We The Soldiers: Player Complicity and Ethical Gameplay in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*

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Introduction

Who would have expected a multimillion-dollar, mainstream blockbuster videogame, to be *serious*? When the newest iteration of the *Call of Duty* series was announced in 2007, the prospect of a high budget game about "modern warfare" was not very promising. In fact, I feared just another example of excellent action gameplay wrapped in a pseudopropagandistic narrative glamourizing modern warfare.

Surprinsingly enough, I was wrong. *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* did fetishize the military, but it also delivered a carefully crafted narrative that questioned "modern warfare". Don't get me wrong: *Modern Warfare* is a militaristic shooter, an adrenaline rush that combines outstandingly crafted action gameplay with a semi-realistic depiction of weapons, tactics, and military lingo. But it is also a narrative-driven game that proposes a different discourse about warfare. This narrative was not presented as conventional cutscenes, but as authored sequences with limited player agency. The careful combination of limited agency with authored narrative made *Modern Warfare* stand out as a popular, yet thoughtful militaristic videogame.

Modern Warfare's economic and creative success led inevitably to a sequel, a title that pushed the techniques pioneered in *Modern Warfare*. However, it pushed too far, and one of its central gameplay sequences became an example of militaristic shooters gone wrong. The infamous level No Russian created controversy, but failed to generate the same kind of thoughtful interpretations the previous game encouraged. Still a great computer game in terms of its gameplay design, *Modern Warfare 2* failed at the creation of nuanced emotional experiences for players.

Military first person shooters are as popular a product as they are criticized for being vehicles for propagandistic discourses. Most of these critiques are right. Many of these games are propaganda devices that promote epic stories of conventional heroism. These games do not question the origins, context, or role of politics in wars,

trivializing war by turning it into a visual rollercoaster wrapping basic cops and robbers gameplay. Videogames can be excellent instruments for propaganda because we can decouple the pleasures of the core loops (shoot-hid-reload-shoot) from the fictional context used to communicate these loops (war in the Middle East). The fictional element of the game attracts us, but the core loops engage us. Then, we stop seeing the fiction and its messages as rhetorical acts, but justifications for our actions.

In this chapter I will analyze how *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* and *Modern Warfare 2* tried to create an emotional/reflective bond with the player, and why the latter is a failure. I will be looking specifically at how the authored narratives, despite having similar structures, create opposite interpretations, and how we can systematize these interpretations to better understand the design of militaristic computer games that can engage players in thoughtful experiences.

The chapter argues that these two games share a particular design approach to narratives, which I will define as authored agency. In certain sequences of the game, the player agency is limited, with boundaries delimited by an authored narrative. By constraining player agency in meaningful ways, developers can provide particular interpretational frameworks that can lead to different modalities of thoughtful engagement in players.

Authored agency was used to create a frame of interpretation arguably intended to engage players morally. I defining this frame of interpretation as player complicity, understanding complicity as a mode of engaging in ethical interpretation of the experience of play.

Finally, I will define a particular mode of ethical interpretation of that experience, using virtue ethics and my own theory of ethical gameplay[i] to explain why *Modern Warfare* succeeds at creating player complicity through authored agency, while *Modern Warfare 2* fails at doing so, despite the use of similar techniques.

The challenge in modern militaristic computer games relies on the need to balance the pleasures of *agon*, or competitive, conflict-based play experiences, with a more paused, reflective gameplay style that opens the experience for moral reflection. The type of gameplay experiences that military first person shooters can create need not be beyond the domain of morality; it can be precisely anchored in a moral discourse that provides more fulfilling conflict-based play experiences without loosing their emotional, aesthetic appeal.

I believe that if we are able to articulate alternative, richer ways of designing and interpreting militaristic computer games, if we dare to address our unethical war times from a reflective entertainment perspective, we will be able to not only reach a broader audience and perhaps contribute to change their worldview, but also to enrich the cultural presence of games, their role in explaining the world around us. We can make even militaristic computer games devices for moral reflections, if we dare to engage players in reflective practices of gameplay.

Two Instances of Complicit Play

Modern Warfare does not hide its cards. A game about war, developed in the period of the Irak war, it sets its stage from the very beginning. We are in the Middle East. The game begins with our character being captive of some kind of victorious irregular army. The game starts with our first person avatar being thrown into a car and driven across a city. We can move our heads, observe. Something will soon happen, we hope. We will be saved, or we will soon have control and the means to protect ourselves. But nothing happens; we just cross the city until we reach a stadium. We are dragged to a pole, bound, and shot. We die.

The starting sequence in *Modern Warfare* is a reinvention of the narrative introduction that *Half Life* introduced as a novelty: a narrative introduction with limited agency helps recognize environments, get used to basic movement controls, and the setting of the game. However, in a clever twist of the game design paradigm, *Modern Warfare* does not give us agency over a hero, but over a victim. We play the dead, in this game of war.

Modern Warfare 2 proposes a different experience. The No Russian sequence begins with our avatar, and two other characters, loading our weapons and putting masks on while going up on an elevator. One last warning before the doors open: do not speak russian. Once the doors open, we can see our target: the civilian users of an airport. We walk through the terminal, gunning them down. We can only shoot civilians - our weapons are ineffective against our murderous colleagues. Of course, that is because we are an agent infiltrated in a terrorist cell and we don’t want to blow

our cover. We need to walk through the horror, the chaos, the massive murdering of civilians. The sequence then turns into a firefight with the police, after which our terrorist partners, who knew all along about our actual identity, execute us.

No Russian has a similar structure to those scripted sequences in the first title: players are given a relative amount of agency that is not related to the control they have over the flow of events. Players can witness the massacre or participate in it, but not stop it.

These types of limited agency sequences have become a hallmark of the *Call of Duty* series. By modifying player agency and its meaning, the designers of *Modern Warfare* could experiment with the degree of emotional involvement of players in the game, giving them reasons to think about the meaning of their actions. Instead of streamlining a rollercoaster of action sequences, the first *Modern Warfare* game gave players reflective pauses to engage with the narrative domain of the game. In *Modern Warfare*, these sequences end up in death, because that's where their draw their dramatic power from: limited agency that leads to death.

It is a convention in computer games that players should be empowered to act and do within the gameworld whatever they need to do in order to win. To design games is to design activities that players engage with and that pose sufficient challenge so we can lose, but that can be won by learning new skills. All actions available to players should have a meaning towards the completion of goals, towards overcoming challenges.

This classic game design wisdom is challenged in these sequences in which players are only given ancillary control over the game. We can look around, and move, only to witness the unfolding of critical sequences of the narrative. In these sequences the purpose is to slow down the pace of the action so we can reflect, think, and be affected. These sequences break the rhythm of gameplay, the cybernetic loop between input, feedback and output.

These sequences' design share some principles:

Agency is restricted to movement and vision: all the player can do is move around, often at a slower pace than usual, and look at the environment. Interaction with the environment is not possible.

Short duration: the sequences are short to avoid player frustration.

Narrative dimension: all sequences have a meaning in the plot of the game,

usually giving rise to one of the major plots in the narrative.

Character-based: all these sequences require identification with a character, either elaborated through time or presented via previous non-interactive narratives.

In terms of gameplay design, understood as the design of the flow of action, processing and feedback to the player, these sequences remove the capacity for the player to produce input, yet they still operate within known patterns of interactive narrative development; that is, the plot moves forward, even though the player is not moving it. There has been an input to the plot that moves the narrative forward, but that input is not provided by the player.

These sequences present an *authored narrative* to the player. These sequences open the possibility for a particular interpretation of the game narrative by forcing players to a limited interactive spectatorship position. The player becomes an NPC, forced to observe the development of the world in motion.

I shall call these design devices instances of authored agency. Authored, in the sense that the constraints to player agency have a clear intention, closely tied both to the narrative of the game and to an intended experience. The use of authored here does not necessarily reflect on the presence of a designer as author. Authored here refers to a conscious limitation of the interpretations that can be assigned to a particular sequence.

As I have already mentioned, in these sequences player agency is limited in relevant ways, often to just movement. Besides the narrative elements, this is where we can see the authorial imprint that seeks for a particular interpetative mode: by limiting the agency capacities of players, the interpretive process is directed towards specific meanings. In No Russian we can only walk, not run. We are forced to have the agency of witnesses, or. In the opening sequence of *Modern Warfare*, our agency as players is as restrained as that of the character we are playing. And we are, therefore, as helpless as he is

I propose to use the concept of authored agency to describe those gameplay situations in which player agency is restricted for expressive purposes - to create frames of interpretation and emotional experiences directed from an authorial presence in the game. The developers of *Modern Warfare* applied authorial agency in order to to engage players in emotional experiences. The resulting reflective play practice I will define as player complicity.

Complicity, War, Play

Playing No Russian is a voluntary act. It can also easily become a very discomforting experience. Arguably, however, the goal was not to promote violence, but perhaps the opposite: No Russian can be read as a critique of the very concept of (secret) wars and heroic sacrifice, an interpretation suggested by its authored agency.

I will classify these experiences under the concept of player complicity. Player complicity is an interpretational and experiential gestalt created when players are forced to submit to an authored agency sequence. Its purpose is to engage players as reflective beings, teasing out an ethical interpretation of the experience of the game. Player complicity is a device for player moral and emotional engagement. The success or failure of authored agency should be measured in the success in creating player complicity.

Player complicity implies engaging with a game that has its own values, and negotiating ways in which we can accept them within our own moral system. Player morality is negotiated in the wiggle space between the ethics inscribed in the game as an object, the ethics in practice of the game as an experience, and the player as a moral, embodied being with a history and values of her own.

A Moral Experience of Played War

Before analyzing these *Modern Warfare* and *Modern Warfare 2's* authored agency from an ethical perspective, we need to frame what do we mean by ethics and what the relation with gameplay is. To do so, I will quickly summarize here my own theory of ethics and games.

The first important distinction I will make here is that between ethics and morality. To put it short, morality is a public system that defines how we should behave with ourselves, with others, and what are our notions of good and bad, the desirable and the undesirable. Morality is based on a general set of heuristics that can derive either from religion, the law, or philosophy. The branch of philosophy that asks questions about the nature of good and bad, and that develops heuristics that are then turned into moral practices, is ethics. Colloquially put, ethics is theory, morality is practice.

When analyzing games, we need to take our starting point in the ethical basis of players and the game. All players come to the game with an assemblage of different ethical systems that govern different instances of their lives. The actions they take in the game, their specific moral understanding of it, is partially derived from those ethical assemblages. However, it is only partially derived from it because games have ethical systems inscribed in them - sometimes consciously, as part of the design of a gameplay experience. When we talk about the morality of a game we should be referring to the way the act of playing that game by a moral agent configures those ethical inscriptions into particular moral discourses.

If we want to look at the ethics of computer games, then, we should look at the ways the ethics of a game and the ethics of players result into the morality of the gameplay experience, understood as the specific, phenomenological interpretation of a game by a particular individual or group of individuals. I am taking here what ethicists might call a constructivist approach - there are no *a prioris* in the morality of the gameplay experience: the experience itself is configured as a moral experience, constructing the morality of the game(play) experience as we play it. That is, we cannot say that a game is ethically wrong, but we can say that the experience of a game by a moral agent is wrong.

My approach to the ethics of games is a hermeneutic one: players approach a game with their ethics, and interpret the ethics of the game from that perspective, being the moral experience a result of that process of interpretation. This hermeneutic process is filtered through the values of the player outside of the game experience. It is not only the game we play and our ethics as players that define the moral gameplay experience, it is also who we are as moral subjects that engage with a game.

Any ethical analysis of a game, then, needs to define the ethics of players and the game before making any analysis. And to define those ethics, we use classic philosophical theories. In my case, I am mostly a virtue ethicist, in the classic tradition of Aristotle, and deeply influenced by Brey and Verbeek's philosophy of technology. I argue that ethics can be seen as a constellation of values that we want to live by, all guiding towards developing and fulfilling the best of our potential while respecting others and their well-being. In the case of games, my argument is that when we play games, we interpret the values of a game through our own values as players and embodied beings, and we develop the practices of play, the actual

morality of gameplay, by developing a sense of who we want to be as players, and what values do we want to foster in that experience.

From this perspective, let's look at the types of experiences that *Modern Warfare* proposes, and how they can create ethical gameplay experiences.

In *Modern Warfare,* authored agency because it breaks the pleasures of agonistic play, of skill-based combat gameplay, in order to make us, players, take a step back and reason about our own agency in the game. Instead of overpowering us, authored agency disempowers us, yer we are not mere spectators. We participate, we are reminded of our actions as complicit with the narrative of the game. Authored agency creates complicity, and complicity develops a critical view on the narrative and the actions of the game. This critical view allows designers to address complex topics, and to engage players beyond the consumer role into that of the critical interpreter, who has more at stake on the experience of the game than just playing it.

Therefore, I argue that the first *Modern Warfare* constructs a fictional world in which players are not superhuman soldiers, but human warriors, heroic but not invulnerable to combat. Unlike many other games, *Modern Warfare* makes players realize that their actions take place in a larger context, that they are vulnerable to the brutality of war.

This critical view is closely tied to the sequences with authored agency. These are sequences focused on the aftermath of the actions we take, happening on the margins of the main narrative. We are not direct participants in the major events that drive the plot - our position in the narrative is that of pawns that trigger the story. That position makes us complicit with the story. And by being complicit, we players can reflect about the meaning of the game, both as an experience and as a cultural artifact situated in a particular sociocultural time. Complicity challenges us to be reflective, moral beings.

The failure of No Russian is a failure of complicity. Complicity is not used as a way of taking distance from the narrative. Instead of locating the authored agency sequence in the fringes of the narrative, No Russian puts us directly in the action. No Russian is ambitious – it aspires to create complicity with the actions themselves: distance players from the narrative and give them instruments to reflect about it through their actions. Hence, players need to participate in the terrible actions that lead to the main narrative of the game. Being participants should theoretically lead to

a more intricate development of moral complicity, but it does not.

And it doesn't because in order to develop a critical understanding of the game, player agency needs to be closely tied both to the narrative and to the player autonomy to interpret this narrative. In No Russian, player autonomy is very limited, yet the actions are very central to the narrative development of the game. We are tasked to be passive observers in a situation in which there are few reasons to justify that passivity. Our character is of course framed as an undercover agent, but even in that case, as players that construct our moral values by playing the game, we need to be able to play by them.

In No Russian there is a dissonance between the requirements of the scene as authored agency, and the way moral values at play are developed. We are forced to be spectators on a sequence that demands action - particularly if we want to build our moral being as a player. We are not allowed to create our values if we want to stop the assassination. No matter what, we observe, and that position is a gimmick, a trick of authored agency. Complicity in No Russian fails because we are placed in an uncomfortable middle ground that does not help develop a critical understanding of the game actions. No Russian does not lead to reflective engagement with the narrative of the game, and therefore it does not give us sufficient interpretational cues to read it as a moral experience.

Authored agency can create complicity that opens a game for interpretation, for the creation of a moral hermeneutics of the game. But for that moral hermeneutic to take place, we need to create a wiggling space, an opening in the authored agency that allows us to reflect. If that space for reflection is occupied by direct action, like in No Russian, complicity will fail.

The success of *Modern Warfare* in creating complicity through authored agency, and the failure of No Russian, can be seen as a way of understanding the cultural role of military computer games, and how these can be seen as expressions in the intersection of propaganda and entertainment. If we want to do moral readings of military games, we can observe how they fail to create player complicity with the worlds they create, and how that failure is both a requirement of complicity and a failure of engaging with the expressive moral possibilities of the medium,

We Were Soldiers

In this chapter I have argued that there is a way of vindicating military computer games as devices for reflection, and that some franchises, despite their partial glorification of military conflict, have created experiences that are opened for more nuanced interpretations. Don't get me wrong - I still find it troublesoume for games as a medium that they are somewhat defined by military games, particularly in times of immoral wars. However, I am also happy that some developers tried to push the expressive agenda of the genre and the medium, within the constraints of AAA productions in the traditional publisher-studio environment.

I have argued here that player complicity can be an instrument to designed moralized military game experiences. If developers treat their players as moral agents, and if they give them the spaces to act or reflect upon their actions from a moral perspective, then we will be fulfilling some of the promises of the medium.

Player complicity needs not be a consequence of authored agency. A game like *Spec Ops: The Line* offers a variety of design methodologies to engage players in this kind of experience, from manipulating their agency to breaking the fourth wall. The key is to acknowledge that to interpret these games as moral products that can play a role in the configuration of our discourses and understanding of our world, we need the players' complicity. And this complicity can be a consequence of deliberate design choices.

Military games will always be popular, because they appeal to our core interest in agonistic play, and because war has a strong cultural, social, and rhetoric effect in our culture. However, not all games need to be propagandistic tools. We can reclaim military games as reflective devices, as instruments for critically engaging with the importance and effect of war, and its consequences. These games might not teach us lessons, but they could give us arguments, ideas, or emotions to deal with the impact of war. We will not lose battles playing these games, but we can, to the extent we demand them to be expressive, win culture wars.

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