Art, Aggression, and Firearms

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This paper intends to illustrate how all modern media are advertisements and how these ads within art can act as time capsules for the timeframe 2007 to 2024. For example, the relationship between male gamers young and old, how masculinity is advertised in a post-feminist world, and how that shapes the politics and behavior of a generation of impressionable teens and young men.

The game Call of Duty 4 (CoD4) is a first-person shooter, released in the year 2007 and its cultural impact was meteoric. It established the Call of Duty series as one of the most successful gaming franchises (Bartkowiak & Sullivan, 2022). There is a single player campaign in CoD4 with the story jumping between two protagonists, one a member of the British Special Air Service (SAS) and one a United States Marine. The plot moves between a Russia on the brink of civil war and an American invasion of an unnamed country in the "middle east" that stands in for the invasion of Iraq. CoD4 led to multiple controversies at the time, one a lawsuit from the company that manufactures Humvees for their depiction within the game, and the second was a mission that puts players in the gunner seat of an AC-130 gunship that was based off real world combat footage and used voice actors to recreate recorded audio from real life crews. The game was lambasted as military propaganda, but its creators claimed it was apolitical (Bartkowiak & Sullivan, 2022). Regardless of the creators intent, making such a realistic recreation of gun camera footage for use inside their video game can lead to desensitization within its audience when they view footage similar to the in game mission.

However, its continued popularity is due to the online multiplayer feature. Players would play as either United States or European armed forces versus Russian armed forces, or a fictional

stand in for Al-Qaeda (Payne, 2016). While the factions are known, the characters are unknown to the player controlling them until they are killed and viewing the kill cam of the person who eliminated them. Players, especially younger ones, may assume the identity of their faceless avatar. They strive to eliminate enemies, achieve killstreaks, unlock rewards, and earn the right to trash talk players in the lobby. All the aforementioned input could lead to a lasting addiction that sharpens bad behavior (Gelūnas, 2023). It is not uncommon to act hostile to people, not in their friend group or not on their team normalizing anti-social behavior as part of the game. Hours of hostility between young and older male players leads to stunting emotional development, normalization of acting rudely to other people, and glorifying violence as a way to solve conflict (Gelūnas, 2023). The long-term ramifications for men who only know how to socialize through antagonistic relationships could lead to issues with maintaining friendships or having a healthy response to rejection.

Call of Duty 4 caused a massive shift in the gaming industry, leading to a rush of copycat games seeking to capitalize on its success. The creators of competing games would also claim their games did not involve politics or take any hard stances despite the use of real countries, conflicts, and in some cases politicians (Payne, 2016). CoD4 notably featured the true names of many firearms, military equipment, and vehicles. Favorite loadouts would develop among players based on its damage output, accuracy, and recoil (or lack thereof). This would lead to players identifying certain firearms as their favorite but whether it would lead to them buying those guns in real life is hard to quantify.

In 2009 the sequel to CoD4 came out, Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2. It featured a lot of returning and new firearms (Tsogo, 2022). The most notable was the ACR. In its single player campaign a main character, who became a fan favorite, used it in every mission. In multiplayer it

became known as the best primary weapon a player could use. What players did not know at the time was that the ACR was designed to be popular as part of a guerilla advertising partnership between Activision and Remmington (Sinclair, 2023). This advertising deal was only disclosed because of a lawsuit put forth by the parents of children killed in the Sandy Hook elementary school shooting in 2012. Remmington saw the popularity of videogames like the Call of Duty franchise as a tool to reach a younger demographic in an increasingly urbanized country with diminishing gun range access (Lanes, 2020). While the ACR did become extremely popular in-game, it failed to be a major seller in real life. The ACR production was discontinued in 2010 due to lack of commercial success and faulty design that led to a malfunction causing it to fire more than one bullet per trigger pull (Johnson, 2013). Remmington and Activision's partnership to advertise firearms to children, though a failure was still dangerous, because it sets the ground for similar partnerships in the future.

Despite the deal to advertise the ACR failing, it is still important as an example of how firearms and video games are an important part of the male players' masculinity. For someone insecure about real life characteristics, their performance in a video game like Call of Duty could reaffirm their gender identity through the violent domination of opponents who are likewise seeking the same affirmation through the video game (Malik et al., 2024). Due to their insecurities and the identities, they find within video games, any threats of censorship, or negative perceptions about the medium leads to them feeling as if their own identity was attacked or they themselves are being oppressed. That this leads to disproportionate reactions at the idea of a decrease in what they think their representation is.

Video games can have a greater impact on their players than other artforms on respective their patrons. This is due to video games being an interactive medium, to fully consume the art

players must act for their on-screen avatars (Malik et al., 2024). When a player becomes immersed in a video game, they take on the identity of the character they are playing as. However broadly speaking media specifically targeting men throughout the United States history is one of the best ways to determine the cultural norms of masculinity at the time. Ads in the 1950s to videogames in the first two decades of the 20th century can tell us a lot of how males want to be perceived and what spaces they value. Around the early 2000s there started to be a shift in how ads tried to reach male audiences (Bridges & Barber, 2017). They chose to satirize traditional signifiers of masculinity, they accomplished this by using heavily muscled, stereotypically tough guy actors to sell items that are usually targeted to women like Greek Yogurt (Bridges & Barber, 2017). The satire of traditional masculinity delivers a subconscious message to men that suggests their presentation of masculinity is wrong.

As women gain more equality with men and access to venues that were previously male dominated throughout society (Barber & Bridges, 2017); masculinity convulses in crisis. One of the most reactive male populations comes out of video gaming culture, its largely white male audience reacts viscerally as more games drift away from focusing on white, cis, male protagonists (Gelūnas, 2022). Male gamers now in their early 30s and 40s now reminisce on their younger days playing in toxics lobbies of Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, and Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 (CoD:MW2) where hateful language, slurs, and violent threats were thrown around liberally. They joke that younger gamers are not as tough because of all the safety measures and moderation put into modern online videogames (CaptainMKG, 2020). Nostalgia is a funny emotion; through it people might remember only the good aspects of a time in their lives. The players who now lament the changes in gaming to prevent bullying, hostility, and offensive forget how upsetting it was for them to be on the receiving end when they were younger.

This form of art creates a positive feedback loop younger male players are drawn into violent video games that can be so fast paced they experience adrenaline rushes, coupled with encountering older male players who speak with hostility to other players whether they are friend or foe. Reinforcing a patriarchal society that harms males, as older male gamers influence younger males and reinforce the worst anti-social behaviors that are then carried into the real world as shouting, outburst of anger, and racist actions (Malik et al., 2024). Younger players modeling their behavior through interactions within the video games they play will continue to have long term ramifications as they reach adulthood and carry the behaviors offline.

In other forms of media, male teens whose views are being shaped by online interactions would log off to find a world that validates the toxic culture online, including sexism, racism, and homophobia. In advertisements for fast food, soap, cars, cologne, and website creation, women are objectified which reinforces the sexism that can be heard all over online video game lobbies. Kristen Barber and Tristan Bridges (2017) discuss how brands use men who are seen as powerful within the framework of traditional masculinity to advertise items that are normally seen as feminine. While in movies the Pentagon stepped up their involvement in movies like the Transformers series. The year 2007 was a pivotal time in the Global War on Terror (GWOT); the United States deployed more troops into Iraq as American citizenry continued to grow more dissatisfied with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The first Transformers was also released in 2007, with its budget heavily bolstered by Pentagon involvement loaning them personnel, equipment, and vehicles as they saw the movie's great marketing potential.

In the political space was a presidential election where racist views received a mainstream boost as many white Americans voiced negative views on the black presidential candidate Barrack Obama (Joseph, 2016). Radio shows, cable news, and newspapers questioned

Obama's qualifications, place of birth, attributed racist black stereotypes to him, or questioned if he qualified as black at all since he was of mixed descent. Political cartoonists would draw President Obama with enlarged lips, ears, and nose mimicking racist drawings 19th and 20th century of black people. The First Lady Michelle Obama's femininity was in question regularly (LaMagdeleine, 2023). Commentators would joke about how muscular she was, criticize her fashion, or say she was a man who received a sex change operation. The racism she faced intersected with hate against the LGTBIA+ community.

Marriage equality was still eight years out, and hate crimes increased against LGBTQIA+ people by 24% (Staff, 2008). Brands started to become a signal of support or opposition for gay marriage. Target was boycotted in 2010 when it was discovered that they had donated to a Minnesota politician who opposed gay marriage (Cummings, 2010). The same thing happened with Chick-Fil-a in 2012, boycotts and counter boycotts (Aarthun, 2012). Christians to this day identify with Chick-Fil-a. Where people shopped, where people ate, and how people acted became homophobic stances. Men who showed too much care for their grooming and fashion were considered gay.

Videogames distinguish themselves from other mediums through their interactive nature. The player controls the avatar and what they do in game. The pace is set by the speed through which the player moves through levels, missions, or areas within the game. In certain games the player can even control the outcome of the narrative through their actions. In games with morality systems non-Player Characters (NPCs) react differently to Player Characters (PCs) based on their actions throughout the game forcing the player to face consequences for bad actions, sometimes even increasing the difficulty of the game itself (Malik et al., 2024). But that still falls short when even a well-crafted nuanced story still must create spectacle of the same

violence it is attempting to criticize. This leaves players addicted to the dopamine rush that the fictional violence provides them.

The Call of Duty franchise is thoughtfully designed to be as addictive and stimulating as possible. The pace of multiplayer has been increasingly sped up in every successive game since CoD4, for nearly two decades players have bought and continued playing a game that had very little changes in its games except for shrinking map sizes, increasing movement speed, reducing match lengths and time to kill (Gelūnas, 2022). Fast aggressive play is encouraged to the point where it becomes the only viable strategy within the game. In a way the reduction of game strategy to just rushing towards the other team and decreasing the amount of time between action and possible dopamine reward should have been a warning about the dangers of shortform videos on social media that encourages constant scrolling with no space to take in information before the next video.

While Call of Duty and the creative team behind it can claim it is apolitical or a work of fiction (Bartkowiak & Sullivan, 2022), it remains a mirror. In 2019 there was a reboot of Call of Duty Modern Warfare, in the updated version players find themselves in the role of a CIA paramilitary officer assisting fictional stand ins for Kurdish freedom fighters fighting a war of independence against Russian forces and a fictional stand in for ISIS (Romano, 2019). Reflecting real world events at the time of the game's development as Kurdish forces in Syrian fought the Assad government and Russian mercenaries hired by the regime. The game also features an attack on an embassy taking inspiration from the attack on the United States embassy in Benghazi Libya.

Sabine Doran (2013) communicates to the reader how yellow was used to stigmatize people who did not conform with society's norms at the time. One such way is her discussion of

the fear of Asian people or the Yellow Peril in the late 19th to mid-20th century (Doran, 2013). Through all forms of media stories, cartoons, and sensationalized news stories were used to drum up fear against people who were at once seen as a threat to western society, yet an inferior race predisposed to be subjugated. Call of Duty is the legacy of the Yellow Peril, it is the continuation of art being used to manufacture consent against a people that are to be viewed as a dangerous enemy, yet technologically inferior. Players are conditioned to see themselves as capable warriors equipped with the latest technology that can help them overcome numerical odds and play off the idea that Western armed forces fight at a disadvantage because the follow restrictive laws that makes them good guys, while their enemies are savage monsters who follow no rules and use any means to inflict death and destruction.

Ultimately art is never apolitical, especially when art takes inspiration from real world violence and turns it into entertainment to be consumed by people who can live in a world ignorant of the fear of real-life violence. Whether young or old, boys and men who consume this form of vapid violence designed to trap them for hours, are left with nothing to show for it except for an addiction that is no different from any other. They will continue to seek stronger forms in the hope they will recapture the satisfaction they once felt when they first started playing video games, before their neuron receptors were fried by constant dopamine hits. This addiction also ties into male aggression and struggle with socialization depending on the type of behaviors encouraged by the video game. It is difficult to imagine solving any of the problems presented within this paper. Male aggression is born of more than just video games, but it is a result of how men model themselves in real life to young children. This impact larger political feelings on things like firearm regulation, which would need much greater political will within the United States of America to change. But the United States is a country born from violence

that has enshrined the right to gun ownership. All these problems are interconnected, and it is

important to see the effects certain media can have on a specific population.

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