

CONTROL AND THE CONTROLLER: NARRATIVES OF IMPERIALISM AND EMPIRE IN MODERN MILITARY SHOOTERS

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Joseph Conrad touched a nerve with the publication of *Heart of Darkness*. Both in *Heart of Darkness* and his later works, Conrad created what could be described as an imperialist adventure narrative, with an imperial protagonist realizing the end result of the imperial apparatus through a series of brutal adventures. One of these adventures, *Nostromo*, provides Edward Said ample ammunition for a criticism of the genre. In his book, *Culture and Imperialism*, Said describes Conrad as one of a school of writers “whose specialty is to deliver the non-European world either for analysis and judgment or for satisfying the exotic tastes of European and North American audiences” (xviii). Of *Nostromo* itself, Said is equally critical, saying that “Conrad’s novel embodies the same paternalistic arrogance of imperialism that it mocks in characters like Gould and Holroyd. Conrad seems to be saying “We Westerners will decide who is a good native or a bad, because all natives have sufficient existence by virtue of our recognition” (xviii). Said continues his critique of Conrad, stating that he is “both anti-imperialist and imperialist, progressive when it came to rendering fearlessly and pessimistically the self-confirming, self-deluding corruption of overseas domination, deeply reactionary when it came to conceding that Africa or South America could ever have had an

independent history or culture” (xviii). Said is willing to let Conrad off the hook, arguing that the greater problem exists in Conrad’s successors, such as Francis Ford Coppola and Constantin Costa-Gavras, noting that “these works, which are so indebted to Conrad’s anti-imperialist irony in *Nostromo*, argue that the source of the world’s significant action and life is in the West,” continuing on to say that “whereas Conrad wrote *Nostromo* during a period of Europe’s largely uncontested imperialist enthusiasm, contemporary novelists and filmmakers who have learned his ironies so well have done their work after decolonization” (Said xix). While Said’s criticism seems valid, Said is somewhat shortsighted on this final point. Though contesting that the contemporary moment should somehow be more aware of the tools and mechanisms of imperialism, Said’s criticism is incomplete because Said himself is not fully aware of the extent of the modern idea of Empire.

In 2000, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri released their own examination of the machinations of imperialism in *Empire*. Unlike Said, who would forward the idea that imperialism is receding, if not already a thing of the past, Hardt and Negri in their seminal work *Empire* conceive of a transmutation in the form of imperialism, changing into Empire. Empire, as Hardt and Negri conceive it, is a regime dedicated to

peace with neither temporal or spatial boundaries. Most importantly to Hardt and Negri, the Hardt and Negri Empire “not only manages a territory and a population, but also creates the very world it inhabits” (xiv-xv). While Said conceives of imperialism as a concept connected to the traditional Western powers, Hardt and Negri extend this concept, conceiving of the ahistorical Empire that still exists today, creating the main flaw in Said’s criticism of Conrad and his successors: That while Conrad can be excused for his actions within a system that existed pervasively around him, others such as Coppola and Costa-Gavras cannot because the system has been exposed or diminished in some way.

Keeping the concept of Empire in mind, some clemency can be extended to Conrad’s successors, but Said’s critique remains valid if incomplete. Conrad, writing from ideologically deep within Empire, spawned a tradition of imperialist adventure narrative that is at once critical of Empire and ignorant of its place within the system. Today, Conrad’s tradition continues in, among many other manifestations, the form of the modern military shooter video game, a genre of game where the player is asked to take on the persona of a defender of Empire and do its work. Despite its innovation of form, the modern military shooter continues the Conradian tradition of imperialist adventure narratives.

A modern military shooter is, succinctly, a video game portraying military action taking place in the present, a historical setting, or near future with the player typically taking on the virtual identity – a form of multifaceted identity which James

Paul Gee defines as “one’s identity as a virtual character within the virtual world –” usually as a member of a Western military (Gee 49). Modern military shooters exist outside of the West – notable examples include China’s *Glorious Mission Online*, a game published by the People’s Liberation Army and *Under Ash* and its sequel, *Under Siege*, games from Syria which depict Palestinians in combat with Israel (Jou, Ashcraft). Though the vast majority of the modern military shooter genre comes from Western developers and publishers, these narratives will not be investigated here, as they are either resistive of Empire, or reflective of a completely different kind of imperialist legacy than Said’s critique of Conrad is equipped to explain (Ashcraft, Jou). This paper will instead focus its analysis on a select set of examples from the genre: Yager Interactive’s *Spec Ops: The Line*, Infinity Ward’s *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*, DICE’s *Battlefield 3*, and Danger Close Games’ *Medal of Honor: Warfighter*. While other options abound in the genre, these games were selected for their exposure and narrative structure, as well as for a direct comparison based on a shared media platform: They are all available for Microsoft’s Xbox 360 system.

As technology has evolved, the world has moved away from the traditional imperial schemes that formed the setting of Conrad’s work. However, something of Conrad still seems to resonate for artists of all stripes, and even as forms evolved and the world changed, people continue to read, examine, and draw inspiration from *Heart of Darkness*. Perhaps the best-known example is the 1979 movie *Apocalypse Now*, which

relocated Conrad's tale into the American imperialist venture in Vietnam. In this same vein, Yager Development also revisited Conrad's vision in 2012, replacing the jungles of the old tales with a sandstorm-ravaged Dubai, through which Captain Martin Walker goes in search of Colonel John Konrad and the fate of his 33d Infantry Battalion. Erik Kain of *Forbes* notes the similarities of *Spec Ops: The Line* to both Conrad's novel and Coppola's film through a brief catalogue of the allusions in the characters, but he also notes,

[*Spec Ops: The Line*] is no more a remake of either of these works than *Apocalypse Now* was a remake of *Heart of Darkness*. Coppola's film borrowed thematically from Conrad's book and then built its story around the skeletal frame of its plot, but it remained unique – a separate and fundamentally different piece of work. Partly this is because film can tell stories in ways that novels cannot, and vice versa. (Kain)

Like Kain, many other people in the mainstream press have noted that *Spec Ops: The Line* alludes to and is roughly based on the quest to locate a man in the madness. But in all the attention paid to the game in the press, there is little to no focus on how the game addresses one of the major underlying issues in Conrad's work – not just *Heart of Darkness* – the issue of the imperial reality. As previously discussed, Said reserves a harsh critique for these followers of Conrad who argue that “the source of the world's significant action and life is in the West, whose representatives seem at liberty to visit their fantasies and

philanthropies upon a mind-deadened Third World” and this critique applies in its fullest extent to *Spec Ops*, which, like the rest of its genre, is a rehash of the problems of imperialism set against the framework of Hardt and Negri's Empire (Said xix).

While *Spec Ops: The Line* is rightly praised for the way it interrogates its genre, as well as the psychological power of the story told, the frame of the narrative is purely imperialistic, literally designed to funnel the “fantasies and philanthropies,” in the case of this game the fantastic philanthropies, to modify Said's phrasing, of the characters and the player (xix). As the narrative opens, the main character is reflecting on what he knows of another central character, the colonel he has been sent to find: John Konrad. The camera pans over photos, but particularly shows press clippings talking about how the Dubai government rejected foreign aid and America stepped in anyway (Yager Development). Konrad takes this element of the narrative even further by actively rejecting his superior's orders and remaining in Dubai as evacuation became impossible. Over the course of the narrative, the player encounters several main figures, each with their own imperialist fantasies and philanthropies: Konrad, a CIA operative named Riggs, a reporter named Robert Darden known to the player as the Radioman, and Captain Walker the player's character.

Central to the narrative is the character John Konrad. It is his imperialist fantasy that initializes the plot of the entire game. Seen in a piece of collectible “intel” – little items that can be found throughout the game that

are accompanied by audio that provide additional information about an action, a character, or the setting – is John Konrad’s psych profile. While many characters cast doubt on Konrad’s motivations, his psych profile reveals Konrad’s basest motivation: “It is believed that as Konrad comes under fire for failures in Afghanistan, he will go to extreme lengths to internally fortify belief in this reputation [of excellence]” (Yager). Konrad is a man in a position of power who is damaged for some unknown reason, and the game shows the player that it is Konrad’s failures that motivate him to volunteer his men to assist a nation that wanted no such help. His fantasies lead directly to a failure to recognize the people of Dubai as anything more than a brain-dead pet project that needs his help, despite what anyone, even his own superiors, might say. He literally sees Dubai as a fantasy of philanthropy. In this sense, Konrad is acting as an agent of Empire through the mechanism of intervention. While much of *Spec Ops*’s internal critique focuses on the justice of intervention in foreign nations, Hardt and Negri see Konrad’s fantasy of philanthropy as a necessity for the functioning of Empire, saying on the subject of intervention that “these [interventions] are not really interventions into independent juridical territories but rather actions within a unified world by the ruling structure of production and communication. In effect, intervention has been internalized and universalized” (35). Hardt and Negri’s concept of intervention implies that Konrad is unconsciously serving as the last bulwark of Empire in the face of an impossible disaster in his defiance of his orders. In this

sense, Konrad’s reinforcement of the mechanics of Empire make him a reinforcement of the systems that perpetuate Empire, and Konrad would likely not contest that critique, either due to his own devotion to his role as an enforcer of Empire, or due to his belief in his own excellence.

One idea central to imperialism in general is the idea that the people of the imperial power are inherently superior to those of the colonized indigenous population. As Said says in *Culture and Imperialism*: “[Imperialism and colonialism] are supported and perhaps even impelled by impressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people require and beseech domination” (9). In *Spec Ops: The Line* this mindset is most clearly displayed in the character of Agent Riggs, a CIA operative tasked with, as the player later learns after being manipulated into doing his bidding, massacring the people of Dubai so that the reality of the situation can never be known by the rest of the world (Yager). To accomplish this, Riggs has not only manipulated the player, but also the local populace under the guise of throwing off the oppressive remains of the 33d Infantry.

Riggs’ character is troubling for two different reasons. First, he is a direct product of the mindset that some people require domination. Riggs is not acting in the best interests of anyone other than the United States, which does not want their regional dominance destabilized, particularly if said destabilization leads to massive active resistance. Riggs is a direct illustration of Said’s concepts of culture and imperialism.

Said says that “the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them” (xiii). Riggs’s character exists literally to control the narrative. He manipulates the locals and the player in his attempt to manipulate the global narrative in the service of his imperial masters. This is Riggs’s imperial fantasy: The imperial need to control not only the colonized figures, but the narrative other colonies and the rest of the world hears about events within the colonized space. Second, unlike Konrad, whose fantasy might inadvertently help somebody in Dubai in the process, Riggs uses his fantasy of philanthropy – manipulation – to actively help the imperial power. In this action, Riggs is a direct servant of Empire’s intervention. Unlike Konrad, the unwitting servant of Empire, Riggs knows he is taking orders for an imperial purpose, and his pattern of intervention matches what Hardt and Negri identify: “More often it [intervention] is dictated unilaterally by the United States, which charges itself with the primary task and then subsequently asks its allies to set in motion a process of armed containment and/or repression of the current enemy of Empire” (37). In *Spec Ops*, the enemy of Empire has become the people of Dubai, who are witnesses of horrors that would destabilize Empire’s control in the region, and American hegemony.

While Riggs illustrates the experience of the machine of imperialism and Empire, Captain Walker, the player’s character, illustrates the experience of the man enabled by imperialism. Initially he was ordered into

Dubai to do nothing more than “Locate survivors. Leave the city immediately. Radio command from outside the storm wall” (Yager). However, Walker and his team soon find themselves under fire from locals, and their orders are quickly forgotten as Walker takes his men deeper into the ruins of Dubai, looking for answers. The question the game avoids answering for almost its entire length lies in this pursuit: If Walker’s orders were merely to find survivors and report, why did Walker constantly venture deeper into Dubai, causing more and more death and destruction along the way? In a conversation with John Konrad at the end of the game, Konrad cuts right to the heart of Walker’s colonial fantasy: “You’re here because you wanted to feel like something you’re not: A hero” (Yager). Like Riggs before him, Walker’s every action is about controlling the narrative and silencing other narratives he finds unacceptable; Walker cannot accept that he made the decisions he made because of a hallucinatory, blame-avoiding power trip executed upon an indigenous population with narratives of their own. Like Riggs, Walker is consumed with a fantasy of philanthropy: At every juncture, he is completely consumed with the belief he is doing what is right, even as he destabilizes a horrific situation that had found some semblance of stability. However, unlike Riggs, Walker is not a servant of Empire.

Where Riggs accepts his mantle and executes his intervention faithfully, Walker’s act of pursuit is more than just a defiance of orders: It is a defiance of Empire. This decision is not made consciously in Walker’s virtual identity, but

is instead a circumstantial accident that results in Walker becoming a figure of rebellion against Empire doing exactly what Hardt and Negri identify as one possible resistance to Empire: “We must push through Empire to come out the other side” (206). In a sense, Walker does just this in his Dubai narrative, exploring the depths of his own depravity and the depravity the intervention of Empire has created, and either coming out the other side or being crushed under the weight of Empire through his own suicide (Yager). But Walker’s virtual identity is not quite the resistance figure it might be, due to the necessary negotiation between the character and the player.

From a broader perspective, *Spec Ops: The Line* is praised for its willingness to ask questions of its genre and the role of the player in the events of a game, and the praise is well-deserved. In a genre dominated with jingoistic games designed to make the player into nothing more than the Juggernaut of Democracy, *Spec Ops: The Line* deserves the credit it gets for its willingness to force the player to take responsibility for Walker, a system which extends into every part of the game, including areas not normally used for engaging the player, such as the opening credits, where the player is credited as a special guest, and the loading screens, one of which reminds the player that “you are still a good person” (Yager). But despite all the game’s good points about player-character interaction and choice, the imperialistic problems only become more tangible, as the player is clearly implicated in the fantasy through what James Paul Gee

calls the projective identity: Another of Gee’s facets of identity, this one formed in the negotiation between the fixed identity of the player and the virtual identity (50). *Spec Ops: The Line* goes to great lengths to make it clear that the choices made in-game do not reside exclusively in the character’s identity, but they are also present in the projective identity. The problem lies in the fact that these imperialist fantasies are not exclusively Walker’s. On some level, the player shares them, because the game, quite literally, is a fantasy. This is also where the positive implications of Walker’s rebellious actions against Empire begin to recede into the imperialist background of the tale.

While Walker’s push through Empire to rebellion remains one positive implication of the game, it is also only one possible implication. The rebellion against Empire is not left to reside in the virtual identity: The endgame places key choices in the hands of the projected identity. Walker’s end is up to a negotiation between Walker and the player, with Yager presenting a series of choices to the player: Either commit suicide, surrender to the American relief force, or continue your push through the mechanisms of Empire and into a post-Empire space (Yager). As Hardt and Negri imply, the push through Empire is much harder than any other option, and naturally leads to an unresolved question: Even though Walker has made this symbolic push through Empire in rebellion, how far can he continue pushing? America, and by extension Empire, cannot be toppled by a momentary rebellion. Largely, Said’s criticisms remain valid in the context of Hardt and Negri: Walker’s tale is still that of the imperialist

adventurer. Like Conrad, *Spec Ops* leverages resistance to Empire to create what is both imperialist and anti-imperialist at the same time.

Like Riggs and Walker, Robert Darden, better known and heretofore referred to as the Radioman, is a man obsessed with controlling the narrative. But unlike Riggs or Walker, Darden's colonial fantasy is simple and less thought-provoking, but symptomatic of a larger problem in the game: The treatment of the native population. Two instances from the Radioman's story serve to illustrate how the game handles the native population of Dubai. In the first instance, seen in an intel item, the Radioman is interrogating a local politician about how upper-class people were allowed to evacuate Dubai secretly, while the local press claimed there was nothing wrong (Yager). While the portrayal of the politician is disturbing enough, it is the Radioman's attitude towards the man that is more concerning: The politician is not seen as an equal, but as a roadblock for the Radioman's story. The Radioman is not seeking a narrative, but confirmation of the narrative he has already constructed, whether it is right or wrong. The second instance is a globalized component of the setting: In the ruins of the city, the Radioman has set up a public address system that he uses as a radio station, ostensibly to provide hope to the people in the same way Edward R. Murrow did during the Battle of Britain (Yager). This seems like a commendable idea, but the programming of his radio station is questionable in its selection. He only plays Western rock-n-roll and classical music,

never once playing anything local in origin. It is obvious the people he is trying to comfort are the stranded Americans. Both of these instances point to a larger problem: Despite the story's Arabian setting, the narrative is decidedly American-centered, and the indigenous populace is only considered when they are useful for a storytelling moment; fighting in a refugee camp, killing them with white phosphorus, or choosing whether or not to open fire into a crowd forming a literal obstacle to advancement (Yager). This is the Radioman's fantasy of philanthropy; that he is doing something good for everyone, and the game buys into this fantasy as well.

Radioman is largely irrelevant in terms of Empire, being a mere hanger-on to Konrad's actions, having been drawn along by Konrad's attempt at intervention, becoming nothing more than a piece of imperialist flavor to the larger narrative. However, it is important to note his presence in *Spec Ops* to create a contrast with the rest of the genre. Despite its shortcomings, *Spec Ops* is an example of the achievement games can become as narrative devices. Nothing else in the modern military shooter genre stacks up against it for awareness of its imperialist functionality. But the rest of the genre still functions as imperialist narrative, albeit without the awareness that even Conrad had, and that any of his successors should have. It is worth noting that, while Take-Two Interactive does not release unit sales numbers, sales of *Spec Ops: The Line* were below expectations, leading to a \$110.8 million loss for the company (McWhertor). In contrast, Activision's *Call of Duty* games are

routinely seen as massive successes, routinely selling 20 million copies, and other games in the genre do not perform poorly either, usually selling in the range of five to ten million copies (D'Angelo). So while *Spec Ops* is lauded for its narrative qualities, many more people are actually engaging with a narrative of Empire that does not ask them to question anything, much less their role in the mechanics of the system that enables such narratives.

While *Spec Ops* uses its storytelling to differentiate itself from the rest of the genre, the modern military shooter genre is generally dominated by a multiplayer arms race, resulting in a series of less aware narratives that focus on massive set-pieces instead of sustained engagement with the player. This lazy narrative has allowed certain imperialistic tropes to infiltrate the genre, resulting in narratives that relive the same “fantasies and philanthropies” across games and even across developers (Said xix). Across the other games examined for this paper, all of them exhibited Hardt and Negri's concept of intervention, a sense of the primacy of Western agency, and a preoccupation with one of the methods of Empire's control: Weapons of mass destruction.

With the concept of intervention a core component of real world American foreign policy, and one of the primary missions of the American military, it should come as no surprise that narratives reflecting an image of the American military would take up intervention as the general setting for their stories. In the modern military shooters coming from America, Hardt and Negri's unilateral American and allies against

terrorists model is followed like a script (37). *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* features American soldiers waging an interventionist war in Saudi Arabia against a revolutionary government and British SAS soldiers enforcing Empire through intervention in a Russian civil war (Infinity Ward). In both cases, America and its allies have decided that neither government would serve Empire, couching the rhetoric of intervention in terms of terrorism: The leader of the revolutionary Saudi government is a terrorist, and the Russian revolutionary forces are equally dismissed with the rhetoric of terrorism (Infinity Ward). In both cases, intervention is expressed differently. American intervention is expressed as a full-on invasion of Saudi Arabia on moral grounds, seeking to capture the leader of the revolution. British intervention is different, developing as an intervention not in the affairs of government, but is instead an intervention much like Conrad's quest for Kurtz, seeking a single man. While both narratives take on different shapes, at their core they are both still interventions on behalf of Empire seeking to remove a single destabilizing influence.

Battlefield 3 follows the interventionist trope through its two protagonists in much the same manner as *Call of Duty*, only instead of placing the onus of intervention on the nation – although America is still intervening – the onus of intervention is shifted to individual agents of Empire. Even from the beginning of the game, individual intervention is the main narrative force, as the story unfolds in retrospect, as your character has been arrested and is being

interrogated about his vigilante quest to stop a terrorist (EA Digital Illusions CE). But again, the rhetoric of terrorism matches Hardt and Negri's concept of intervention. *Battlefield 3* only expresses intervention in a different way, forwarding the idea that when insufficient proof exists to inform Empire about a threat, it becomes the individual's responsibility to defend it.

In contrast to *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield 3*, *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* takes intervention from an occasion for narrative to the reason. *Medal of Honor* is focused on the personal narratives of a group of special forces soldiers whose sole purpose is intervention, and the game tracks their interventions around the globe, with the narrative going to Pakistan, the Philippines, Somalia, Yemen, and Dubai (Danger Close Games). Many of their operations are conducted unilaterally, and in nations with no awareness of their presence, such as one notable example of a car chase in Pakistan where the player is not only in pursuit of what has been deemed a terrorist, but is also fleeing the local authorities (DCG). In contrast with the tight narrative focus of its competitors, *Medal of Honor* takes to heart not only the concept of intervention in a boundless Empire, but also the concept of a "right of the police," a function of Empire that, according to Hardt and Negri, "in inscribed in the deployment of prevention, repression, and rhetorical force aimed at the reconstruction of social equilibrium" (17). While both *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield* utilize this right, neither embraces it as wholeheartedly as the top-secret operatives of *Medal of Honor*, who exert their force around the world on

mission after mission in support of Empire and in continual defiance of local authority (DCG). What separates *Medal of Honor* from its companions in the modern military shooter genre in this sense of a right of the police is the impetus of authority. Where the protagonists of other games defer to a military command above, the hierarchy of command in *Medal of Honor* is largely independent of any organized military, becoming a quasi-military force that answers only to Empire in its pursuits.

In his critique of Conrad, Said points out a fatal gap in Conrad's conception of the world about which he wrote: "He could neither understand that India, Africa, and South America also had lives and cultures with integrities not totally controlled by the gringo imperialists and reformers of this world, nor allow himself to believe that anti-imperialist independence movements were not all corrupt and in the pay of the puppet masters in London or Washington" (xviii). This critique is equally fair of the modern military shooter, which uses as one of its core concepts a sense of the primacy of Western agency. While *Spec Ops* interrogated this concept through the actions of Konrad, Riggs, and Walker, other examples in this genre choose to embrace the denial of agency to the non-Western, usually through positioning Western villains to be opposed by Western heroes, despite their decidedly non-Western settings.

Battlefield presents a typical case of this denial of non-Western agency. Over the course of the narrative, the player's character participates in an invasion of Iran in a reaction to a military coup, and discovers nuclear weapons, only to learn

that the leader who acquired the weapons and launched the coup did so only at the behest of the game's Western villain, Solomon (EA DICE). In the narrative, this is played as a major reveal, perpetuating the story, but in reality, a postcolonial critique sees such an action in a narrative like this as an inevitability of the Conradian vision. Even though *Battlefield* makes an attempt at a setting-appropriate villain, the Western perspective of the writers can only result in one conclusion: that there must be a second Western villain manipulating the non-Western.

Call of Duty is a particularly egregious offender in this regard, deciding that not only is the non-Western villain incomplete without a Western villain behind him, but that the non-Western setting is incomplete as well. While *Battlefield 3* does have Western settings, with major events taking place in Paris and New York prompted by the Western villain, *Call of Duty* takes another step and not only allows the Western villain to select the West for his battleground, but also allows the Western heroes to select the West for their battleground (DICE, Infinity Ward). This abandonment of the actual battleground of the contemporary soldier for the fantastic battles that never happened of the Cold War cheapens the experience on both sides of the conflict by allowing the West to appropriate an experience that is not theirs and in the process, to deny the authentic resistance of the people actually engaged in resistance to imperial domination.

Medal of Honor would appear to be less guilty of these denials of agency than either *Battlefield* or *Call of Duty*, keeping its

experiences to places where genuine conflict is occurring instead of co-opting real-world conflicts for a more familiar setting, and aside from a brief interlude with a stereotypical Eastern European arms dealer representing a brief digression from the game's focus on actual sites of conflict, the game features no overtly Western villains (DCG). *Medal of Honor* is not innocent. Instead, *Medal of Honor* subverts the agency of its non-Western opponents through reductive characterization. Over the course of its narrative, *Medal of Honor* presents the player with two main villains, Marwan al-Khalifa and Hassan, who are both characterized as very intelligent and charismatic leaders (DCG). Ultimately, after spending much of the game's narrative, or in the case of Hassan all of the game's narrative, building these characters up as terrorist masterminds, they are both ultimately reduced to suicide bombers, with al-Khalifa destroying a train station in Spain and Hassan donning a suicide vest when the American protagonists raid his compound (DCG). This course of action is extremely unlikely for men like this, as suicide bombers are generally depressed, unstable, and brainwashed instead of the masterminds that Danger Close Games takes great pains to put in suicide vests (Islamic Center of Beverly Hills). But to a Western audience, suicide bombers are a typical image of terrorism, and reducing the enemy to suicide bombers serves as an easy way to prompt the player not to think that the characters labeled terrorists might have legitimate grievances and reasons for their resistance.

When reduced to their basic essences, these Conradian narratives are about control.

As previously illustrated, Empire uses intervention to enforce its will around the world, and the modern military shooter is born of intervention. But an engaging story needs a credible villain to create conflict, and a protagonist with the weight of Empire's army behind him is hardly threatened by localized rebellion, so the modern military shooter uses successful rebellions to create credible threats. The rebellions that modern military shooters pose as the enemy are successful because they have seized one of the pillars of Empire's control: the bomb. Hardt and Negri propose that "imperial control operates through three global and absolute means: the bomb, money, and ether" (345). While ether and money both factor into the modern military shooter, only the bomb makes the threat credible enough to create dramatic tension. *Battlefield* and *Call of Duty* both feature endgames revolving around preventing nuclear attacks on American cities, which are naturally foiled by the Western heroes (Infinity Ward, EA DICE). These endgames create their dramatic tension through agents of Empire fighting to quash rebellion at the height of its power, when the rebellion has gained control of the most complete means of control, that of total destruction. *Medal of Honor* opts for personal tension instead of a global sense of dread, but this does not diminish the fantasy of power present in the other two narratives.

Collectively, these narratives represent tens of millions of fantasies and philanthropies of Empire projected onto their non-Western subjects in the same manner as the Conradian narrative. This

projection of Empire is problematic, because video games, particularly modern military shooters, have become international touchstones of culture, reaching millions of people with narrative that minimize billions and lionizes the control systems that continue to divide the world today. While some games like *Spec Ops* do exist, the majority of the genre validates Empire, creating imperialist adventure narratives that go unchallenged.

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