

‘There’s a Soldier in All of Us’: Call of Duty’s Promotion of US Foreign Policy

Written by Daniel Golebiewski

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DANIEL GOLEBIEWSKI, NOV 7 2013

In the United States, November comes as a month of hosting major political events—from Election Day and Veterans Day to Thanksgiving Day and Black Friday. In addition, the Roman Catholic Church remembers the souls of the departed on All Souls Day. Coincidentally, military video games such as Battlefield and Call of Duty, selling millions of copies every year, are also released on major consoles—PS3, Xbox 360, and PC. Released maybe to commemorate the fallen soldiers in current and past times, these video games have a much larger mission, a propaganda hidden in a message: to protect and promote the post-9/11 US foreign policy concerning international relations and military strategy.

This blog post takes a look at Call of Duty, a first-person/third person shooter game, owned by Activision—specifically, its Modern Warfare and Modern Warfare 2 series—to explain how its gameplay promotes and protects US foreign policy since 9/11.

Firstly, using John Mearsheimer’s offensive realist argument that great powers are willing to shift the current balance of power in their favor, Call of Duty portrays the US as facing evil enemies, ones that it must destroy to protect itself and its people from harm. As reinforced by former President Bush Jr., “thousands of terrorists” live in this world and would not think twice to use weapons of mass destruction against the US, all in the hopes of killing millions of innocent Americans. For example, the game reinforces post-9/11 fears when it reminds Americans that Arab terrorists such as the fictional character Khaled Al-Asad, a military commander in an unnamed Arab country, could get their hands on nuclear weapons from “rogue states” and use them against US interests in the Mid-East or elsewhere—a mirror scenario of the US fear of Iran.

Secondly, the video game emphasizes the excuse that wars initiated by the US are unavoidable. More specifically, it seems to reemphasize the idea of Manifest Destiny, the 19th century belief that the US has a sacred duty to promote and defend American values throughout the world. In fact, in a way, this idea reinforces US hegemony by allowing it to go anywhere and take part in any war. As a result, Call of Duty reflects the emerging reality that possible diplomacy with states becomes an unrealistic task; it is better to put bullets into someone’s body than by sitting down to talk. For instance, referring back to the fictional character Khaled Al-sad, at nowhere in the game does the US consider sitting down with him, but rather engages in direct battle.

As much as the game protects and promotes post-9/11 US foreign policy through these two themes, Call of Duty stops short from showing the real consequences of armed conflict—that is the destruction of buildings and the mass carnation of bodies. For instance, when bullets hit a soldier in the game, he collapses to the ground without a cry. In reality, however, soldiers have scars and marks left behind from the enemy’s bullets. Moreover, unlike the enemy in the game, soldiers can hide behind a wall and automatically regain energy. In other words, the game depicts US soldiers as invincible people, more or less like Bruce Lee or Rambo, but ignoring the psychological effect that war brings down on them, even to the strongest of them all.

Despite this limitation, Call of Duty still reminds Americans that they are ever closer to war with international actors such as Arab terrorists, who are unafraid to invade the US and use nuclear weapons. Unsurprisingly, countries such

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as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates have banned the series, because of the violence toward Muslims, as well as the way the game depicts these countries as the home of terrorists. Regardless, whether gamers consider buying the game to feel almost like real soldiers, placed in a modern battlefield through the lens of a home theater system and a 60" LCD HDTV, or whether to investigate the game's relevance to current international relations, Call of Duty continues to invite gamers to see the war on terror as the chief instrument of foreign policy.

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Daniel Golebiewski is an Editor-at-Large at *e-IR*. Read more from Daniel and others on the *e-IR* editors' blog.

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