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In a recent episode of *The Simpsons* (31 January 2010), the crotchety, aged Mr. Burns stands in front of a Nintendo Wii display at the Springfield Mall. Holding the Wii controller as one would hold a handgun, the tycoon finds himself playing a World War II-era first-person shooter that requires him to fire upon members of the approaching German army. Leaning over to his ever-vigilant assistant, Smithers, the somewhat bewildered Burns intones, “Shooting at Nazis...? That’s not how I remember it.”

The historical first-person shooter, which this episode of *The Simpsons* lampoons, has become a conspicuous and highly lucrative sub-genre within contemporary videogames.¹ The first-person shooter has always been indebted to skewed representations of World War II, with the genre’s popular genesis closely tied to id Software’s release of *Wolfenstein 3D* in 1992 (in the game, the player attempts to escape a Nazi-controlled castle in the heart of the Third Reich).² In the eighteen years since *Wolfenstein*’s release, numerous iterations of the first-person shooter have appeared, many set in dystopian futuristic worlds such as the decimated cityscapes of *Half-Life 2* (Valve 2004) and the alien planet of *Halo* (Bungie 2001). Games such as *Wolfenstein* and *Battlefield 1942* (Digital Illusions 2002), in contrast, situate game play within war torn European countries during the mid-twentieth century, differentiating themselves as a distinct sub-genre through their evocation of the past. Today, historical shooters such as the *Call of Duty* franchise (Infinity Ward and Treyarch 2003-2009) have attained widespread popularity among game players and a cultural visibility expansive enough that the genre can be the subject of an insular joke on television.

The *Call of Duty* franchise has experienced a privileged longevity within the videogame market, having sold over fifteen million units since the release of the original *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward and Treyarch) in 2003.³ There are eight major entries in the series, and the franchise as a whole spans all six contemporary sixth and seventh generation videogame console systems, as well as personal computers and numerous mobile devices.⁴ Of the eight titles available, six represent military campaigns that occurred during the Second World War (franchise entries four and six, subtitled *Modern Warfare* [Infinity Ward 2007 and 2009], allow the player to engage in armed conflicts that fictionalize contemporary political and military tensions). *Call of Duty: World at War* (Treyarch 2008), one of the most financially successful entries within the historical first-person shooter sub-genre, was one of the five most popular videogames of 2008 in terms of units sold worldwide.⁵ When compared to the other bestsellers of that year, such as *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar North 2008) and *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* (Nintendo 2008), *World at War* is the only game to take a major international historical occurrence as its core subject, with the Second World War functioning as the spatio-temporal referent around which the game’s interactive play space is designed.

While countless modern-day videogames erect fantastical universes that exist apart from contemporary histories as spaces of play, the historical first-person shooter continually and uniquely raids and re-appropriates cultural and international history in the interest of providing foundational narrative structures for individual games. In so doing, these videogames engage contemporary understandings of history and manifestations of nationalized collective memory (as the recent *Simpsons* episode implies). As well, they employ culturally specific notions of individuality and heroism that privilege the United States' role in the Second World War. Much as the *Call of Duty* franchise invites players to play through particularized historical events, the individual games' structures play with conceptions of and approaches to the construction of history.

The *Call of Duty* franchise, through its interactive representation of the Second World War, is emblematic of a contemporary form of historical remembrance. In its ability to interactively incorporate the player within the sensorial world of the game, the series allows players to explore the multivalence of warfare's historical presence and experience conflicting perceptions of the traumatic violence endemic to war itself. As both a cultural text and a suite of digital games, the *Call of Duty* series functions as what Marita Sturken (1997, p.44) has defined as a screen memory, "a contested form of remembrance in which cultural memories slide through and into each other, creating a narrative tangle." The franchise's interactive depiction of a traumatic national past opens the Second World War to considerations of history's constructed nature and the meaning of violence therein.

***Call of Duty* and the Layering of Historical Narrative**

Within the field of videogame studies, discussions of historical representation frequently note the post-structuralist potential of engaging historical narratives through interactive play. From this perspective, the interactive possibilities games provide have the potential to call into question fixed narrative histories that prescribe deterministic conceptions of the past. Allowing players to explore virtual representations of specific moments within the past destabilizes understandings of history that profess its unfolding as having the segmented status of an event with particular starting and ending points. Interacting with history virtually, in turn, allows players to reevaluate insulated, singular meanings associated with past occurrences.

As William Uricchio (2005, p.335) writes, "the hypertextual form [of games], with its shift in determination from the author to the reader, is ... capable of calling into question beginnings, endings, and everything in between." In other words, the potential intervention of the player in the unfolding historical narrative allows for a form of historical engagement absent in traditional, non-interactive narrative forms. To Uricchio (2005, p. 331), "the limits and inherent subjectivity of history as written tend to be bracketed off from discussion," producing "established explanatory master narratives" that structure historical reflection. It is these grand narratives of past events that digital games call into question. Uricchio (2005, p.336) states that historical digital games "offer a new means of reflecting upon the past, working through its possibilities, its alternatives, its 'might-have-beens,' [and therefore] seem [to] succeed where other forms of history have failed." However, while Uricchio celebrates the *potential* for interactive games to provide players and historians with

new modes of exploring and engaging the past, he cautions that such games nonetheless frequently emphasize totalizing conceptions of historical progression.

Uricchio's analysis of historical games foregrounds their prospective allowance for unprecedented explorations of history. While individual games restrict this exploratory potential through their design limitations and generic scope, they nonetheless provide players choices in terms of what actions they perform. As a result, players can apprehend how their individual actions influence both their progress through the game itself and the unfolding of history represented within. However, games may also divulge the complex nature of history through their structuring of individual levels. How these levels relate to the narratives established through cut scenes and the historical occurrence the game itself represents further complicates games' depictions of the past. Representing World War II through the layering of levels and cut scenes, the *Call of Duty* games simultaneously foreground not one historical narrative but several that intertwine with and reverberate off one another during the experience of game play.

Importantly, none of the *Call of Duty* games set during the Second World War attempt to represent the entirety of the war itself. Instead, they utilize the war's historical unfolding as a backdrop for the individual military conflicts they both represent and replay. Specifically, *Call of Duty: Finest Hour* (Spark Unlimited 2004) takes as its subject the Russian charge of Stalingrad, British campaigns in North Africa, and American tank battles in Belgium. *Call of Duty 2: Big Red One* (Treyarch 2005) focuses on the eponymous American infantry division and its combat thrust from Africa to Germany. *Call of Duty 3* (Treyarch 2006) allows the player to engage in the battle of Normandy in 1944. *Call of Duty: World at War* replays both the United States' push against Japan in the Pacific and the Red Army's battle towards Berlin on the Eastern Front. Indeed, the individual games in the *Call of Duty* franchise exist within a historical sub-genre Josh Smicker (2010, p.112) defines as "*re-enactment* games." Re-enactment games are those that attempt to "recreate and reproduce, as accurately as possible, specific wars, battles, armies and equipment," and pay "fastidious attention to artifactual and organizational detail" (ibid.). While the accuracy of such detail is debatable, the *Call of Duty* franchise emphatically proclaims the historical fidelity of its individual titles by referencing consultations with veterans and historians during the games' closing credit sequences. As opposed to allowing players to play through the entirety of World War II, each *Call of Duty* game positions its individualized digital recreation of the past as an accurate portrayal of a specific moment within a much broader historical time line.

And yet, while the individual games aim to represent—and allow the player to virtually experience—different military conflicts that only in sum begin to approach the totality of a war spanning six years and four continents, they also operate through a tripartite narrational layering of history that entwines contemporary conceptions of world history with the individual experience of game play. The result of this layering is the incorporation of the player not only within the interactive and sensorial world of the game itself, but also within a grand historical and nationalist narrative that exceeds the historical focus of the individual game titles. As a franchise that represents the Second World War, *Call of Duty* places the player within specific military conflicts while positioning play as relevant to the outcome of the war itself. This positioning is achieved through evocations of the war in its totality, the

embellishment of the importance of specific battles, and the play of the individual levels. Through this complex form of representation, the *Call of Duty* series establishes a multifaceted narrative that reveals diverse conceptions of how World War II may be understood historically.

Specifically, three separate layers of historical narrative coexist and intertwine during the campaign play of the World War II-era *Call of Duty* games. The outermost historical layer is that of the Second World War in its totality, an occurrence that is portrayed as a closed event only during the opening cinematics of the individual games. Specific invocations of World War II as a single, definable event occur primarily in brief moments of onscreen and voiceover narration. For example, when Sergeant Roebuck, voiced by Kiefer Sutherland in *World at War*, intones that the capturing of the airbase on the island of Makin Atol may allow “us” to “win this war,” his declaration both emphasizes a historical closure that the player is aware has already occurred and exemplifies the nationalist bent evident in the franchise.

Likewise, in the opening animation of *Call of Duty: Finest Hour*, American, British, and Russian soldiers appear engaged in battle during diverse scenes of military conflict, as words appear onscreen in the series' proprietary bold, stocky typeface: “They answered the call, ordinary soldiers who forged extraordinary bonds ... in the war that changed the world.” Such references to the overarching conflict as a closed event, albeit brief, provide an historical basis for the ensuing missions and incorporate the individual game's forthcoming play within a genuine past occurrence. This situating of World War II as a closed event establishes the presence of “real” history that is constantly referenced during the ensuing game play. Through such bombastic declarations of the Second World War's meaning—while war fundamentally “changes the world,” individual participants change as well, achieving the “extraordinary”—the *Call of Duty* games also position the War as both a globetrotting display of might and a personal journey of self-discovery. These cinematic openings foreground an understanding of Allied military force as both fundamentally heroic and tied to a Western individualist ethos within a closed history that exists distinctly in the past.

Such references to the Second World War, and its perceived production of both the United States' global militaristic dominance and an individualized self-awareness within US soldiers, corroborate what Smicker (2010, p.112) terms the “political and ideological unassailability” of World War II within cultural, national memory. According to Smicker, re-enactment games emphasize a jingoistic perspective that positions international war in terms of American militarist and national progress. The outermost historical layer of the *Call of Duty* narratives thus functions doubly, positioning the forthcoming game play within a closed global history while simultaneously working to evoke feelings of heroism and national pride toward the events encountered within that history.

The second narrative historical layer apparent in the *Call of Duty* series is produced within the cut scenes that partition game play. Such cut scenes simultaneously provide the player with a spatio-temporal localization for the coming military encounter, and a personalization of the conflict's stakes and meanings. While the cut scenes differ in the extreme from game to game, they nonetheless participate in bridging the historical, spatial, and perspectival gap between each game's

foundational grand narrative of war and the first-person, interactive, personalized experience of actual game play. In *Finest Hour*, for example, animated photographs of the characters whose narrative role the player will shortly occupy accompany voiceover narration through which these characters relate their desires and fears while retelling their own personal histories. In so doing, *Finest Hour* spatially and personally localizes the Second World War's unfolding, constructing fictional characters from distinct countries through whom the player will experience the game's representation of warfare.

While *Finest Hour* localizes the player through the construction of characters, *World at War* makes bold claims to the reality of the ensuing game play. In what are arguably the most graphically provocative cinematics contained within any of the *Call of Duty* titles, *World at War's* cut scenes offer an overwhelming barrage of dates, military statistics, mapped spatial referents, and archival footage of World War II. Each cut scene begins with a global map that displays statistics such as the number of soldiers involved in individual battles, the number of lives lost, and the rise of military production, all hovering above the mapped locations where these conflicts occurred. The statistics accompany rectangular windows that present grainy archival footage of the war, with arrows pointing to the locations where such footage was purportedly filmed. In sum, these graphical elements embellish the historical fidelity of the coming conflict's representation and foreground visually the game's attention to miniscule detail and proposed indexical realism. As play begins, the global map visually transitions to the location where the forthcoming battle will occur, while voiceover narration discloses the importance of this mission to the larger war effort and the individual characters within the player's military unit. Through highly divergent means but always in the brief temporal space of the cut scene, each *Call of Duty* game shuttles the player from the grand narrative of World War II to the individual narrative of personal player experience, buffering this transition through appeals to on-the-ground realism and individuated, personalized knowledge of wartime.

The player encounters the games' innermost historical layer during the play of the individual levels, where the ludic qualities essential to the game medium exist in the foreground. Rule-based interactivity structures progression through the levels themselves, and the historical revelations these levels contain (e.g., the visual presentation of the US infantry assault on an enemy airfield located on Peleliu Island) are activated only as the player spatially progresses through the game environs. Evident here is a unique form of narrative evocation specific to the videogame, one that is inherently unstable and dependent upon the individual player's specific and differentiated actions within the game world. As Henry Jenkins (2006, p.678) discusses, many videogames, including those that fall within the first-person shooter genre, evoke narration through the player's exploration of the game world, as players either "perform or witness narrative events" while traversing in-game environments. "Spatial stories," to Jenkins, are "pushed forward by the character's movement across the map," the game space of the individual level (ibid.). It is precisely through such spatial exploration that the innermost narrative layer of the *Call of Duty* games emerges and functions. As the player navigates the game space of the individual level, particular historical narrative events occur (e.g., the Battle of Stalingrad) concomitantly with the construction of a personal narrative of the player's individual experience negotiating the level.

Unlike the grand narrative of war or the localizing, bridging narrative of the cut scene, the narrative of historical progress during game play is presented from a first-person perspective, experienced through a realistic temporality, and participated with interactively. The player is meant to experience war as if he or she were participating on the front line of an actual military conflict. Of course, historical participation, due to the generic confines and expectations of the first-person shooter genre, is highly restricted, revolving specifically around the performance of physical violence and the anticipation of such performance. Though the player moves away from the fixed histories established through the viewing of cut scenes during game play, the exploratory play within the level itself is tightly regimented. Interaction, in the *Call of Duty* games, rarely exceeds moving, shooting, and exchanging weapons and ammunition. The narrative history revealed in the play of the individual levels is thus primarily a history of violence, of military engagement and the complexities of warfare subsumed into the act of aiming and firing. The game play provides the player with a narrative of spatial conquest, a play experience that corroborates both the grand narrative of war as violent territorial subjugation and the bridging cut scene narrative's discursive focus on spatial specificity. At the same time, the general unidirectional level progress parallels the linearity of traditional, determinist history, with the player always moving forward to a distinct space that draws the level to a close.

Though this analysis of the historical imperatives within the *Call of Duty* franchise appears resoundingly pessimistic, with history's unfolding reduced to singular acts of violence, there is historiographic value evident in the narrative layering emphasized in the individual games. The foundational grand narrative of World War II, the intermediary narrative of personal history and self-discovery evoked through cut scenes, and the violent narrative of play itself foreground an approach to historical representation that bears a distinct similarity to New Historicism. Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt (2000, p.54) describe New Historicism as the act of approaching an historical object as existing within a "tangle of crossing lines." When writing, relating, or representing history, the historian must consider a multitude of possible contextualizations, particularly when discussing the genesis, evolution, and influence of past occurrences. In the *Call of Duty* series, World War II is contextualized and conceptualized in triplicate. Through the narrative historical layering evident within the individual games, one is reminded that international warfare is always a highly personal experience.

However, the games' representation of personal experience during wartime is intentionally reductive, and conceived as a handful of violent actions performed continually and repeatedly. While the franchise demonstrates videogames' potential to both exceed singular histories and emphasize spatio-historical exploration that is decidedly personal, the individual narrative layers themselves stress a linearity that leaves little room for interpretation. No matter what actions are performed during game play, the foundational narrative history of World War II and the localized, personalized narratives of the games' cut scenes remain unchanged.

As a first-person shooter that intertwines multiple conceptions of history, the franchise's depiction of the Second World War comes into conflict with itself. The violence of war is construed as brutal and regrettable, yet the performance of violence is the only way to achieve in-game success. Personal histories of war's

participants are emphasized through the cut scenes' narrational exposition, yet the personalized actions of the player are tightly regimented. Rewriting the historical game of war as the *videogame* of war, the *Call of Duty* franchise simultaneously plays with and problematizes both totalizing nationalist histories and the personal experiences within such histories. As such, the series forcefully emphasizes the diverse approaches that exist in both the telling of, and the playing of, historical conflict.

***Call of Duty* and the Representation of Traumatic Violence**

As a collection of first-person shooter videogames engaged in the representation of historical warfare, the *Call of Duty* franchise bears a tenuous relationship to the traumatic violence associated with the Second World War. The series must simultaneously entertain the player through the performance of violence as its core ludic mechanic while also construing the regrettable nature of the necessity of such violence within history. As noted above, actual game play itself requires the player to enact violence continually, as the spatio-historical exploration offered requires the elimination of Japanese or German soldiers.

Violence, specifically the aiming and firing of the games' notoriously diverse array of weaponry, allows for both spatial progress within the individual levels, and the activation of the second-layer cut scenes that bridge personal player experience with the grand narrative of World War II. Put differently, the player's performance of violence propels both the player and the individual game toward a tripartite narrational closure. Through violent interaction, the player's completion of individual levels simultaneously brings closure to the game, the arc of character development tied to the winning of specific battles, and the war itself. Such a conception of wartime history is clearly reductive, foregrounding singular acts of violence as the sole catalyst of military victory and the impetus for historical progression.

Not all violence in the *Call of Duty* games is situated as progressive, however, on either a spatial or personal level. As the technical capabilities of the individual entries in the series have advanced over time, so too has the brutality of the physical violence represented. Enemies expire in a more realistic fashion in the latter games, crumpling to the ground differently depending upon which parts of their bodies have been shot. The overwhelming intensity of warfare has also increased, as players are able to call in thunderous rocket strikes on enemy outposts that create massive explosions experienced visually and aurally in *World at War*. In fact, the increasingly affective representation of violence is heralded in the very packaging within which the games are contained: while *Finest Hour's* box art invites the player to "Head to the frontlines of World War II's epic battles," *World at War* forewarns that players will "Experience the intensity and brutality of war like never before."

As *World at War's* first level opens with a scene of torture, in which infantrymen are burned with cigarettes and cut with knives, the game emphasizes through a transitional, second-layer cut scene that not all violence during warfare is of the point-and-shoot variety. While witnessing torture, player motion is notably impossible, though point-of-view movement is not. In this localizing cut scene that simultaneously allows and yet heavily restricts player interaction, the vicious brutality of torture halts

both immediate spatial progress and the historical unfolding such progress implies. Grotesque torture, and the limited interactivity provided players as it is enacted, problematizes interpretations of the series' violence as solely heroic. In *World at War*, the player's performance of violent actions to effect both militaristic domination and the "correct" progression of history is challenged by a representation of violence, performed by the game itself, that is utterly immobilizing. Importantly, this performance of torture annihilates the core mechanic of spatial movement that partially defines the first-person shooter as a genre.

This opening cut scene of Japanese soldiers torturing American infantrymen is echoed in a later cut scene that introduces the Red Army series of levels in *World at War*. As German soldiers brutally execute wounded Russians, the player, whose character is buried underneath the corpses of fallen comrades, is again unable to move spatially, yet is notably capable of manipulating the avatar's point of view. These scenes of torture and debasing, immoral violence, and the lack of spatial progress they allow, interactively exemplify Elaine Scarry's (1985) understanding of the physical and psychological effects of torture upon its victims. "Intense pain is world-destroying," Scarry (1985, p.29-30) writes, noting that the incredible physical pain associated with torture simultaneously results in the victim's perception of "an increasingly palpable body and an increasingly substanceless world." To the victim of torture, the surrounding spatial world is wholly obliterated, as the pain endured physically overwhelms perception in its entirety. The limits of the victim's body transform into the limits of the world itself.

In *World at War*, Scarry's understanding of torture's world-destroying effects is experienced through the cessation of the player's interactive mobile potential within the play space. While a surrounding world is clearly visually evident to the player, a world that through its design invites spatial exploration, such physical progression is impossible as scenes of torture and grotesque violence unfold. The inability to move coupled with the ability to visually perceive the world embellish the limits of the player-controlled character's body. As such, these moments of intense violence differ in the extreme from the normative point-and-shoot violence that structures the majority of game play.

Writing on the representation of both history and death in World War II digital games, Eva Kingsepp (2007) discusses the unique nature of mortality as it exists and is experienced in games such as those in the *Call of Duty* series. To Kingsepp (2007, p.371),

Death in this context differs quite a lot from the traditional idea. Death both is and is not the end: Your enemies pass away, but your own death is rather a temporary absence ... World War II digital games contain two types of death [that] might be called postmodern and ... carnivalesque; the latter being an attempt to capture a notion of death where accentuation of the corporeality of the event, highlighting the bloody, the gory, and the grotesque is crucial. [Postmodern death] is disappearance rather than extinction, a mode of death that is very remote and distanced.

In a genre that makes grand claims to historical accuracy and factual fidelity, the results of violence are treated in a fantastical, wholly unrealistic manner. When the player's character perishes, the player simply respawns at the site of death or, more

frequently, at a previous checkpoint spatially proximate. In contrast, the bodies of enemies, after being shot and falling to the ground, leave pools of blood and dismembered body parts in their wake. To Kingsepp, death in the historical first-person shooter is therefore either overly sanitized, with the player's death itself literally erased after it has occurred, or grotesque, in that the gory results of enacted violence frequently remain present long after the bodies of fallen enemies have evaporated.

In *World at War*, however, the enactment of gruesome violence in scenes of both torture and abject physical cruelty appear to unite the postmodern and carnivalesque representations of death Kingsepp discusses. While physical, spatial boundaries that normally allow the player's movement are now inverted, limiting locomotion utterly, the grotesque nature of violence is both embellished and visually unavoidable. The player's character is not at risk of perishing during these cut scenes, and is distanced from the violence through the inability to interact fully within the game space. However, the gruesome execution of fellow infantrymen and fallen comrades lingers, with the bloody nature of violence appearing uncharacteristically excessive in contrast to the normative violence that structures game play. Such moments of torture function as a unique occurrence within the game's construal of violent action. The grotesque, affective representation of torture—a representation that severely limits anticipated interactivity—embodies a construction of violent action within historical first-person shooters that problematizes easy interpretation.

As an historical text, *Call of Duty* foregrounds violence as a catalyst for historical progression and as a traumatic occurrence that utterly destroys the experience of the historical present. Much like the historiographic multiplicity evident in the franchise's narrational layering of history, the violence that the player either performs or witnesses within the games' unfolding is similarly multivalent. This diverse representation of violence is closely tied to the individual games' technical proficiencies, as latter games—particularly *Call of Duty: World at War*—allow for alternations in interactivity and a graphical fidelity that profoundly emphasize the physical effects of violence to both its perpetrators and its victims.

***Call of Duty* as Digital Screen Memory**

As a videogame series that provides its players with a layered, interactive structuring of a major historical war, and as media objects that proffer multiple readings on the meanings and effects of violence during wartime, the *Call of Duty* games operate as what Marita Sturken (1997) has discussed as screen memory. Focusing on the Vietnam War specifically and the public commemorations of the war's fallen soldiers that the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. epitomizes, Sturken (1997, p.44) writes, "the forms remembrance takes indicate the status of memory within a given culture. In acts of public commemoration, the shifting discourses of history, personal memory, and cultural memory converge." This convergence of history and memory produces multiple cultural meanings that come into conflict, resulting in "a narrative tangle" that resists straightforward encapsulation and definition. Sturken argues that the multiple meanings associated with such memorials have the ability to alter historical memory on both an individual and national level. As a screen, such memorials function simultaneously as "a surface that is projected upon [and] an

object that hides something from view” (ibid.), altering perceptions of history by emphasizing certain meanings over others. As a series of digital games, the *Call of Duty* franchise functions as a unique screen memory, disclosing a multiplicity of meaning concerning the Second World War and foregrounding the digitally mediated nature of historical perception in the twenty-first century.

Though first and foremost designed as an entertaining game, the *Call of Duty* series also positions itself as a memorial, as each historical entry in the franchise is dedicated to the veterans of the Second World War and those who died in combat. For example, as the ending credits of *World at War* appear onscreen, the game’s title is immediately followed by a dedication “to the veterans of World War II who sacrificed their lives for the preservation of liberty.” This dedication overtly heralds the heroism of individual soldiers, echoing the game’s narrative construction of warfare as both personal and heroic. Nonetheless, *World at War* problematizes glorified conceptions of warfare’s place within history during the game’s cut scenes by foregrounding the brutality and abject violence endemic to military conflict. In the *Call of Duty* series, war is simultaneously construed as being both heroic and harrowing, with moments of victory contrasted with gross physical abjection. Much like the memorials Sturken analyzes, the *Call of Duty* games actively negotiate differentiated interpretations of World War II’s meaning within the past.

These differing interpretations of the Second World War are most palpably evident in the individual game’s narrational layering of history, a literal narrative tangle that foregrounds three distinct approaches to the war’s historical presence. The Second World War may be understood as a distinct, closed event, as a series of specific conflicts, or as an individual experience. Of course, the war is all three of these perceptions combined, possessing multiple meanings that the franchise demonstrates through its construction of game narrative and game play. Even if the multiple layered histories operative within any specific *Call of Duty* videogame may, on their own, be understood as reductive and jingoistic, the design act of layering such histories blatantly exposes the multiple narratives present within the construction of history.

Though functioning as a screen memory due to the competing perspectives the franchise offers on history’s construction and warfare’s violence, it is essential to note that the games are also played upon a literal screen. To Sturken (1997, p.85), visual media such as film and television function as “a melding of historical fact and dramatic form” and “afford a means through which uncomfortable histories of traumatic events can be smoothed over, retold, and ascribed new meanings.” Over a decade after Sturken’s writing, the historical first-person shooter videogame allows for a form of interaction and historical experience that previous visual media forms do not. As a literal screen memory, the *Call of Duty* series is firmly situated alongside the visual media of film and television, contributing to a distinct lineage of historical, memorial functionality that reprocesses and replays the meanings of the national past. However, due specifically to the technology of the videogame, the *Call of Duty* games allow for a form of meaning-making, both by the game designer and the game player, that is unique within contemporary media. As a digital screen memory, the franchise positions the player as the producer of meaning and the catalyst for history’s unfolding. While players are certainly limited in this capacity, as each game severely restricts interaction and exploration through its rules and spatial boundaries,

the series nonetheless foregrounds the contemporary relation between digital interaction and historical interpretation evident in the mediated present.

The interactivity of the digital game importantly differentiates the *Call of Duty* series, and historical games in general, from the visual media forms that precede them. Sturken understands visual media, specifically the screen memories produced through the filmed docudrama, as working to bring closure to tumultuous historical events. The *Call of Duty* videogames, however, operate in a uniquely opposing fashion. Instead of providing closure to troubled historical memories and past national trauma, the games' historical first-person shooter components function to open up multiple histories, memories, and potent interpretations that structure the games' representations of the Second World War.

If “the forms remembrance takes indicate the status of memory within a given culture,” as Sturken (1997, p.44) argues, it is imperative to consider the implications of how the *Call of Duty* series functions as a digital screen memory within contemporary American, as well as global, culture and society. History, in a very real sense, has become a participatory enterprise; videogames are but one element of a growing digital media network that allows players and users to write and reconstruct history on their own terms, in ways that are personally meaningful and individually relevant. The presence of history in videogames such as those in the *Call of Duty* series, in terms of the national meanings they divulge, is undoubtedly a negotiation between the game designers' understanding of a profitable interpretation of the past and the player's own interaction with and reading of the history presented. Nonetheless, such digital screen memories herald a bold new mediated front in the discursive address of history and warfare's presence therein.

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Notes

- ¹ While this article focuses specifically on the *Call of Duty* franchise, numerous first-person shooters exist that represent historical warfare. The *Medal of Honor* (Dreamworks Interactive and EA Los Angeles) franchise, which includes eight individual games released for videogame console systems alone between 1999 and 2010, is another important and popular example of the historical first-person shooter. While both *Call of Duty* and *Medal of Honor* are popular multi-console, multimedia videogame franchises with numerous entries, stand-alone games also exist, such as *Hour of Victory* (N-Fusion Interactive), released in 2007 for the Xbox 360.
- ² I use the term “popular” intentionally. *Wolfenstein 3D*, which differs greatly from the *Call of Duty* games in terms of its technical proficiency, level design, and fantastical narrative, is commonly understood to have catalyzed the lucrative production and popular reception of first-person shooter videogames in the mid-1990s. It was closely followed by id Software’s release of *Doom* in 1993. Notable here is that this exceptionally popular game evades history entirely: *Doom* takes place in a dystopian future where a gateway to hell has been opened up on one of Mars’ moons, and the player must fight demons and monsters instead of Nazi soldiers. However, scholars such as Nina B. Huntemann and Matthew Thomas Payne (2010, p.5) are careful to note that 1980’s *Battlezone*, released on the Atari, though not a first-person shooter in terms of contemporary graphical fidelity or navigable spatial design, is “among the first first-person shooter games” to represent historical military conflict.
- ³ For a useful website that tracks sales of games in terms of genre, national distribution, and year of release, see The Video Game Sales Wiki at http://vgsales.wikia.com/wiki/Video_Game_Sales_Wiki. Specific videogame sales figures for 2008 were culled from http://vgsales.wikia.com/wiki/2008_in_video_games and the Year in Review articles available at Joystiq.com, e.g. <http://www.joystiq.com/2009/02/02/top-5-selling-games-in-2008-across-global-markets/>
- ⁴ The major entries in the franchise include *Call of Duty*, released for Microsoft Windows in 2003; *Call of Duty: Finest Hour*, released for the Xbox, PlayStation 2 and Nintendo GameCube in 2004; *Call of Duty 2*, released for the Xbox 360, Microsoft Windows and Macintosh in 2005; *Call of Duty 2: Big Red One*, released for the Xbox, PlayStation 2 and Nintendo GameCube in 2005; *Call of Duty 3*, released for the Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, and Nintendo Wii in 2006; *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, released for Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Nintendo Wii and Microsoft Windows in 2007 and for Macintosh in 2008; *Call of Duty: World at War*, released for the Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Nintendo Wii and Microsoft Windows in 2008; and, most recently, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, released for the Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, and Microsoft Windows in 2009. Numerous handheld and cellular ports also exist.
- ⁵ *Call of Duty: World at War* sold 5.89 million units worldwide in 2008, coming in behind *Super Smash Bros Brawl* (6.32 million units), *Grand Theft Auto IV* (7.29 million units), the *Wii Fit* (8.31 million units), and *Mario Kart Wii* (8.94 million

units). Notably, as opposed to the other four bestsellers, *Call of Duty: World at War* was not retailed in Japan. See Alexander Sliwinski's "Top 5 selling games in 2008 across global markets," available at <http://www.joystiq.com/2009/02/02/top-5-selling-games-in-2008-across-global-markets/>, for more information.