture in shaping geopolitical imaginaries. Interviews went beyond previous methodological studies within popular geopolitics which have largely been depersonalised and reliant on online forums and questionnaires. Instead interviews allowed participants to elaborate and provide

more nuanced reflections on their understanding and relationship with popular geopolitical narratives.

On the other hand, these interviews were conducted away from the situated context of playing virtual war. Indeed, *Chapter 6* went further by moving from what players say they do to what they actually do. In order to explore the situated context of play, I utilised a video ethnography approach as a means of considering the play *in situ*. As such, the video camera afforded a number of possibilities to this research, and further research opportunities within the field. It offered the opportunity to capture the intricacies of playing war. This goes beyond the capacity of other methodological approaches that are more reliant on the researcher's own ability to manually record information by taking notes. Furthermore, this approach was sensitive to "the everyday intersection of the human body with places, environments, objects, and discourses linked to geopolitics" (Dittmer & Gray 2010, p.1673). The act of playing war involves a complex assemblage of materials, technologies and bodies. While offering players the opportunity to virtually immerse themselves in distant locations, the act of play is always grounded and enacted in specific places. The video footage moves the analysis beyond the screen into the realm of the everyday and provides a more nuanced and multifaceted understanding of *what it is to play war*. The use of a video camera can therefore offer a creative and grounded approach to a fuller understanding of the complex and contingent role popular culture has in shaping imaginations of world politics in everyday life.

Finally, the study has gone some way into illuminating the ways popular geopolitical narratives are produced. Research into production within popular geopolitics has been largely overlooked, mainly due to issues of accessibility. While the study also experienced such difficulties, in an attempt to overcome this I turned to documentary evidence. A range of other sources including newspapers, magazines, official documentation, and *YouTube* videos all provided valuable insights into the processes and practices involved in the production of the *Modern Warfare* series. These wider outlets, I argue can offer productive sources to enable consideration of the actors, organisations and practices involved in the production of media and popular culture texts. Ultimately, the thesis has undertaken a number of methodological approaches

that can usefully be utilised, adapted and taken forward within the field of popular geopolitics.

### ***Popular Geopolitics: Beyond the Screen***

Finally, a key empirical contribution the thesis has made is to shed light on the complex and multifaceted geographies of popular culture. In a number of respects, popular geopolitics 3.0 shifts the emphasis beyond the screen. To put it another way, rather than being attuned to an analysis of just the virtual worlds, the thesis has explored the various 'paratexts' (Gray 2010) and events such as the launch night that complemented the *Modern Warfare* series. Furthermore the analysis has revealed how the virtual geopolitical worlds spill out of the screen, into quotidian spaces of home, for example. In *Chapter 5* and *Chapter 6*, the thesis highlights the place of play, which is usually the domestic setting. Taking Brickell's (2012) call to consider how geopolitics is influenced by, and emerges from the home, *Chapter 6* reveals intimate and everyday practices in which the imaginaries of the geographies of military violence materialise within the domestic setting. Here, I revealed how the complex and contingent experience of playing ludic war was shaped and made possible, through an assemblage of human and non-human entities. Indeed, attending to the places of play helped break down clear cut distinctions between 'public' and 'private'. As *Shaun* indicated (p.126), the knowledge of military weaponry attained from the game world, went beyond the home and became embedded in the school playground. The empirical data also revealed how players own geographical knowledge and imaginations shaped their understanding of the virtual worlds they navigated, whether this was to reject the simplistic portrayal of places (see p.135), or the ways in which the games brought a sense of familiarity (see p.134). *Chapter 8* further illustrated the different spatial aspects of *Modern Warfare* that extend beyond the screen. In this case I drew attention to the launch night where the virtual geopolitical world was presented, enacted and performed on the streets of London. It points to the excessive spatial qualities of popular culture (Horton 2008) and how the geopolitical meaning becomes intelligible by a range of actors, organisations, events and other texts.

### 9.3 New Research Directions

To end, I wish to briefly refer to three new areas of possible research. Firstly, despite the huge appeal and popularity of video games, popular geopolitical studies of them remain scarce. There is also a need to go beyond a focus on military-themed videogames, as Hughes (2010) indicates there are a plethora of other videogame titles and genres, such as 'quest', that intermingle with the geopolitical and which warrant critical analysis. Defining videogames is a difficult feat due to the number of different technologies in which the medium can be played, such as mobile phones and tablets. It is also important to consider the ways gaming is increasingly used for recruitment purposes in the military (Rech 2012; Toussaint 2015) and to consider to what effect. In this thesis I have largely explored the single-campaign mode of the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series. While some insights of the multiplayer option has been given (see *Chapter 6*), further research would benefit from understanding the wider militarised worlds offered online in which players compete against each other. This aspect relies less on narrative, but on the short bursts of competitive play. These virtual online worlds and the fascinating social worlds which can be usefully explored through virtual ethnographies are largely ignored (Kozinets 2010). There is much to be said about videogames, how they offer different ways of experiencing the geopolitical through genre conventions, but we also need to consider the wider virtual and material spatialities which they interact with.

This coincides with the second research trajectory, that of the players. As this thesis has shown, interviewing players has revealed detailed insights into their activities, as well as the interpretations of the geopolitical and militaristic virtual worlds they interact with. Further studies into audiences would benefit from firstly, a more wide and varied sample. For instance, a more internationally based sample would enable understandings of different interpretations. For instance, "what kind of interactions do players from countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan have online? How do they feel and interpret war games?" (Shaw 2010a p.799). Moreover, further attention needs to be paid towards the experiential aspects of playing war as discussed in *Chapter 7*. The video ethnographic approach offers a range of possibilities in further illuminating understandings of the affective, emotive and embodied entanglements of not

just playing war but other aspects of popular cultural consumption and how it relates to the geopolitical.

Finally, in regards to production, this is perhaps the most underdeveloped area within popular geopolitics and perhaps one of the most fruitful. The key stumbling block is accessibility. I have detailed my difficulties in *Chapter 3*, however, others may have better credentials, experience and contacts which allow them access to the production process (Levine 2001). Moreover gaining access to the producers of popular cultural items can further promote dialogues between the academy and the cultural and creative industries. While popular geopolitics has provided critical insights into the role of popular culture in inculcating particular world views, the relevance of this outlook falls largely on deaf ears beyond the academy. For example, while military-themed videogames have long been critiqued, further attention needs to be given to the medium in respect to the possibilities for social critique and political activism (Robinson 2012; Bogost 2011). For instance, there is a growing movement of art games, which depict and offers challenges to how 'real-life' (geo)political systems work (see [www.gamesforchange.org](http://www.gamesforchange.org) and [www.persuasivegames.com](http://www.persuasivegames.com)). By engaging with the medium in such a way, popular, and critical geopolitics for that matter, could introduce new ways of challenging dominant understandings of how the world works, through the persuasive and playful structures of videogames. This offers potential to go beyond the academy and stimulate debates within the more public domain.

Overall, this thesis has provided a rich and detailed insight into the ways world politics and popular culture collide. Popular culture is a legitimate and deserved area of geographic enquiry, where ideas of space, place, identity, and statecraft are circulated to mass audiences. In taking the videogame series *Modern Warfare*, this thesis has moved beyond popular sentiments that 'it's just a game', to reveal the multiple actors, complex power relations and everyday processes and practices that are constitutive of popular geopolitical sensibilities. To this end, the thesis calls for scholars to attend these complexities by undertaking holistic research that considers how popular geopolitics is represented, consumed and produced.

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**Spec Ops: The Line** (2012) [Videogame]. 2K Games: USA.

**Tom Clancy** (1998- ) [Videogame Series]. Ubisoft: USA.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: Discourse Analysis: *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*

**Source materials:** Call of Duty: Modern Warfare, Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2, Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3- The single campaign mode.

**Key Themes and considerations:**

**Place/Space:**

Where is the gameplay set? What scales does the gameplay operate at? How are places represented in the game? How are landscapes represented?

**Characters:**

What characters do the players adopt? How do the characters interact with the landscape and other characters?

**Narrative:**

How does the narrative script the world? How is the narrative/storyline presented? Who narrates the story?

**Gameplay:**

How are players actions constrained, or enabled by the game rules? What details are shown on screen? How do avatars interact within the virtual world? What are the ranges of interactions players have with the game?

## Appendix B. List of Participants

|    | Name      | Occupation                                  | Age | Sex | Nationality | Interview Type   | Interview Location    |
|----|-----------|---------------------------------------------|-----|-----|-------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| 1  | Malcolm   | Student (Military History)                  | 23  | M   | British     | Gaming Interview | Participant's Home    |
| 2  | Jacob     | Plumber                                     | 25  | M   | British     | Interview        | Interviewer's Home    |
| 3  | Dean      | Customer Services                           | 25  | M   | British     | Gaming Interview | Participant's Home    |
| 4  | Gary      | Tattooist                                   | 26  | M   | British     | Gaming Interview | Participant's Home    |
| 5  | Michael   | Postgraduate Student                        | 27  | M   | British     | Gaming Interview | Newcastle Culture Lab |
| 6  | Keith     | Student (English)                           | 31  | M   | British     | Email Interview  | N/A                   |
| 7  | Daniel    | IT Technician                               | 33  | M   | British     | Email Interview  | N/A                   |
| 8  | Karl      | Engineer                                    | 30  | M   | British     | Email Interview  | N/A                   |
| 9  | Nick      | Student (Criminology and Forensics Science) | 22  | M   | British     | Gaming Interview | Newcastle University  |
| 10 | Alan      | Student (Art)                               | 22  | M   | British     | Gaming Interview | Newcastle University  |
| 11 | Arjun     | Student (Electrical engineering)            | 25  | M   | Indian      | Interview        | Newcastle University  |
| 12 | Alexander | Student                                     | 19  | M   | British     | Gaming Interview | Newcastle University  |
| 13 | Shaun     | Student (Politics)                          | 19  | M   | British     | Gaming Interview | Newcastle University  |
| 14 | Owen      | Student (Computer Science)                  | 22  | M   | British     | Interview        | Newcastle University  |
| 15 | Ali       | Student                                     | N/A | M   | Bahraini    | Interview        | Newcastle University  |
| 16 | Scott     | Professional Cleaner                        | N/A | M   | British     | Interview        | Newcastle University  |
| 17 | Jake      | Personal Trainer                            | 23  | M   | British     | Gaming Interview | Interviewer's Home    |
| 18 | Simon     | N/A                                         | N/A | M   | British     | Gaming Interview | Newcastle University  |
| 19 | Lee       | Student (Postgraduate)                      | N/A | M   | Chinese     | Gaming Interview | Newcastle University  |
| 20 | Sarah     | Student                                     | 20  | F   | British     | Gaming Interview | Newcastle University  |
| 21 | Michael   | Building Surveyor                           | 33  | M   | British     | Gaming Interview | Newcastle University  |
| 22 | Robin     | Building Surveyor                           | 33  | M   | British     | Gaming Interview | Newcastle University  |
| 23 | Fraser    | Building Surveyor                           | 30  | M   | British     | Gaming Interview | Newcastle University  |
| 24 | Louis     | Student                                     | 20  | M   | British     | Interview        | Newcastle University  |

|    |          |                         |     |   |         |                   |                                   |
|----|----------|-------------------------|-----|---|---------|-------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 25 | James    | Student – Electro Power | 22  | M | Chinese | Interview         | Newcastle University              |
| 26 | Jason*** | Student                 | 19  | M | British | Video Ethnography | Participant's Home                |
| 27 | Brian    | Administrator           | 40  | M | British | Interview         | Newcastle University              |
| 28 | Emil     | Student                 | N/A | M | N/A     | Interview         | Call of Duty Launch Night, London |
| 29 | N/A      | N/A                     | N/A | M | N/A     | Interview         | Call of Duty Launch Night, London |
| 30 | N/A      | N/A                     | N/A | M | N/A     | Interview         | Call of Duty Launch Night, London |
| 31 | N/A      | Videogame Journalist    | N/A | M | N/A     | Interview         | Call of Duty Launch Night, London |
| 32 | N/A      | Retail Assistant        | N/A | F | N/A     | Interview         | Call of Duty Launch Night, London |

\*\*\* Grey highlighted cells indicate where the interview was conducted as a group.

## Appendix C. Recruitment Poster

## **Appendix D. Interview Questions**

### **Background**

Name:

Age:

Sex:

Occupation:

Ethnicity:

### **Video gaming**

When did you start playing?

What sort of gamer would you describe yourself as? i.e. (hard-core- casual?)

How often do you play Call of Duty?

What is your favourite game from the Call of Duty series? Why?

How often do you play?

How often do you play on the multiplayer option and how often do you play on the single player mode?

Do you interact with other user? Are you in a clan?

Do you collect poster, game paraphernalia? Anything associated with Call of Duty?  
Do you read forum, magazines?

### **Call of Duty**

Why do you like the Call of Duty Series?

Why do you think these games are so popular?

How does it differ to other videogames?

What are your favourite aspects of the Call of Duty videogames?

What is your least favourite part of the series?

Which do you prefer historical or the contemporary adaptations?

Describe in your own words the plot, content, character, motives?

Do you think about the narrative while you play?

Is it an important aspect of the gameplay?

What other games do you engage with?

What is your favourite 'mission'? Why?

## **Military Content**

How are the military represented in the games?

What is your impression of the military from these games?

How 'realistic' and 'authentic' do you find the games?

How are the 'enemy' represented in the game?

What do think about controversial aspects of the game? i.e. No Russian mission/  
Fidel Castro

What do you think of the military's involvement with the games?

## **Geopolitics**

Where are these game predominately set?

How do they reflect the 'real' world and current conflict? Do they mirror contemporary political events?

How would you describe the landscape?

How are places represented in the games?

What do you think about this?

Does this play a role in your decision to play? Where do you want these games to be set?

## **Emotional and Affective**

Can you describe your emotions while playing the game?

Are there certain aspects that heighten your emotions or engagements with the game?

How does the game amplify these emotions or affects?

How does this reflect 'real' military situations?

What parts of the game are the most enjoyable?

What about moments of frustration, or boredom? What makes you put down the controller?

Do you have a favourite character?

How do you think yourself while playing in relation to the game? Do you identify in anyway with the characters?

How do you identify the national combatants presented on the screen?

Are there any characters you don't like to be? Why is this?

What about the moral and ethical considerations placed in the game? How does the game define the moral and ethics? Do you agree?

What about the national symbols and iconic landscapes used in the game? What is your perception of this?



## Informed Consent Form

---

***Research Project: The popular geopolitics of military video games***

---

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research.

As part of the interview process you will be asked some questions regarding personal background, your experiences with first-person shooter video games, and the political and militaristic significance of these particular games. The interview itself will be semi-structured and will the location will be determined by the participant in which ever location they feel most comfortable in.

Your responses will be recorded, transcribed and coded. These recordings and transcripts will be stored on a secure laptop which will be kept in the University and locked up overnight. All personal information and identifiers (name, email and phone number) will be kept confidential and separate from transcripts. A pseudonym will be used in replace of your actual name which will be only known by me. If you would prefer recordings to be destroyed after transcribing please notify me.

The interviews will be informal and you are encouraged to ask any questions at any time in regards to the nature of the project. You are free contact me to withdraw from the project at any time, or to gain any further information about the projects process.

To fulfil the requirements of my institution's research protocol please acknowledge that you accept the below statement of consent.

*I agree by taking this survey I am freely and willingly taking part in Daniel Bos's research project. I understand that information from this interview will be transcribed and will be incorporated into the overall project that may be published or presented at academic conferences. My identity and any other information that may connect me directly with this research will be kept confidential. Moreover, I am under no obligation to answer any questions that I do not feel comfortable with and may withdraw anytime from the project.*

**Print Name:**

**Signature:**

**Date:**

If you have any further questions or need additional information please do not hesitate to get in contact.

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## Appendix F. List of Documentary and Secondary Sources Used.

| Source                     | Data Collection                                                                                                                                                                                                | Further Information                                                                                                                                              |
|----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>YouTube</b>             | Video stored and transcribed. Transcription coded into emerging themes                                                                                                                                         | Various search terms used. Call of Duty: Modern Warfare, Modern Warfare 2, Modern Warfare 3 etc.                                                                 |
| <b>Newspapers</b>          | Lexis Nexis used to search for newspaper articles.                                                                                                                                                             | These included all the tabloid and broadsheet newspapers in the UK. This was limited to the UK because these were the only available publications on Lexis Nexis |
| <b>Video game websites</b> | The top 15 video gaming websites were searched. The list of sites included (see link)<br><a href="http://www.ebizmba.com/articles/video-game-websites">http://www.ebizmba.com/articles/video-game-websites</a> | The search was narrowed to these websites. Irrelevant websites were excluded from the search.                                                                    |
| <b>Google</b>              | An extensive Google search was performed to source relevant data.                                                                                                                                              | This complimented previous searches.                                                                                                                             |

## Appendix G. Events Attended

| <b>Event</b>                                                   | <b>Date</b>                                         | <b>Location</b>                                         |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Battlefield 3-<br/>Midnight release.</b>                    | 28 <sup>th</sup> October 2011                       | Game Store,<br>Newcastle-upon-Tyne                      |
| <b>Call of Duty: Modern<br/>Warfare 3 launch<br/>night</b>     | 7 <sup>th</sup> November 2011                       | Old Billingsgate,<br>London                             |
| <b>Call of Duty: Modern<br/>Warfare 3 midnight<br/>release</b> | 8 <sup>th</sup> November 2011                       | Game Store, Oxford<br>Street, London                    |
| <b>Medal of Honor:<br/>Warfighter -<br/>promotional event</b>  | 4 <sup>th</sup> - 6 <sup>th</sup> October 2012      | Newcastle-upon-Tyne,<br>Eldon Square<br>Shopping Centre |
| <b>Call of Duty: Black<br/>Ops II Live Event</b>               | 10 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup> November<br>2012 | Bloomsbury Ballroom,<br>London                          |
| <b>Call of Duty: Black<br/>Ops II launch night</b>             | 13 <sup>th</sup> November 2012                      | Bloomsbury Ballroom,<br>London                          |
| <b>Play Expo</b>                                               | 12 <sup>th</sup> - 13 <sup>th</sup> October<br>2013 | Events City,<br>Manchester                              |