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Thumb Sticks and Hand Grenades : An Analysis of War and Perspectives in Video Games

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**THUMB STICKS AND HAND GRENADES: AN ANALYSIS OF WAR AND
PERSPECTIVES IN VIDEO GAMES**

A thesis submitted to
the Graduate College of
Marshall University
In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

In
English
by

Jonathan Ked Nance

Approved by
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Marshall University
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ABSTRACT

Throughout *Thumb Sticks and Hand Grenades*, I seek to examine the role American Exceptionalism plays within the player's perspective of war narratives in *Halo: Combat Evolved*, *Halo 2*, *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, and *Wolfenstein: The New Colossus*. Using a theoretical lens I call ludo-narrative war theory, I am able to fully understand the above-listed games' narrative, player perspectives, and positions in relationship to the wider war narrative and how the games reflect a wider understanding of war, American Exceptionalism, and societal issues prevalent in the analog world. When these facets of the games are analyzed I am able to show that they exist as cultural artifacts that exhibit the fears, societal shortcomings, and issues of the cultures in which they were created. With *Halo: Combat Evolved* and *Halo 2* this analysis shows the issues that are inherent in blindly drawing lines between who is friend and foe, and it shows the issues that arise when American Exceptionalism gets in the way of allowing those othered to step in and help in times of war. Moreover, in *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *The New Colossus* this analysis shows that the rise and fall of American Exceptionalism coincides with a blinded view of who the American Dream is truly created for, and that Exceptionalism can only be regained through a changing of that Dream on every level of society. By analyzing these four games together I show a common thread among video games as cultural artifacts, in that they show players the state of the world in which they live and what transformations must be made to reverse the cultural slopes they depict. Ultimately, *Halo* and *Wolfenstein* provide examples of the cautionary tales the war narratives provide in video games, and what follows are analyses of those narratives and player perspectives in video games.

INTRODUCTION

Greatness and power are often allied with defeat. – Bear, 280

Coming home from school at six years old, grabbing a Lunchable and Kool-Aid from the refrigerator, and escaping into 8-bit worlds until being called to dinner was a daily ritual of my youth. I cannot remember a period of my life that video games did not play a prominent role; they slowly became more than simple forms of entertainment that filled the empty spaces of living in rural West Virginia. Video games became my source of escape from the more difficult aspects of life; they became a sounding board upon which I could place all of my problems and work them out on race tracks, battlefields, and sports arenas. Casting my eyes upon the screen, I became the characters I controlled. I have lived numerous lives, been the MVP of the Super Bowl, and squished enemies as a plumber numerous times.

One of my favorite games, *Halo: Combat Evolved*, was released in 2001, when I was 12 years old. The game immediately enthralled me with its pristine graphics, incredible music, and mysterious main character, the Master Chief. My friends and I would spend countless hours playing through the campaign together, discovering all the secrets, and battling it out to decide who was the best. The sounds of orchestral scores and grenade blasts filled our rooms, and the clacking of thumb sticks in the midst of intense fights became the signature noise of this ritual. We lived our lives with and through the game, holding what we affectionately called “*Halo Parties*” to test the mettle of each other. The Halo Parties continued all throughout high school, and the release dates of *Halo 2* and *3* meant we would not be in school the next day. The rumors of our parties caught wind, and our Monster-energy-drink (the parties were strictly non-alcoholic, to many people’s surprise) and corn-dog-fueled nights grew until we eventually had

eight consoles up and running at any one party. *Halo* was the beacon upon which we all gathered, both to celebrate and escape who we were in that moment.

Beyond the ability to escape life for a little while, video games led me to find a passion for the written word in quite an odd twist of fate. Walking into the Huntington Mall on a family excursion to the small city of Huntington, WV, home to around 50,000 people, I discovered a book titled *Halo: The Fall of Reach* and begged my mother to buy it for me. When I returned home, I, as always, retreated to my room, but instead of turning on my television set and booting up the Xbox, I devoured the words of the book. At 14 years old, this was my first time truly experiencing, not just reading, a book. I related to the child version of the Master Chief, the character I had played on the screen countless times. I read the book over and over, and this obsession with my favorite video game in book form led me to begin reading more. Eventually, I began to realize there is a connected nature of playing out a story on screen and reading a story in print. It was this realization that led me to want to pursue a field that allowed me to explore both of my passions in earnest. Choosing English as my college major allowed me to explore narratives in new and exciting ways, and I would eventually come to draw direct connections between studying literature and critically analyzing video games.

Thus, I land here with this thesis. The work that follows is a culmination of my equal passion for both the written word and video games. I still use games as an escape from stress and for just having fun, but now, I also use them to think about the ways in which they tell stories of who we are and the ways in which we interact with those stories. The games chosen for the first chapter of this thesis are games I quite literally grew up playing: *Halo: Combat Evolved* and *Halo 2*. Having played *Halo* since I was 12 years old, I can, without question, say that it is something that has shaped who I am and ultimately led me to writing this thesis. The games in

the second chapter, *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Wolfenstein: The New Colossus*, represent the opposite end of the spectrum. Having played these games only recently, they represent my following through on a passion that started over 20 years ago. I write about games not just because they are fun to play; I write about them because they tell stories about who we are and who we want to become.

Discovering My Scholarly Legs

As I moved along my undergraduate studies in English, I always thought about ways in which I could bring video games into my studies of literary theory but finding opportunities to do this was not always easy, as this idea is still fairly new. During my undergraduate capstone workshop, I found the opportunity to utilize some of the theories at work within the field of video game studies. I explored the ideas of ergodic literature, a type of literature that is defined as requiring the reader to take an active role in the reading of the text, and the labyrinthine novel, a type of novel that can be read utilizing various paths, as applied to non-traditional forms of print literature. I did not feel confident enough to actually tackle video games head on, so I blended what I was familiar with, analyzing print texts, while also dabbling in some of the theories that are foundational to the critical study of video games.

When I entered graduate school, the number of opportunities to explore video games expanded, and I have been, by and large, able to analyze video games within nearly every class. In my first semester, I experimented with using eco-criticism to analyze nature-based enemies in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, effectively flipping what I did for capstone around: exploring literary theory with video games, instead of video game theory with books. With a bolstered confidence in my ability, I began to fully delve into the world of video game studies and truly realize my goal of blending my two passions of books and games. From here, I began utilizing

video games in everything from analyses of race to classes on pedagogy, exploring the ways in which video games can be integrated into my graduate career. Finally, when it came time to decide what to write this thesis on, I knew it was going to be on games.

From the outset of this project I knew that I wanted to write about *Halo* in some way; my initial thought was to engage the religious symbolism within the game. Ultimately that idea gave way to using war theory after finding inspiration from taking a political science class that was centered on war in popular culture. Within this class I discovered war theory and worked with key theorists Geoff Martin and Cynthia Weber and the way the theory is used to engage with popular media to uncover why and how war is used within narratives. After this discovery I began applying this idea to *Halo* to see if an argument could arise from this meeting of theory and narrative. This combination of war theory and *Halo* was an exciting prospect to me, so I pursued the lead and landed here, with this thesis. By combining many aspects of both of my passions, I decided to create a blend of theories from three different fields of study: war theory arrives by way of political science, aspects of player perspectives is from ludology, the study of video games, and the narrative analysis comes from traditional literary theory. I call this combination of theories ludo-narrative war theory.

Ludo-Narrative War Theory

The theoretical framework within this thesis takes cues from political science's war theory. War theory is used to analyze depictions of war in popular media, specifically the impact war has on societies and the art those societies produce, focusing especially on national identity following an event that precedes war. I will utilize Cynthia Weber's *Imagining America at War: Morality, Politics, and Film*. Weber's book focuses on the language and depictions of identity within media following 9/11, as compared to that following the attacks on Pearl Harbor. This

study analyzes the language to describe national identity and the enemies of America, as the use of older language often circumvents advancements made in societies between wartime and peacetime. I use Weber's theoretical framework in Chapter 1 to analyze the setting and the human characters within the *Halo* series and the ways they interact with the enemy both by directly speaking to them and by talking about them to other human characters. In Chapter 2, I primarily utilize Weber's analysis of the ways in which Americans examine themselves in the face of conflict, highlighting the areas that intersect with the ideas of the American Dream. Studying language use throughout the games allows me to analyze the emergence of the ideas of American Exceptionalism that appear in these games and how both games have a rise or fall of Exceptionalism at their core.

American Exceptionalism refers to the perceived universal power and positive social and political ideologies (i.e. freedom, democracy, and opportunity for all) that America is said to have from national leaders, patriots, or normal citizens of America (Tyrrell). Therefore, when I state that Exceptionalism is lost, it means that America can no longer be perceived as being a place that fosters positivity or power, and the reverse is true if I state Exceptionalism is gained. So, while the idea of American Exceptionalism cannot be seen as a quantifiable attribute, and is instead an ideology that is placed on the United States by the aforementioned American leaders and citizens, it is something that is measurable based upon the language Weber describes in the above-mentioned theory and is carried out by the to-be-discussed aspects of war theory.

Other aspects of war theory that are used in the following chapters are brought in from Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard's book *The Hollywood War Machine: US Militarism and Popular Culture*, Tom Pollard's *Hollywood 9/11: Superheroes, Supervillains, and Super Disasters*, and Geoff Martin and Erin Steuter's *Pop Culture Goes to War*. These three books are used in

conjunction with one another to examine the themes present in the games analyzed and how they reflect, mirror, and subvert war and militarism through their representations of war. War theory, when used in political science, often underscores the distrust in, ambiguous nature of, and/or complete trust of the government's involvement of conflicts within war present in war narratives. For my purposes, however, I utilize the above theorist analysis of the roles of war in films to tease out what my chosen texts are saying about the state of America's place in the world as it pertains to the conflicts the games are mirroring.

Halo: Combat Evolved and *Halo 2* are mirroring the post-9/11 War or Terror and highlighting the flaws present in the ideas of American Exceptionalism by showing a war that cannot be won until the human military soldiers in the games, who are shown to be entirely American, come to terms with their inability to win the war on their own and ally with a member of the designated enemy race. By highlighting the American military being unable to win the war against the othered aliens, the game presents war as unwinnable as long as the ideology of American Exceptionalism persists in the consciousness of those who command soldiers and direct wars. *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *The New Colossus*, however, present a loss of Exceptionalism in a very different way, as the loss of Exceptionalism is due to a corrupted belief of what makes America exceptional, as well as the ideology of the American Dream.

Because of the difference between the fall of exceptionalism in the two chapters, Chapter 2 sees a broadening of the theory outlined in Chapter 1 to include aspects of the American Dream. Jim Cullen's book *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*, explains that the cinematic idea of the American Dream often seen in films, and in the two aforementioned games, is a lie as the "the United States was never a 'free,' 'open,' or 'virgin' land" when American ideals are examined (136). This sentiment, of the Dream being a

lie, is at the center of my argument within the analysis of Chapter 2. By combining the above-mentioned war theories, and the post-modernist analysis of the American Dream, I highlight the flexibility of my created approach to the analysis of these games and show the ways in which video games criticize the analog world in which they are created.

The video game theory used in the two chapters shifts from one chapter to the next, as the chapters, like the other theories used in my analysis, build upon one another throughout my thesis. In Chapter 1, I take a relatively traditional approach to analyzing players' positioning within the game world. For this aspect of the analysis I utilize Laurie Taylor's article "When Seams Fall Apart: Video Game Space and the Player" to analyze players' perspective with the war that is present within *Halo* and *Halo 2*, as players' progression throughout the game, and their relationship with the characters they control, has direct relation to the meaning that is derived from the war narrative. The above term "player perspective" is used as an umbrella term throughout this thesis to mean the language, tone, and player inputs and viewpoints that come together to culminate in players' overall understanding of the game as a singular narrative experience.

Where the first chapter presents the idea that a player's perspective of the game is the central driving force of the narrative, the second chapter subverts this idea by using an aspect of ludology that explores the lack of player perspective outlined by Pedro Cardoso and Miguel Carvalhais in their article "What Then Happens When Interaction Is Not Possible: The Virtuoso Interpretations of Ergodic Artefacts." Within the two *Wolfenstein* games players take on the role of the virtuoso, the author's term for a passive reader of game narratives, an idea that plays an important part of how the narrative is to be interpreted (55). This phenomenon occurs when the game ceases to provide new gaming mechanics for players and places the narrative of the game

ahead of their role within the game. This shift in agency creates moments of the game where players' interactions with the narrative no longer matter and the playing of the game becomes secondary (58). Utilizing the idea of virtuosic interpretation, I explore and set up the narrative as being entirely experienced by players in a near traditional narrative state where the mental interpretation of the game is far more important than the passive playing of the game. By exploring the game as a cerebral experience rather than one experienced primarily through the physical manipulation of a game controller, I am able to truly analyze the game's reflection of societal issues present within the flawed ideas of the American Dream that causes the fall of American Exceptionalism.

By using the above ideas in conjunction with one another (which creates ludo-narrative war theory), I am able to fully understand the chosen games' narratives, player perspectives, and positions in relationship to the wider war narratives and how the games reflect a wider understanding of war, American Exceptionalism, and societal issues prevalent in the analog world. When these facets of the games are analyzed they show that the games exist as cultural artifacts that exhibit the fears, societal shortcomings, and issues of the cultures in which they were created. With *Halo: Combat Evolved* and *Halo 2*, this analysis shows the issues that are inherent in blindly drawing lines between who is friend and foe, and it shows the issues that arise when American Exceptionalism gets in the way of allowing those othered to step in and help in times of war. Moreover, in *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *The New Colossus*, this analysis shows that the rise and fall of American Exceptionalism coincides with a slanted view of who the American Dream is truly created for and that Exceptionalism can only be regained through a changing of that Dream on every level of society.

Together, the two *Halo* and *Wolfenstein* games that make up the following thesis represents a culmination of what I had hoped to achieve throughout my academic endeavors: combining the skills of critically analyzing pieces of literature learned throughout my time studying literature, and my passion for video games to view and analyze games as cultural artefacts whose meanings relate to the analog world. But, beyond that, they show a common thread among video games as cultural artefacts, they show players the state of the world in which they live and what transformations must be made to reverse the cultural slope the creators believe the analog world to be on. Ultimately, *Halo* and *Wolfenstein* provide examples of the cautionary tales the war narratives provide in video games, and what follows are analyses of those narratives and player perspectives in video games.

CHAPTER 1: HALO'S CRITIQUE OF WARRING PERSPECTIVES

Child of my enemy, why have you come? I offer no forgiveness, a father's sins, passed to

his son. – Gravemind, Halo 3

Introduction

First-person shooters (FPS) are often violent, have strong depictions of war, and, more often than not, are targeted when video game censorship is brought to the fore in political arenas. Despite this, FPSs are consistently the best-selling video game “super genre,” according to the Entertainment Software Association (ESA). A “super genre” within the gaming industry is a broad-strokes category of video games organized by their play style rather than their subject matter, as is common in most other forms of media such as film genres. The ESA states in their end of the year publication that 27.5% (5% higher than the closely related action genre) of all games sold in 2016 were shooters, and seven of the top 20 video games sold in 2016 were FPSs (12). The genre continues to be at the top of the video game industry. Interestingly, if we narrow our scope and look at thematic genres, that is genres described by the atmosphere or subject of the game (such as horror, action, etc), within video games, we can see that games based on war make up an even larger number of games sold, with nine of the top 20 video games of 2016 (12). It is at the pinnacle of both the super and thematic genre that the video game series that is central to this analysis, *Halo*, can be found.

The *Halo* series, since its initial release in 2001, has consistently been at the top of the video game industry. *Halo: Combat Evolved* (Bungie, 2001) sold over 1 million units in its first four months on the market, and *Halo 2* (Bungie, 2004) generated \$125 million in revenue in its first 24 hours, making it the fastest-selling United States media product in history, a record it would hold until *Halo 3* (Bungie, 2007) was released (Kastrenakes). As of 2017, with five main

series games, five spin off titles, 23 novels, two short story collections, and a large toy line, the Halo franchise is a powerhouse in the gaming industry, having sold over \$5 billion in merchandise (Kastrenakes). Beyond being a major moneymaker for Microsoft, the game presents a fascinating blend of war and analog societal elements that, in many ways, reflects the world we live in today.

For the purposes of this chapter, I look at the first two games in the series: *Halo: Combat Evolved* and *Halo 2*. By examining player perspectives in these games through what I call the ludo-narrative war theory, I argue that the series undermines the idea of American Exceptionalism that arose in post-9/11 culture. Additionally, I argue that the *Halo* series provides a clear cultural representation of post-9/11 America's War on Terror which shifted popular perspectives on America's place in the world and ideological othering through language. The centerpiece of my analysis is based on the knowledge that our post-9/11 world contributes to the underlying fears, thoughts, and romanticization of war in popular media, a theme that largely impacts the place in society *Halo* inhabits. By analyzing the series in this way, I will show that the series exists in popular culture as games that exhibit the fears and the realities of the war culture that has overcome the wider American popular culture while also demonstrating how the Exceptionalism within American culture is flawed. I believe it is important to note that I include language, tone, and player inputs and viewpoints, under the umbrella term "player perspective" as these gameplay aspects culminate into the overall player understanding of the game. Further, by exhibiting these themes as a video game immerses players in a simulated war that attempts to show them that wars are far more than good versus evil and that othering of our enemies is highly detrimental to our own ability to overcome conflicts. Thus, from highlighting the flawed nature in believing in American Exceptionalism and the othering of enemies, *Halo's* meaning

expands to create a socio-political statement that highlights parts of our culture the creators felt were fundamentally flawed.

The War-Based Approach to Analysis

I base the theoretical framework within this chapter on war theory, a theoretical framework utilized in political science to analyze depictions of war in popular media. This theory analyzes the impact war has on societies and the art those societies produce, and it focuses especially on national identity following an event that precedes war. I utilize Cynthia Weber's book *Imagining America at War: Morality, Politics, and Film*, wherein the author looks at language and depictions of identity within media following 9/11 as compared to those following the attacks on Pearl Harbor. Weber especially focuses on the topics of using progressive language to describe national identity, and regressive language to describe and discuss enemies of America that harkens back to older, World War II lexicon. I use Weber's theoretical framework to analyze the setting and the human characters within the *Halo* series as they interact with the enemy both by directly speaking to them and by talking about them to other humans to strongly reinforce the way language is used to describe, and other, those deemed as enemies both within and outside the game. Using this approach allows me to analyze the characters around the mostly voiceless player character, Master Chief John-117, to better understand how the events that precede the game's war are handled by these characters. By looking at the language used within the game, I will show that the game is directly reflecting the events outside of the game, allowing for an analysis that shows that the *Halo* series acts to inform players on the normalization of the horrors of war, while undermining the idea of American Exceptionalism through player perspectives.

Along with the game's use of war, an analysis of the ludo-narrative role of war in video games will allow a deeper dive into players' perspective within the war that plays out through the series allowing an understanding of how the game presents a breakdown of foundational American cultural ideas. I use the book *Joystick Soldiers* by narrative theorists Nina Huntemann and Mathew Payne to analyze the role war plays in video games. I utilize the authors' work on video game narratives to see how the representation of war within *Halo* closely relates to our analog-world understanding of the wars that take place around us. The authors go beyond the politics of war to tease out the importance of the war-based narratives in video games and how that narrative corresponds to an analog world understanding of war culture. By combining the ideas in Weber with Huntemann and Payne, I conduct an analysis of the science fiction war presented in the *Halo* series to show that while, of course, the war is a reflection of war in the analog world, it also presents a critique on the normalization of war in popular media, by undermining the Exceptionalism American culture has cultivated within post-9/11 culture, a time period that is contemporary to the games analyzed.

A player's positioning of being both inside and outside of the events occurring in the game (called the "event space" by ludologists) presents a unique perspective on the events occurring within a game. Following ludologist Laurie Taylor's ideas on player perspectives, I argue that understanding players' perspective is critical in knowing the importance of what is occurring within the game world, as the game places players in a position of both othering the enemy and disrupting the constructed exceptionalism of the humans, who represent America. In relation to this chapter, in order to fully understand what is occurring within *Halo* one must look at what perspectives a player brings to the game itself. Thus, to analyze the meaning behind the game, one must know how the game is being played. To this end, I analyze players' interaction

with the war occurring within the video game world to underscore how meaning is derived from players' progression throughout the narrative of the game.

Combining both aspects of the above theory into one ludo-narrative war theory allows a full understanding of the game's narrative, player perspectives in relationship to a wider war narrative, and how the war within the game reflects the wider, analog understanding of war, the fears that come with it, and the contributing factors that rest in our Post-9/11 world. The following analysis of the *Halo* series shows that the series exists as a cultural artifact that solidly exhibits the fears and realities of the war culture that has taken hold of American popular culture through the othering of designated enemies and the shakiness of America's exceptional place in the world. *Halo's* experience allows players to see beyond the war that is around them in the game and in the analog world. My analysis shows that the game forces players to look at how those who are deemed enemies of the country are valued as well as how those deemed enemies can undo the American mindset. Like most story-driven, science-fiction war video games, *Halo* doesn't emulate the war-time narratives of the analog world; it instead provides a reimagining and commentary on the emergent ideas of othering enemies and American Exceptionalism. *Halo's* cultural commentary is one that extends much further than it may seem at first; it is one that uncovers important parts of American culture and ideologies.

All About War: What Is War Theory?

The primary theory I am using throughout this chapter is known as "war theory." This theory is one borrowed from political science and is often used to look at events throughout history and the mindset those events cause individuals to have through films that contain war at the center of their narratives. I have borrowed this theory from the field of political science where the theory is most often used to analyze depictions of war in popular media to better

understand the effects those wars have on the wider population's perceptions. While this theory, to my knowledge, has not been used in video game applications, I posit that such an application can be done just as successfully as it is used to analyze film, as video games often employ the same tropes and simulated cinematography as film. As such, I use the theory to analyze the *Halo* games and their mirroring of the War on Terror through the narrative. This application falls in line with war theory's purpose as Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard, scholars who were foundational in promoting war theory within political science, explain in *The Hollywood War Machine*. They argue that depictions and stories of war are "both mirroring and contributing to the culture of militarism that permeates [the] early twenty-first century America" (Boggs and Pollard 1). The connectedness between the mirroring of the fiction and the analog world's permeation of militarized media is said by the authors, within the political scope of war theory, to be a result of the romanticization and attempts by government military entities to soften the blow of military activities around the world (5).

My use of war theory in this chapter does not delve into the political intricacies that are potentially present when the theory is applied within the political sciences; instead, I use the aspect of the theory that focuses on the analysis of the text as a mirroring of analog world events and a commentary of what arose within American culture post-9/11. Pollard states, in *Hollywood 9/11: Superheroes, Supervillains, and Super Disasters*, that post-9/11 popular media depictions of war have "became colored by intense collective emotions" and are continuously burdened by the on-going war that is being played on news outlets (149). To move this idea further, I look specifically at the mindset of post-9/11 Americans and the ideology of American Exceptionalism, and the way the *Halo* series effectively dismantles this mindset by presenting

war as a conflict that cannot be won without the help of those society has othered. Pollard states that post-9/11 films that depict war,

[...] reflect highly emotional responses to the terrorist attacks, unleashing shock at the violence, grief for the victims, horror at the deaths and devastation, outrage against perpetrators, thirsts for vengeance against the attackers, fear of unknown terrorists, and paranoia about future attacks. [...] Post-9/11 films bear striking similarities in content, style, and mood and help define the post-9/11 films movement. In post-9/11 films most genres rely on one or two dominant feelings. Science fiction, for example, relies on intense fear bordering on paranoia for its dramatic appeal. (149)

Of course, this description extends beyond just films that have been produced following 9/11.

Indeed, much of the media produced following 9/11 in some ways encapsulated this range of emotions at what occurred. Due to the trauma of what occurred during the events that surround 9/11 we see the reflections, the hopes, fears, dreams, and goals of that society (Pollard 150).

Above all the emotions being present in these media depictions of the War on Terror, a much larger theme emerged in media as the war dragged on: “highly polemical depictions of the events and of the government’s responses” began to become a norm in media (150). This larger, more critical take on the war is one that is central to my own analysis of the othering of enemies and the breakdown of American ideologies.

Of course, it is important to note here that *Halo: Combat Evolved* was developed prior to the events that occurred on September 11th and was released after those events. Therefore, 9/11 did not impact the story that is told within the narrative of the game. However, the militaristic culture that Boggs and Pollard discuss in *The Hollywood War Machine*, and the post-9/11 mindset of American audiences outlined in Pollard’s *Hollywood 9/11* certainly impact the perception of the game itself as those that played it would have been aware of the events that transpired two months prior to its release. Nevertheless, the idea of American Exceptionalism is not dependent upon the events of 9/11, as this was an ideology that dates back long before those

events. An analysis that uses the above theory to analyze a game that, while developed prior to 9/11, existed solely in a post-9/11 world, is fitting as the theory is defined by the idea of analyzing texts as cultural artefacts, that is, as pieces of literature that are understood in their contexts to the audiences that consumed them.

War theory also analyzes the presence of non-human characters in war narratives as they are often veiled critiques of our own handling of the war and the people in power controlling those events. Indeed, “post-9/11 films demonize monsters, zombies, and psychopaths instead of their ultimate targets, a government that appears disorganized, tyrannical, and incompetent” (Pollard 150). These depictions often underscore the need to apply our own discontent to something that is more thematically equivalent in media: vampires “may represent repressed minorities struggling for survival” in a post-9/11 world (152), supervillains like *Saw*’s Jigsaw may represent the torture scandals at Guantanamo Bay (158), and mutants or aliens are often used to represent American’s fear of an unknown invader, effectively othering our assailants (Pollard 161). Of course, the context of the film may turn these equivalencies on their head, but the importance remains that oftentimes films plant their understanding of these events onto a thematically equivalent stand-in to not make direct, but instead implied, statements on issues. *Halo 2* utilizes implied statements as the game’s alien Covenant highlights the flawed American Exceptionalist ideology present within post-9/11 culture.

With our knowledge that military-based media produced during the War on Terror that quickly followed the events of 9/11 contains a wide range of emotions that are felt towards our analog world’s burden of war campaigns, we can begin to analyze those emotions, depictions, and moments of mirroring to uncover what is being told about the war in the analog world through the stories presented on our television screens. While the above descriptions of what war

theory specifically looks for when analyzing media makes no mention of video games, it is easy to transcribe those same ideas to a video game in order to get at what a game is saying about a war as well. Though some video games do seek to simply represent or allow players to virtually simulate the wars seen on television, others seek to create a conversation on how war is perpetuated. According to Geoff Martin and Erin Steuter's book *Pop Culture Goes to War*, video games, much like movies, can sometimes "provoke us to ask questions and undermine militarism" through their depiction and mirroring of war (206). The authors go on to state that "video games and the gaming industry are being used as agents of militarization," and through their use of realistic glorification of war "this medium can also be utilized to question that very militarism" (206). It is this questioning and subversion of war that I believe is at the core of the *Halo* series.

"Unseal the Hushed Casket": The Unexplained Beginnings of War

The *Halo* series is set in the years 2552 – 2558, a future in which humans have expanded beyond the Earth and have successfully colonized planets within and outside of our solar system. War between nations has largely ended as there is a Unified Earth Government that governs all of humanity spread across the Milky Way galaxy, but insurrections are a common nuisance in areas deemed "the Outer Colonies." It is in these Outer Colonies that humanity was halted in their expansion by a coalition of enemies known as "the Covenant" (*Halo 2*).

The Covenant are a group of non-human intelligent species that scour the galaxy in search of relics from a civilization they call "the Forerunners," the Covenant view the Forerunners as gods, and once they discovered humanity living on a planet utilizing Forerunner technology they sought out to destroy humanity for their perceived sins. Thus, the war between the Covenant and humans began and a new type of soldier was needed to aid in the fight. The

SPARTANS were deployed into war, and one of them, John-117, is the player character of the game (*Halo 4*). *Halo: Combat Evolved* begins after a battle on the planet Reach, the first planet of the “Inner Colonies” to be destroyed by the Covenant. From there, the story of the five main games follows the player’s character, John-117’s successes in pushing back and destroying the Covenant leadership, and running into the Covenant’s gods, the Forerunners.

From the outset of *Halo: Combat Evolved*, we can see important acts of war being played out for the players to experience before they even take control of the player character. This positioning of war first serves to set up the significance of the player character being the only hope of humanity and the destroyer of the othered enemy he will soon be facing, thus forcing players into a position of great power within the game world. In the opening minutes of the game we see the human starship “The Pillar of Autumn” fleeing the planet and the attacking enemy, seeking refuge in a random “corner of space” (*Halo: CE*). This opening sequence of humanity being on the verge of defeat is not of particular note as action films and games often place humanity in an up-hill battle. However, one of the main non-player characters (NPCs) of the game, Cortana, a female AI who advises the captain of the ship on battle and evasive strategies and will go on to be with the player character throughout the game, suggests that continuing the fight against the Covenant on the Halo (a ringed shaped planet that players soon learn is actually a weapon) is careless as the war “has enough dead heroes” (*Halo: CE*). It is this suggestion of not fighting and recollection of the number of deaths humanity has already faced that is of particular note for my analysis.

As Weber notes, the suggestion of retreat or refusal to fight indicates “an acceptance of fear and general understanding of a fight *worth* fighting” (28, italics added for emphasis). This sentiment is most certainly noted within the following sequences of the game as the player

character, “Master Chief,” is called upon to take the fight to the surface of the ring world with an upsweep in music that serves as a rally call to players. The game places emphasis on the need to fight the battle at hand, almost as if humanity’s very existence depends on this single battle in a sector of the galaxy indicated as being “in the opposite direction of Earth and other human planetary colonies” (*Halo: CE*). What could be so important about this one battle that only a single “Halcyon Class Battlecruiser” is taking part in (*Halo: CE*)? It is all about the exceptional human player character and the othered nature of the enemy he is fighting on the ring.

When players first meet the character they will be controlling, known in this entry of the series only by his military rank, a long cinematic sequence is played indicating the importance the player character will have in the story to come. This cinematic is also indicative of players being thrust into the mid-point of the story, as the Master Chief is already well known and incredibly important in this world. Within this sequence the character is woken from “cryosleep” and simply asked to come to the bridge of the ship. When the Master Chief is awoken from cryosleep, a line of text pops up on a soldier’s computer screen that reads “unseal the hushed casket,” a reference to John Keats’ poem “To Sleep” (*Halo: CE*). In this poem the final two lines read, “Turn the key deftly in the oiled wards, / And seal the hushed Casket of my soul,” referencing death as being similar to sleep, though an altogether different experience (Keats, 13-14). The change between “seal” and “unseal,” when paired with the original lines, almost creates a resurrection during this scene. The resurrection of the Master Chief John-117 places the player character into a mythological position within the game, making his role within the war as that of humanity’s savior. What is most interesting about the role of being humanity’s savior here is that every character in the game, with the exception of two minor, unnamed characters, all speak with distinctly American accents, all military ranks are from the U.S. military, all classes of ships are

from the U.S. Navy, and all human characters have typically American names. As such we can easily see that “humanity” in the game is actually “America.” Since it is easy to draw a straight line from the broad “humanity” to the specific “America,” it is plain to see that the only way to stop this alien (othered) enemy is through the might of American Exceptionalism; where all else has failed, this one American can end the war. This exceptionalism is further reinforced when the Master Chief emerges from the cryotube in a flurry of Gregorian Chant, reminiscent of Orthodox churches, and low angle shots borrowing, typical cinematography, to show he is an incredibly powerful and imposing character, a role that players are placed into with no textual introduction, but no introduction is needed due to the exceptional nature of who he is and the vapidness of his enemies.



Figure 1. The Master Chief emerges from the “Hushed Casket” (Microsoft Studios, 2001)

By placing players in control of a character whose introduction indicates a mythic figure, the game forces them into the role of savior. Playing the role of savior positions players into a narrative “traversal” that will create the “definition of the player’s personal experience of journey through the video game” (Cardoso and Carvalhais, “Breaking” 30). The term *traversal* used in this context describes the journey a player makes while experiencing a video game’s story and world. While players learn next to no backstory of either their character or the war at

hand, the players' traversal is entirely based upon the war they are thrust into. What is most noteworthy of this fact is that video game traversal is usually underlined by the choices players make while making that journey through the game world, but in *Halo* those choices are incredibly restricted as players are mostly traversing through hallways or small fields that always restrict their movement to forward through both the world and story (26). In this way, the game sets players into a position that prevents them from being anything but saviors of humanity and an instrument of war. The players' role within the game world is determined from the very beginning, and their reason for killing all of the aliens in their path isn't told until the second game provides the context. Narratively the only bit of information we are told about the Halo, the planet from which the game's title is derived, is that it "holds deep religious significance," but that too is not given context until the next game in the series (*Halo: CE*). The aliens' beliefs, ideas, and identities are not at all important to the player, as the Covenant are simply the enemy standing in the path of the hero. This fact is not unlike the similar presentation of the enemy combatants in our analog world wars, as we know these people have beliefs, feelings, and ideas, but they simply are not important. Thus, we begin to see how the Covenant take the form of othered war-time enemies, while the exceptional hero is the only one civilians (players) are allowed to know.

What *Halo: Combat Evolved* does do, however, is underscore the two distinct sides of war through its use of NPC dialogue throughout the game. Understanding not only what the game's story is saying but also looking at the words being spoken in the game allows us to fully view the contexts of the war that is being waged within the game. The type of language used, as in the words that were chosen for the characters, plays an incredible role in the cultural identities the game creators were hoping to portray in their finished product. The language used within

pieces of popular media that depict war expresses the “moral, popular, and societal understanding of America’s individualistic identities during war” (Weber 4). Specifically, examining language use within popular media “clearly shows how dependent moral understandings are on historical codes and context, [and] how the ‘grammar’ of the story is as important as its narrativity” (Weber 6). By examining the “grammar,” or language patterns, of a story about war, the cultural identities of the people within and outside of the story can be uncovered.

In relation to *Halo*, the player character barely speaks, uttering only a total of 25 lines throughout the entirety of the game, none of which pertain to the enemies he is fighting. In fact, the Master Chief doesn’t even say the name of the enemy he spends the whole time fighting. This absence, according to Weber, is an indication that the player character views the enemy as unimportant and merely an obstacle to overcome in completing the mission at hand (111). Indeed, one of the Master Chief’s most iconic lines throughout the entirety of the series is “I need a weapon,” indicating that his eye is only on the next mission, and his enemy is merely something in the way of that mission’s end, further instilling the ideology of American Exceptionalism within this singular character (*Halo 2*). The Master Chief “need[s] a weapon” because he is set up to be the only one capable of using that weapon to save those he is tasked with saving. While many more lines are spoken by the NPCs that surround the player character, they only reinforce a sentiment that is devaluing the lives of those enemies the Master Chief is tasked with destroying.

Throughout *Halo: Combat Evolved*, the NPCs either refer to the enemy collectively as “them,” “the enemy,” and rarely by their coalition name “the Covenant.” By not using the same terms one may use to refer to humans when talking about their enemies, the characters within the

game world distance themselves from their enemy. This distancing is particularly seen in a scene in which some NPCs come across a deceased enemy known as a Sangheili “I mean...look at it,” they state (*Halo: CE*). Referring to this enemy as “it” completely removes the possibility that the enemies players are fighting have the capacity to be anything similar to humans (See Figure 2).



Figure 2: Covenant species with their species name and human name. From left to right Sangheili (Elites), Kig-Yar (Jackal), and Unggoy (Grunt) (Credit: Halo Nation, 2011)

According to Weber’s study of language, within our war culture this distancing from the enemies by calling them “it, them, they, combatants, or enemies” makes the language user feel as though the enemy is incapable of human emotions or as if the enemy is simply destined to be killed by “the good guys” (Weber 103). While the enemies in the game certainly do not look like humans, it is clear they are advanced and capable of thinking like humans. They have starships, technology, organization, and they even speak broken and heavily accented English from time to time. Most importantly, they have a clearly defined culture. These things point to the Covenant as being similar in many ways, outside of physical appearance, to humanity itself. Yet, human characters refuse to see this as the case; instead, they opt to other their enemies so as to not face the idea of killing something, or someone, similar to themselves.

This refusal to humanize the enemy characters within the game world is the same refusal we see in media depictions of real wars happening outside of the game, where war reports often

devalue those deemed as combatants, and only focus on the heroics of the “good guys.” Society often refuses to give our enemies human-like traits, preferring to simply mask their identities behind adjectives that can be used to refer to anything non-human or non-living (Weber 104). As such, the *Halo* series presents its audience with a real-world issue on understanding the enemies players face in the game and the enemies of the world outside of it. Throughout the first game in the series, the Covenant are held in a strange place narratively, as the characters around players seem to know a lot about them, but the players themselves are not given any information about them at all. This positioning of the enemy serves to inform players that there may be something else there, but it is of no importance. A sort of *if it doesn't look like you kill it* mentality is taken to the enemies throughout the game as it “appeals to the emotions of those living in the warring society of post-9/11 America” (Huntemann and Payne 227). These appeals present a troublesome concept when the enemies of the game have purpose, beliefs, cultures, and societies that become directly relatable to the player’s themselves. What happens when players are placed in direct control of an enemy they were just told to kill? These are questions that the following games in the series force players to consider, as the game world becomes larger, and the narrative deeper.

Enemies Like Us: *Halo 2*'s War on Terror

While the first game in the *Halo* series may not provide much context to the player character, the enemy, or the futuristic humanity, from the second game in the series on, *Halo* becomes much more narratively rich. While the enemies, the player character, and the language used to describe enemies are much the same between the games in the series, *Halo 2* presents a strong turn in my initial analysis, as the second game in the series breaks down the exceptionalism the previous game built up and poignantly underlines the flaws in othering the enemy. *Halo 2* also presents change in player perspective on multiple occasions as it forces

players to take control of one of the enemy characters, placing them in opposition to everything they have been fighting against throughout the narrative of the game. We also see a tonal shift in the game as players are given much more information on what is motivating the enemy faction in the war, thus forcing players to come to terms with why they are fighting and who they are fighting against.

The opening scenes of *Halo 2* provide players with context surrounding the enemies and, thus, information that humanizes the enemies fought in the first game of the series. By doing this, the game subverts the expectations of players as, in the previous game, players' expectations are set on the enemies continuing to be fodder in a war. The following described scene disrupts humanity's (American) exceptionalism by showing the importance of the enemies being fought and showing players that they are not simply killing aliens but are instead fighting an enemy that has true motives, cultures, and goals similar to that of the Master Chief's. In the opening scene of *Halo 2*, players are presented with more information about the enemies in two minutes than in the seven hours of the game previous. Here they are shown a clear hierarchy with characters who will later be named the Prophets of Truth, Mercy, and Regret taking a position of both power and religious leadership, and the Arbiter, a character who players will use later on in the game. What is most telling in this scene is the sheer amount of religious language used. We see that the name of the Covenant capital is called "Holy City High Charity," they refer to Halo as "the Sacred Ring" saying that humans "desecrate[ed] it with their filthy footsteps," the Master Chief is referred to as "demon," and there is mention of "heresy" and that a "Great Journey will begin." These examples, combined with what resembles a parliament meeting in progress, indicate a society with great culture and significance, making the enemies far less nonhuman than players may have first thought (*Halo 2*). By giving them life and fleshing out their

characteristics, the developers transition the enemies away from mere fodder for players to shoot at and bring them into the realm of becoming NPCs with more complete backstories and motives. The more complete nature of the NPCs creates tension between players and the objective of the game, which is preventing the Covenant from following through on their religious ideology that would ultimately destroy all life in the galaxy, as each enemy is becoming a much more fully built character in the game world. The fully realized nature of the NPCs exists beyond the cutscenes throughout the game as well, as they are voiced characters that players hear around them throughout the game. If players are taking a slower pace, they may hear full discussions between enemy characters where they are discussing either religion or just what they are going to be eating later. Further, if players take a faster pace through the game, they will hear various pieces of dialogue in battle that indicate a more fleshed out character and narrative, as they will mention their end goals or show fear and anger at players for preventing them from reaching those goals. Thus, we can begin to see how these enemies can take shape in their parallels to the analog world.

By looking at the enemies players face within the game's event space, players can draw very tight parallels to the current enemies faced by the United States in the War on Terror. Indeed, many others have drawn these similarities which prompted the developers of *Halo 2*, Bungie Studios, to release a statement that denies their paralleling real-world conflicts, stating, "Let me be really clear about this: there is no intentional political message in Halo2 [sic], anti-Bush or otherwise" (qtd. in Voorhees). Interestingly, however, the statement goes on to acknowledge that the game could, and can, be viewed in many different political ways, indicating that the game developers specifically designed the game with various possible readings in mind (Voorhees). While this description leaves much to the imagination of what

exactly the developers intended their message to be through the game, it is also clear that the game's story design was entirely based upon an ideological group of enemy combatant's mass killing humanity due to perceived religious differences; a very straight line from the game to current socio-political conflicts, especially the War on Terror's ideological combatants, can be drawn.

Despite the obvious parallel present in the game, I do not believe the developer's intent here was to glorify the war; instead, I argue that the developers are attempting to humanize the war to its players through their insistence on forcing players to understand and view the nature of war in an interactive way. Bungie isn't embracing war through their game, but the developers are resisting it by allowing players to both witness the death and destruction wrought by the Covenant through the Master Chief's eyes and through playing on the other side of the battlefield with a second player character, named the Arbiter, introduced in the second game. In these instances of shifting player perspectives, the game "fleetingly rupture[s] the surfaces of [the] mediated realism," essentially bringing players to the jarring moment of realizing the enemies they have been so haphazardly killing have a deeper meaning of life within the game world (Chan 277). *Halo 2* jars players by suddenly placing them in control of the Arbiter, a character who is fighting against the humans and counter to the Master Chief's goals. Here, the game shows the depth and breadth of the enemies players have been fighting against, giving them goals, lore, culture, and, most importantly, a real voice. We hear the Arbiter speak against the goals of the Master Chief, calling him a "demon" on multiple occasions, but these moments serve to upset the position of players within the war, showing players that there are two sides to the war they have been engaging in. This, for lack of a better term, humanization of the enemies jars players by making them question the war they are fighting and upsetting the exceptionalism

they thought humanity (America) had in the game. The humanization pushes back against the traditional take on enemy portrayals in post-9/11 media “where the enemies are unclear, and the methods of attack are unconventional;” thus, the action and stories presented in *Halo 2*, and the wider *Halo* series, persist in showing players that there are stories to be told on both sides of the conflict (Huntemann and Payne 224).

On the human side of the conflict, the clear context of the War on Terror is presented from the outset of the game where the story thrusts players into a continuing war of misguided religious fundamentalism that is juxtaposed against the analog world’s own issues. Here, the game presents a strong divide between the human and alien characters by telling a story where humanity is needed by the Covenant in order to fulfill their religious goals, and the player character, augmented to be the ultimate soldier, is the only one who can stop the beginning of the “Great Journey.” These moments serve to initially position players in a place of power, as they play as a human character who is saving another human character from being used by the religious fundamentalist Covenant for their own gain. Stepping back for a moment, we can see that these same tactics are present in real-life moments of the War on Terror: religious fundamental terrorists use those who do not adhere to their religion to reach their own goals. As such, the world in which *Halo* takes place is much the same as our own world where the War on Terror occurs: “[The Human-Covenant War] is waged against an ideologically driven opponent whose beliefs are rooted in religious fundamentalism and disallow[s] any alternative but conflict” (Voorhees). However, these parallels run deeper than a simple conflict between two ideologically different combatants: “just as official discourses of the War on Terror produce the belief that the conflict is winnable [...] *H2* assures players that the game is winnable by positioning them as one of only two remarkable characters uniquely capable of addressing the

woes that assail the galaxy” (Voorhees). But it is the second of the two mentioned characters, the Arbiter, that allows *Halo 2* to succeed in its ability of humanizing the parallels of the War on Terror throughout the game’s narrative.

The Arbiter belonged to the Covenant before he fell once the hierarchy blamed him for the destruction of the Sacred Ring that occurred at the end of the first *Halo* game, and acts as a secondary player character at various points throughout the second game in the series. As the Arbiter, at this point, is still a member of the Covenant, though labeled as a religious heretic, he provides a shifting point of focus within this game, allowing players to take the perspective of the very enemy they were tasked to dispatch in the series so far. This shift in the game’s narrative does more than simply deepen the lore of the game world; instead, it acts to humanize and sympathize portions of the Covenant forces. Of course, the use of the term *humanize* may seem odd, considering the Arbiter is very much not a human physically; however, emotionally, linguistically, and resolutely, the Arbiter is human. More importantly, to the point of the game’s balancing of who is friend and who is foe, the Arbiter is *exactly* like the Master Chief. He and the Master Chief “are the same size and build, and allow the player to run the same speed, jump the same distance, and crouch equally low,” which makes this player character on par with the “good guys” (Voorhees).

Eventually players will come to accept the Arbiter as an in-game friend and learn about their forced enemy through a manner of “rejection” and “contemplation” (Cardoso and Carvalhais, “What,” 58). What this means for players is that they will initially scoff at the simple prospect of playing as their given enemy, but through that play and the story told through the rejected character, players will grow to accept the Arbiter as both an interesting character and an ally to the Master Chief (58). This acceptance is important when we consider the Arbiter’s

position as a reflection of America's enemy in the analog world, as we can see the Arbiter being used to soften the blow the Covenant may have on humanity. The struggle seen within the hierarchy of humanity's ultimate enemy during the later parts of the game's story serves to corrupt and tilt the viewpoint of a single solidified enemy through the rise of the Arbiter as an overall ally of the humans. By the time the Covenant begins to fall apart in a way not dissimilar to the Western Schism, the player's acceptance of the Arbiter is on par with the player's comfort of the Master Chief. At this point, a deeper political statement on the War on Terror can be seen within the game.

As the Arbiter realizes the potential destruction that will be wrought through the activation of a Halo ring, he makes multiple attempts to stop the "Great Journey" he so ardently fought to begin. These attempts destroy the exceptionalism humanity claimed to have within the game world, as they, up to the moment the Arbiter turned on his original allies, were the only ones fighting against the Covenant. In the analog world the same exceptionalism is claimed by America as "the War on Terror is a means to restore America to its place of privilege on the world stage" (Voorhees). However, the presence of the Arbiter stepping in and achieving something that humans have long been unable to achieve undercuts the value of America's narrative in the War on Terror because it undermines the foundations America Exceptionalism has been built upon. The implications of the Arbiter and *Halo's* mirroring of the War on Terror go further than simply showing how unexceptional America is in the grand scheme of a global socio-political issue; the game uses its mirroring and thematic framework to provide a more targeted critique of those in charge of directing the ones who would place the Master Chief and the Arbiter in a war on fundamentalist groups.

The two playable characters of the game position both the outlook and the ethos of the War on Terror in opposition to the reasoning and positive disposition of the war declaration in the analog world. The Arbiter can be seen as a character of uncertainty as he was cast down in the hierarchy of the Covenant and placed in a role in which a quick death was certain (*Halo 2*). His rise and survival as a savior of humanity despite not being human is said, according to Voorhees, to be emblematic “of uncertainty in a tale of decline and fall of social order [which is] at odds with the Bush Administration’s sunny forecast for the War on Terror.” The Arbiter’s position as savior also humanizes and creates a point of contention in the entirety of the War on Terror’s outlook. This position also combats the idea that all enemies are simply enemies and fodder for the American war machine by presenting depth and emotional connections within an enemy. The Master Chief, on the other hand, presents an experience of the mirrored War on Terror that questions the very foundations of the war by “undermin[ing] the ethos of the Bush Administration, as central authority, to define the War on Terror” (Voorhees). This questioning of ethos is achieved by both the Master Chief’s inability to resolve the crux of the game’s war narrative and by allying himself with a member of the enemy alien races. Thus, *Halo 2* both mirrors and critiques America’s current and longest lasting war by emulating events and factions narratively and creating moments of reflection functionally through the character perspective and arches.

The ending of *Halo 2* also serves to combat the idea of American Exceptionalism by not providing a clear path to beating the othered enemies. While the Arbiter and the Master Chief exceed in their immediate goal of preventing the Covenant from destroying all life in the galaxy, the final scenes of the game show the Covenant advancing on Earth and, presumably, bringing the intergalactic fight of the previous two games to humanity’s home world (*Halo 2*). With only

one small part of the fight won by the two player characters, we see that American Exceptionalism has not been reinforced, or regained, through simply completing the sought-after objective of the game. This ending shows players the multifaceted issues of a belief in the exceptional nature of America, by looking at the complexities of war and how important it is to allow cooperation and understanding of those once believed to be enemies.

The *Halo* series and its expanded universe are vast and full of social, political, and moral reflections of humanity outside of the game world. Understanding and examining the nuanced approach to the series' representation of human politics and war unearths commentary on who we are, what we fear, and what our goals as humans are, both now and in the future. Above all, what I have presented here represents the core value of literature, of which video games are certainly a part; it speaks of who we are as a people and who we hope to become. *Halo* is, at its core, both a cautionary tale and a take on what lengths we will go to survive the unthinkable. It also serves to shed light on what happens when both sides of the story are understood. Above all, *Halo* wants its fans to experience the complexities of human life and how those in command misunderstand those complexities.

CHAPTER 2: THE FALL AND RISE OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM IN *WOLFENSTEIN*

This isn't a war, but the breaking of seals, the undoing of life itself.

-William "BJ" Blaskowicz, Wolfenstein: The New Order

Introduction

The *Wolfenstein* series began its long history in 1981 with the release of *Castle Wolfenstein*, and since that initial release, the series has spawned numerous sequels and spin-off titles before being rebooted in 2014 with the release of *Wolfenstein: The New Order*. Throughout the series' history, leading up to the 2014 reboot, the games have focused on an alternate-history set around World War II wherein players are tasked with foiling plots set in motion by Nazi Germany that would have ultimately led to the demise of the United States. The reboot series retains the alternate-history timeline and the player character Captain William Blaskowicz yet turns the plot to see the demise of the United States come to fruition after Captain Blaskowicz is incapacitated at the outset of the *Wolfenstein: The New Order* (the first game of this reboot series). After waking from a 14-year coma at the beginning of *The New Order*, the player character sees a world consumed by Nazi Germany, as the United States surrendered after Germany detonated an atomic bomb over New York City. The former United States, all of Europe, and most of Asia are under Nazi order while a war is being waged on the African continent. *The New Order* and *The New Colossus* present an interesting take on the rise and fall of American Exceptionalism, with *The New Order* representing the fall and *The New Colossus* reinstating exceptionalism that is a result of a new, more inclusive Dream.

For my analysis I will be looking at the two aforementioned games in the *Wolfenstein* series, *The New Order* and *The New Colossus*, to uncover the way in which American

Exceptionalism is presented within those games, how the games uncover why exceptionalism is lost, and what it would take for America to regain power within a world that lost power. The two games have separate timelines that players can choose to follow based on a single decision at the beginning of *The New Order* (a decision that can, of course, be changed at the beginning of *The New Colossus*). While the choice largely does not impact the overall narrative of the games, with the exception of minor characters and dialogue being different, I feel it is necessary to note that my analysis of the games is based on the timeline in which Wyatt is saved and Fergus is sacrificed in the first chapter of *The New Order*. Unlike the previous chapter, the rebooted *Wolfenstein* games present a war that has occurred in the analog world, World War II; however, this war is told through a retro-futuristic alternate history in order to, at first glance, play out a story that exemplifies the fears of American citizens during World War II. However, I believe the games tell a story that goes much further than a “what could have been” narrative; these games tell a contemporary story that critiques the ways in which the United States handles domestic inclusion and highlights the flaws with the typical American Dream narrative. I will uncover these critiques and highlights by looking at how the United States fell in the game and then how it only rose again when the combined effort of a racially, linguistically, and gender diverse group of people came together to achieve a singular cause. The new America in the game world, ultimately, is a much more inclusive place where the American Dream truly is attainable for everyone, and, as such, the exceptionalism returns anew and available to anyone in the new America.

The Intersectional Theory

The theories used in this chapter build upon the previous, in that I use aspects of the ludonarrative war theory I outlined in chapter 1, while also looking at an intersection of these theories

with that of the American Dream to explore the social commentary at the center of the two *Wolfenstein* games to be analyzed in this chapter. In brief, the war theory at work in these two chapters explores the impact war has on societies, their ideas, and the art that comes from the conflict with special attention to the national identity of those involved. I once again utilize Cynthia Weber's book *Imagining America at War: Morality, Politics, and Film*, where the author examines the language and depictions of identity within media following 9/11 in comparison to the language that followed the attacks on Pearl Harbor. In this chapter, I primarily utilize her analysis of the ways in which Americans examine themselves in the face of conflict. She outlines a three-way identity theory that asks who we think we are, who we think we were, and who we hope to become. By utilizing this outline for identity, I analyze the ways in which some of the characters in the game view themselves in relation to America and the idea of the American Dream. This method of analysis allows me to uncover the reasoning behind why some characters view America with exceptionalism, while others understand it for its lack of exceptionalism. I use exceptionalism in my analysis to refer to the perceived universal power and positive social and political ideologies (i.e. freedom, democracy, and opportunity for all) that America is said to have by national leaders, patriots, or normal citizens of America (Tyrrell). Therefore, when I state that exceptionalism is lost, it means that America can no longer be perceived by its citizens as being a place that fosters positivity or power, and the reverse is true if I state exceptionalism is gained.

In conjunction with Weber, I also return to war theorist Tom Pollard's *Hollywood 9/11: Superheroes, Supervillains, and Super Disasters* to analyze the emotional responses that occur from the characters of the games. By understanding the emotional responses of the characters, along with how they speak, we can uncover the identities of these characters and their general

understandings of the events that are occurring around them. It is important to understand the character's emotional responses because they allow us to understand their position in the fall and rise of exceptionalism that occurs throughout the game as well as their view of the American Dream and how they fit within the dismantling and rebuilding of that dream.

In addition to these war theorists, I utilize ludologists Miguel Carvalhais and Pedro Cardoso's article "What Then Happens When Interaction is Not Possible: The Virtuoso Interpretations of Ergodic Artefacts" to explore the lack of player perspectives that at times occur within the analyzed games. As the analysis presented in this chapter takes on a more traditional narrative feel, the positioning of players as "virtuoso," Cardoso and Carvalhais's term for a passive reader of game narratives rather than an active player in the narrative as is traditional in video games, takes an important part of how the narrative is to be interpreted (55). They explain this phenomenon as the game no longer being a game, but it is instead a "reading system" wherein players are tasked with simply going through the motions while making no direct change, and the game is signified by there being no new mechanics introduced and no new paths to explore (57). This important detail of the analysis indicates that the narrative of the game is more important than players' position within it and becomes especially important when the narrative's crux is revealed to players. By positioning players as passive readers of the narrative, the game creates a narrative of "ergodic contemplation" that focuses on players' "mental exploration" while still retaining the necessary "non-trivial effort from the reader" to be considered ergodic (58). Utilizing virtuoso interpretation, I explore and set up the narrative as being entirely experienced by players in a near traditional narrative state where the mental interpretation of the game, or what players think about the narrative of the game, is far more important than the passive playing of the game.

It is important to note here that players being a part of the virtuosic system stands despite there being a choice in narrative progression at the beginning of *The New Order* as this is the only narrative decision they make throughout the game. While players are aware of the choice they make and are reminded of the choice by their save file being clearly labeled as “Wyatt Timeline,” in the case of my present analysis, they retain their position as virtuoso due to the gameplay elements being passive to the narrative. According to Cardoso and Carvalhais, readers are “limited to the interpretative function and barred from developing any of the other function[s]” that are traditionally seen in games (57). While players may have limited roles in the narrative of the virtuosic game, it doesn’t exclude them from having roles in early parts of the game. It is when gameplay variety and choices taper off within the play through of the game that virtuosic interpretation beings to arise (Cardoso and Carvalhais 59).

Looking at the game play perspectives in a passive light allows the central theme of the fall and rise of American Exceptionalism to come through and the traditional view of the American Dream to be disrupted, exposing both as a dream for some but a nightmare for others. The American Dream stereotypically sees the same suburban neighborhood with a picket fence, a husband and wife, two children, and barbeques in the back yard. An aspect of these American Dream sequences often overlooked is that they are starkly without diversity. According to Jim Cullen’s book *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* the Dream was and is really only attainable by a very small group of select people, and it was laid out that way from the Puritan-based inception of its idea, indicating the traditional view of the Dream is a lie to most (10). This sentiment, of the Dream being a lie, is at the center of my argument within this analysis.

Even today, the idea of the American Dream persists but “all too often it serves as a lazy shorthand, particularly on the part of those who use it to ignore, or even consciously obscure, real divisions in American society” (Cullen 189). This use of the American Dream to ignore the divisions present all around Blaskowicz is seen in the game. By tracking Blaskowicz’s view of the American Dream throughout the game, in conjunction with the ludo-narrative war theory outlined above, I show that the *Wolfenstein* games analyzed in this chapter highlight that the fall and rise of American Exceptionalism coincides with a blinded view of what America truly is, and that exceptionalism can only be regained through a reshaping of the Dream.

The Fall of Exceptionalism

In the opening moments of *Wolfenstein: The New Order* players are met with a grim scene: Nazi Germany defeats America, and there is nothing they can do to stop it. In the scenes leading up to the penultimate battle that will ultimately end with the United States being invaded and overthrown, players are shown flashes of the 1960s American Dream: images of picket fences, backyard barbeques, nuclear families—all white—fade to destruction and defeat. This juxtaposition of the white American Dream alongside war-torn struggles creates a narrative that positions the Dream as being unattainable and undesirable because the enemies players are presented with, the Nazis, are also trying to achieve the same thing: a white world, with white Dreams. (*Wolfenstein: TNO*).

When the United States falls at the hand of Nazi Germany in the beginning of the game, amid the flashes of the dream, players are shown a world that is devoid of people of color because the player character, unbeknownst to him, fails to view the world in a way where people of color have a place. Throughout the entire introductory cut-scene, players see no people of color and hear only English or German languages. There is no mention of women, except in the

player character's dream where Blaskowicz's dream wife, for lack of a better term, is shown making him food and tending to the children; and there is only elitist ideology. By juxtaposing the scenes of hellish war against idyllic scenes of the American Dream, the game seeks to "undermine the high moral ground held by most World War II films by depicting American greed and corruption" (Pollard 62). The American greed is represented in the games through the images of the American Dream, and corruption is represented by the war itself, and the lack of diversity within either Blaskowicz's day dreams or the scenes of the virtual war being early hints of America's own racial corruption that is brought to light throughout the game. This social corruption and injustice that the game dismantles by showing the issues within American culture with regards to the American Dream, racial and gender issues as America falls amidst images of a whitewashed patriarchy, only begins to be rebuilt when there is a balance of races and genders who are doing the rebuilding.

The following scene sets the stage for the way in which the rage and violence are handled after the player character realizes that the United States fell during his time in a coma. William Blaskowicz's coma of 14 years due to an explosion during an attack on one of Hitler's compounds leads to him waking up in the year 1960 and learning that the war is over, and Nazis everywhere. Blaskowicz immediately responds with disbelief saying, in a Texas accent, "The war ain't over, look at all these Nazis walking around" (*Wolfenstein: TNO*). In response to this, Anya, a member of the Polish family who runs the hospital where Blaskowicz has been staying while in the coma, states simply, "The Nazi[s] rule the world now, they are everywhere." When asked about the United States, Blaskowicz is told, "They surrendered 12 years ago, when [the] Nazi[s] atom bombed their country" (*Wolfenstein: TNO*). Following this, Blaskowicz believes that he can find an American resistance group because he cannot believe the United States can

lose to the Nazis because that is simply not the way his American Dream ends and because he still believes America to be exceptional in the wider world. He strongly believes in the exceptional nature of the United States and believes a resistance group must be hiding somewhere in the region, so he viciously tortures a Nazi SS soldier and learns of a resistance group hiding in Berlin.

The rage, denial, and gratuitous violence displayed during the above-described scene (especially during the interrogation) is a defining moment of war narratives, and those emotional moments in war narratives are described by war theorist Pollard as not being focused on the war itself but “focused on the repressive elements” present in the war (72). Moreover, in the post-9/11 world of today, rage depicted in World War II narratives where Jewish fighters are successful in fighting back, such as the film *Inglorious Bastards* (which *The New Order*’s creators have stated as inspiration for the game), indicate vindicated rage against repressors (72). In addition, the rebooted *Wolfenstein* series, despite being set within the 1960s and World War II era, is a product of contemporary society as the portrayal of rage and violence are aimed squarely at flawed societal ideals and those who seek to repress others. The player character, however, struggles with who exactly his repressors are as he moves from being vehemently against anything deemed non-American to understanding that it takes people of all backgrounds, races, and creeds to build something strong enough to fight back the true repressors. This struggle shows a weakening of his American Dream ideology and a move to understanding the flawed nature of the Dream.

When players reach the resistance hideout in Berlin, they first learn that the resistance is called the “Kreisau Circle,” a fictionalized version of a historic group of the same name that served a similar purpose as the game’s representation does. In the analog world, the Kreisau

Circle was active between 1940 and 1944 and met to discuss how the German government should be reorganized after the fall of the Third Reich (Von Moltke 8). In a final act that resulted in the Circle's dismantling, the resistance launched a failed attempt to assassinate Hitler which led to the members being hunted by the Third Reich (67). The same ideology is used in the game's version of the Circle in that they are attempting to implement a new government and deal crippling blows to the Nazi government. The in-game group is made up of people of various races, sexes, and creeds with the leader of the group being Caroline, a physically disabled veteran of the former United States military. When Blaskowicz first enters the Circle headquarters, he spots the assistant leader of the group, Klaus, who is a former Nazi SS soldier and immediately attacks him, perpetuating the rage directed at his perceived repressor. It is only when Wyatt, one of the co-founders of the Circle and formerly a comrade who players choose to save in the beginning of the game, pulls him off Klaus that Blaskowicz looks around the headquarters and realizes the diversity of the members, a moment that is made clear to players by the "camera" stopping on each of the member's faces.

This is the first time players see black characters, strong female characters (apart from the opening American Dream sequence mentioned above), people who do not speak German or English, as well as physically and mentally disabled characters. The character diversity occurs at this point because entering the Kreisau Circle is a moment of clarity for Blaskowicz. While he is never shown to be either racist or sexist, he is shown to be entirely blind to issues of equality. According to Cullen, blindness to equality is due to "all the laziness and hypocrisy [of the Dreamer's] attitude toward equality" (108). In *Wolfenstein*, the lack of diversity in characters up to this point is symbolic of Blaskowicz being unconcerned of anyone who is not like him, because he does not think or concern himself with people who do not fit into his view of

America. However, this moment begins to weaken Blaskowicz's view of the American Dream, as he realizes the world is not just for his taking, but it must be upheld by everyone, and freedom must be for everyone.

As previously mentioned, the appearance of strong women and mentally disabled characters within war narratives is uncommon and in any type of video game is rare; thus, their presence is meant to bring gravity to what is occurring within the game. The roles of Caroline Becker, the leader of the Kreisau Circle, and Max Hass, a mentally disabled member of the Circle, present an added layer to the narrative taking place within *Wolfenstein*. Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard posit that the presence of physically and mentally disabled characters in war narratives are not only meant to show the hellishness of war also “the eclipse of the American Dream” and, as such, undermine the victories of war (78). Ultimately, these characters' presence within the narrative of *Wolfenstein* underscores the lack of victories found within the story, effectively dissolving Blaskowicz's American Dream by showing that survival and positive outlooks do not provide a way to freedom. Instead, survival in the game's world means literally losing parts of yourself and figuratively losing hard fought battles. Blaskowicz's meeting and teaming up with these characters requires him to step back from his original vision of an American Dream and picture the future America with more diverse faces in order to return America to an exceptionalist position.

However, the game also inverts this traditional outlook of disability in war narratives by using these characters as bastions of freedom from the Nazis. Max is a character who suffered severe brain trauma resulting in a third of his brain being surgically removed as an infant, leaving him only able to say his name and having child-like behavior such as playing with toys and coloring with crayons. As a member of the Circle, Max is a pacifist and is also a defender of

the headquarters who takes his position seriously. He is often shown as being happy and genuinely excited to see members return home. The juxtaposition of his life trauma and this sunny disposition also inverts the traditional sense of disability in war narratives, as Max represents the very thing the Circle fights for, happiness and an end of war.

Other members of the Kreisau Circle present changes in the game's tone while also providing a greater amount of diversity within the game, and it is the character J who thrusts the game into a social commentary on equality and acceptance. J is one of the few black characters we see in the game, and he serves as an electrical specialist for the Circle. He says few lines throughout the game, but one of his and the players' first exchanges presents a strong tonal shift from that of believing in America as it was before the war to understanding the problems inherent in its Dream. When Blaskowicz asks why J doesn't fight on the front lines of the resistance, J explains that he had to flee across the ocean when the Nazis came to America because the former America bowed to the Nazis immediately. He would have been put in a gas chamber, so he doesn't believe in fighting for an American cause, let alone the America Blaskowicz dreams of. Blaskowicz defends his position as an America saying "that isn't the America I fought for" prompting J to respond saying:

Really? I was little, my mother wanted to take me to the picture show, but we had to go in through the fucking colored entrance. I wanted a hot dog and a lemonade, but the sign says, "we don't serve negros in this establishment." You're a patriot. The blue-eyed, jarhead, motherfucking Nazi killing, Patriot that you are, you are still a fucking puppet to the man. You are exactly the kind of guy they ordered in come lynching time. You don't get it do you? Before all of this, before the Germans, before the war, back home, man, you were the Nazis. Violence: language of the man. (*Wolfenstein: TNO*)

This pivotal quote by J, occurring at about the half-way point in the game at a time when the resistance was building to a mission that would attempt to destabilize the Nazi hold in Berlin, shows players that the American Dream Blaskowicz was reminiscing about at the beginning of

the game was not perfect. It shows that the diverse group of individuals within the Kreisau Circle can potentially build a new America that is inclusive of the people who were always oppressed, even before the Nazis showed those who did not see the oppression what it looks like. Since exceptionalism was lost due to the flawed American Dream, the group can rebuild exceptionalism that is attainable by all Americans and create a Dream that is not exclusive. Ultimately, J's conversation with Blaskowicz, the inclusiveness of the Kreisau Circle, and the active role the disabled characters take in the war narrative shows that the American Dream was always a lie, as the United States already had a Nazi mentality before it was taken over, and their exceptionalism was also a lie. The game also shows, however, that it will take a completely new outlook on inclusivity and an acknowledgment of what was once flawed in America to rebuild a Dream that is inclusive of all people and an exceptionalism that is truly exceptional to all people who live in America.

Cynthia Weber describes the language of war as defining “who we think we were/are; who we wish we'd never been; who we really are; and who we might become” (5). Blaskowicz speaks the language of who we think we were, while J speaks the language of who we really are and who we wish we had never been. Blaskowicz staunchly standing behind the America he dreamt of rids the “moral ambivalence and ambiguity” that comes from war itself due to him believing an American Dream that is a product of his society, and his “interpretations of historical narratives and their popular signifying forms are so crossed and confused with one another that attempting to police fact from fiction fails” (Weber 11-12). Blaskowicz was so consumed by the image of what he thought America looked like that he became blinded by what it really was and is, and it is J who shows players what is really happening in the world around them. J's language of war speaks of the hard truths of humanity; it shows us who we really are

by highlighting what Weber calls the “vigilante nature” of America (Weber 91). This language unveils the true nature of society by showing us “when some forms of humanity get in our way, it is our moral duty to ‘take them out’” (91). This mentality and grammar of war is highlighted by J through his inversion of the term “Nazi.” J points out that Blaskowicz has been the very thing he is fighting because he turned a blind eye on “some forms of humanity” (91) in America before the war (*Wolfenstein: TNO*).

Players’ realization of Blaskowicz’s determination to defend something that J deems as equally bad as Nazi rule positions players in a liminal space. The player character is a definitive American, with core American values and a distinctive American accent, yet he is determined to defend an America that is decidedly not the America he imagines. The liminal positioning, that is the placing of players in a position of control and loss of control at the same time, undermines the typical ludo-narrative element of “human-machine collaboration” (Cardoso and Carvalhais, “What” 57). While it may seem, in these moments, that the game is removing control from players and that they are being told what to believe within the game world, *The New Order*, instead, makes use of “ergodic contemplation” where players, despite the game taking control of the story, gain “the mental exploration and reconfiguration of analogies – or simulations – of the system [and is] not limited to a classic interpretation [due to] virtuosic interpretation” (Cardoso and Carvalhais, “What” 58). To simplify this concept, we can think of how the game play becomes similar to understanding the text of a book, where the experience of reading and understanding the plot and turning pages is passive but required to progress the narrative. After this point of *The New Order*, no new gameplay mechanics are introduced, so after this section of the game, the plot elements are central to the experience. Essentially, players are forced to reconcile and internalize what is happening in the game to move forward in the story, and the

cerebral experience of the game becomes far more important than the game play elements. This cerebral experience, according to Cardoso and Carvalhais, creates an opportunity for players to fully explore a “virtuosic interpretation,” or a near entirely mental experience of the game after gameplay elements become second to a player’s position in the narrative (55). Interestingly, the virtuosic interpretation takes hold after J supplants the term Nazi onto the player character, the players themselves, and America. Following this point of the narrative, the resistance succeeds in disrupting Nazi operations but ultimately fails in resurrecting a new America, an aspect that aligns with Cardoso and Carvalhais’s virtuosic interpretation, where the narrative is internalized through the players’ cerebral experience of the game.

Following the scene with J, Blaskowicz’s idea of an American Dream revitalization ends abruptly. His disposition shifts from bringing America back to a much grander idea of ending the Nazi’s world-wide reign, a position that is more in line with the rest of the members of Kreisau Circle. Nearing the final quarter of the game, players meet a Jewish scientist named Set Roth who is said to be a member of a Jewish secret society named Da’at Yichud (a name derived from a Jewish mystical tradition of Kabbalah meaning “knowledge of being” (Bosman)) and who becomes an important member of the Circle that will ultimately lead to the resistance gaining a foothold in their fight against the Nazis. The Da’at Yichud, and by extension Set Roth, present an ironic tone to the game as the Nazis are said to have used their artifacts to derive their technological prowess over the world leading to their victory, yet they sought to exterminate those who gave them power. It is the presence of Roth and his knowledge of Da’at Yichud principles that allow the resistance to execute their plan to capture a German U-boat and set up a mobile base that will allow them to travel to parts of the world where Nazi Germany is weakest and where resistance parties are cropping up: the former United States.

It is only when Set Roth enters the Circle that ground is gained, a new exceptionalism shows signs of life, and a more inclusive American Dream begins to appear. However, the exceptionalism that is gained here is different than what was thought to be held at the beginning of the game and is not aimed at the United States at all. Indeed, the game ends with exceptionalism being held by all that the Nazis and the former United States lacks: diversity. In an attack at the end of the game, several of the members of the Circle are killed or taken. And while it may seem as though the Circle is about to be defeated, it is the diverse group that succeeds in allowing the leaders of the Circle to escape and continue the fight. J reminds Blaskowicz in his final moments that it is only through the might of the people against “the man” that the Nazis can be defeated (*Wolfenstein: TNO*). It is this fight against what Blaskowicz now knows as “the man” that can bring exceptionalism and a true Dream to life, so he dissolves the dreams of his past, and resolves to bring that exceptionalism to life and the Dream to the people of America. J’s sacrifice certainly could be linked back to the American Dream Blaskowicz had at the beginning of the game. J, however, will be one of the final major black characters to perish in the quest to rectify the American Dream, and bring true exceptionalism to America.

With the dissolution of the American Dream Blaskowicz and the Circle leave on their captured U-Boat and head to America, where exceptionalism can be gained only when American mentality is entirely destroyed. The Circle’s deliverance of a new exceptionalism is reinforced when the following line is delivered to images of explosions, fallen members of the Circle, and the surviving members retreating to the U-Boat: “A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame is the imprisoned lightning, and her name Mother of Exiles. With silent lips ‘Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me’” (*TNO, Return*). This line is part of a

poem by Emma Lazarus titled “The New Colossus” that is engraved on a tablet at the base of the Statue of Liberty and is foreshadowing the events to come in the next game that bears the same name as the poem. With exceptionalism lost and a path to regaining that exceptionalism and rebuilding a new America clear, the Circle leaves Germany where they will accept the tired, poor, and huddled masses to rebuild.

What It Takes to Return to Exceptionalism

At the beginning of *The New Colossus*, the players are shown scenes that reinforce the lie of the American Dream and the lack of exceptionalism during the prologue scenes. Here players see depictions of Blaskowicz as a child being told by his father that “sickly minds and dirty bodies and cockroaches doing everything in their power to rob the white man of what he’s earned,” which reveals to them that Blaskowicz’s American Dream was always a lie and America lacked exceptionalism from the beginning (*Wolfenstein: TNC*). Following this scene, the player character awakens from surgery to find the new Kreisau Circle mobile headquarters under attack while they are approaching the Manhattan shoreline. During this time, Blaskowicz is confined to a wheelchair and players must navigate the level with their health severely restricted which makes the gameplay difficult. While in the wheelchair, players are unable to traverse stairs, they quickly gain speed going down slopes, and are only able to defend themselves with one handed weapons. The players become the very thing Blaskowicz says America was meant to protect at the end of the first game: the tired, poor, and huddled masses, exposing Blaskowicz and players to the reality that undermined the American Dream the player character had at the beginning of the previous game. Players are forced to play in this perspective for the first 20 minutes of gameplay, during which time the player character repeats to himself lines that his father said during the flashback sequences, reinforcing his feelings of uselessness

and the trauma of his youth and reminding himself that he has to continue his fight to rid America of those who believe the way his father did.

When players finally reach their destination, they are attacked by a Nazi soldier and nearly killed but are saved by a returning character from the Kreisau Circle, Anya. Blaskowicz says to her, “I am a burden” (*Wolfenstein: TNC*). This statement is yet another line we hear his father say to him during the flashback sequences prior to the start of gameplay. This gameplay sequence and traumatic internal dialogue place players in a unique position in first person shooters as they are entirely unable to complete objectives without the assistance of someone else. According to Carr, in video games “disabled bodies are positioned as producers of trauma or as threats to the integrity of the able body” and playing as a disabled character removes players’ ability to “police” the body they are taking control of (Carr). After control of a disabled body is given to players, they seek to gain control of an able body and seek to overcome whatever disabled them. Moreover, while players will gain control over an able body shortly after this sequence, controlling an able mind devoid of the trauma Blaskowicz has undergone is never within their grasp. The trauma is, ultimately, a reflection of what America was and continues to be: torn, divided, and weakened by a past whose hold does not relent. Blaskowicz continuing to fight despite being in his weakened state reflects his drive and need to stand against those who are like his father was during his youth and demonstrates his need to rebuild a true exceptionalist state.

To continue that fight against those like his father, Blaskowicz is able to, with the assistance of an exoskeleton, track down the resistance group in Manhattan that the Nazis have been trying to capture and kill. When players arrive at the Manhattan resistance hideout, they find a character by the name of Grace Walker who is the leader of the Black Revolutionary

Front, a fictionalized version of the Black Panther Party. Here, Walker explains what has occurred within the United States following the atomic bombs that the Nazis dropped on Manhattan. When Blaskowicz states that monsters caused the death and destruction, Walker simply replies, “Not monsters. Men caused this” (*Wolfenstein: TNC*). Following the conversation with Walker, and his realization that racism, sexism, and prejudices are what caused the de-evolution of the world, Blaskowicz refers to the attacking Nazis, as they descend on the Front’s hideout as “white ass fascist Nazi pigs” (*Wolfenstein: TNC*). The inclusion of Walker and her assuming the role of commander of the Circle, now renamed American Resistance after joining with the Black Revolutionary Front, sparks a surge in the progress the group is making in reclaiming land from the Nazis and in returning America to a newly exceptionalist state.



Figure 3: Grace Walker (Bethesda Game Studios, 2017)

In the previous section, I discussed Blaskowicz’s use of war-time language exemplifying his thoughts of “who we think we were,” according to Weber. However, this change prompts Blaskowicz to start speaking in terms of “who we might become” (Weber 149). This use of language occurs because Blaskowicz begins exemplifying the notion that “who we might become and, indeed, who we must become, is a nation willing to get this balance right” (147). While he sees himself as a man destined to die in the coming days due to a grim outlook from the

Resistance doctor, Blascowicz resolves himself to show people an America that could be free from tyranny by banding together with his diverse resistance group and showing people a new form of exceptionalism, one that includes all people and rids itself of even the prejudices that came before the Nazis.

However, this moment of potential change and rallying of spirits is quickly followed up by Walker informing players that the southern portion of the former United States is being controlled by the Ku Klux Klan, who the Nazis allowed to control states including Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, and Louisiana. At this point the game begins to provide a commentary on current social and political issues within the analog world. While the developers of the game could not have known what would occur only two months ahead of its October 2017 release with the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, the presence of Nazis walking the streets of the United States in the analog world compared to those marching the streets within the game world presents an eerie art-reflecting-life moment. This coincidence prompted the publishers of the game, Bethesda Studios, to create anti-Nazi marketing to boost recognition of the game. They launched a “Make America Nazi-Free Again” and a “#NOMORENAZIS” campaign on social media in September 2017 (Crecente). The latter of the campaigns garnered both praise and criticism given that the video launched with the campaign states, “If you are a Nazi. GTFO” (an acronym for “get the fuck out”) and shows the player character punching an in-game Nazi soldier. The parallels between the game world and analog reality prompted *Rolling Stone* to interview the vice president of marketing at Bethesda, Pete Hines, about the game and its parallels (Crecente). In the interview Hines states that the game was not initially made to make a commentary on current events but that current events made the game relevant to discussions of modern Nazis, saying, “no one could predict what would happen,” highlighting that the game

was in development long before the marches (Crecente). Nevertheless, because the game resonated so profoundly in conjunction with the marches, it highlights the commentary being made within the game. If these events would not have happened in Charlottesville, the game may have simply been viewed as an alternate history World War II game, but instead, it can clearly be viewed as a game that has clear connections to modern society as we struggle to deal with analog world Nazism, racial issues, and the flawed American Dream.



Figure 4: Make America Nazi-Free Again Marketing Image (Brown, 2017)

Current events bring relevance to the argument that *Wolfenstein* reveals that the American Dream is a lie and that American Exceptionalism cannot exist while social issues such as Nazism exist. When the Resistance makes their way to Roswell, New Mexico, players are immediately met by KKK members in white robes patrolling the streets for any non-white, anti-Nazi individuals. During this chapter of the game, players are forced to blend in with the crowd by being disguised as a fire fighter; it gives them the opportunity to see what life is like in the Nazi/KKK controlled America. This perspective is especially important if any players of the game are white, as in this space white players would be forced to confront their privileged position in the world as they would be able to walk the digital streets without fear of persecution.

This positioning of players is a return to the internalized narrative discussed within the first game of the series. In this scene the game is very much played internally as players are being confronted not only by this issue digitally but is also made to think about issues of racial persecution in the analog world, as well as through the replication of Klan controlled streets and the events of white nationalists held around the country. Juxtaposing the way a black player may feel seeing a digital representation of how many feel walking American streets today in the analog world, the game's jarring shift from artistic commentary to a digital representation of real-life exemplifies analog-world-America's true lack of exceptionalism, while offering solutions to the problem later on in the narrative.

The scene reinforces these sentiments by showing no people of color and only nuclear families. No one speaks anything except English or German, and there are signs of typical Americana with diners, country vistas, and colonial designed houses, though tilted towards Nazi ideology with Nazi flags and German language posters. It is quite unsettling how natural this feels as players will be immediately reminded of typical film representations of the 1960s, and the scenes here would be carbon copies of those films if the flags were American instead of German. The player character brings attention to this by noticing how natural the image looks, and how happy the people seem to be, saying, "They don't even know what they are happy for. A parade celebrating a slaughter" (*Wolfenstein: TNC*). The people in the town seem genuinely happy despite the Nazi and Klan control over the city, harkening back to J's comment in *The New Order* that America was quick to bow down to their new leaders because the traditions were the same (*Wolfenstein: TNO*) and Walker's comment that the people accepted their new rulers without putting up much of a fight (*Wolfenstein: TNC*).

In this moment the game highlights the unchanging ways of American society and the perpetuation of prejudices against non-white people and the continuation of gender roles as no male NPCs are seen tending to children. The game, despite being set in a 1960s alternate history timeline, retains close enough ties to the 2018 analog world that it shows our unwillingness to see what is truly negative about the world around us. By placing players within a town being patrolled by Nazi and Klan police and allowing them to explore a small area of the town surrounded by what is happening in this digital space, the game shows players what is missing within this society and our own. The striking realization that if a black character were to walk this in-game street he or she would be arrested and killed returns players to a virtuosic perspective and makes them reflect on the aspects of our own world where black men and women have the same fears. This perspective and reflective moment occurs because the game allows the user to build basic “analogues of the explorative and configurative functions” throughout the game (Cardoso and Carvalhais, “What” 60). The understanding that Blaskowicz is only able to carry out his mission to destroy a Nazi compound in Roswell because he is white carries tremendous weight within the game and further shows why American Exceptionalism, or the aspects of America that are typically seen as uniquely positive such as freedom and equality, was lost when marginalization became rampant.

The Resistance is able to spark a nationwide war of American resistance cells against the Nazis and the KKK that comes to be known as the Second American Revolutionary War where the Nazis are on their heels and are largely pushed into California. In an attempt to downplay the fighting and paint Blaskowicz as a negative figure who represents the flawed ways of the former America, the Nazi leaders hold propaganda telecasts, create films using rhetoric that parallels the language that is used by the United States to drive wedges between perceived enemies, and give

him the name “Terror Billy” in much the same way the United States did to Nazi Germany during World War II and Russia during the Cold War. During one of these broadcasts players track down the Nazi leader in America, Irene Engle. As players make their way into the television studio, Engle uses similar propaganda-focused language as the United States did: saying the ideology of the Reich is righteous, painting their enemies as demons, and making promises to stop and destroy the resistance and Blaskowicz. This comparison draws one final parallel between the once America and the Nazi ideology by using the same rhetoric that was once, and often still is, used to forge gaps between perceived or actual enemies and forced allied thought.

After players manage to kill the Nazi leader, the resistance goes on to make their first televised speech on a live broadcast visible to the entirety of the United States. The two co-leaders of the Resistance Grace Walker and Probst Wyatt speak directly into the camera saying:

WALKER: My brothers and sisters of America, don't listen to that lying bitch. Tonight, we are not going to take it anymore. (To Wyatt) Go on.

WYATT: Americans. Americans, wherever you are. I wish I had words of comfort to give you. Like the warm winds that this Nazi general sent down from above. But from me you will not get comfort. Only the cold, agonizing truth. And the truth is this great nation has been raped and pillaged by the greatest enemy of our time. They ask you to sell your liberty to purchase your safety. To kneel to the new order, to submit to the winds of change. But my fellow Americans! They that sow the wind shall reap the whirlwind. You were born in the land of the free. You fought the kings of old and broke them. You gave your lives for the simplest but most essential truth of all: Give me liberty or give me death! In your veins runs the blood of revolutionaries. So tonight, brandish your guns your knives, and your fist. Seek out your oppressors wherever they are and tell them: We don't want nothing, not a thing from you. Tonight, we show those that sow the wind that we, we are the whirlwind!
(*TNC*, Epilogue)

This speech is not only important to the narrative of the game because it is the final spark in the start of the Second American Revolutionary War but also because it is the first time in 13 years that the American people would see a black individual on their TVs who is being accused of an

executable offense. It is the return of exceptionalism to the American people, but not because the Nazis are being pushed out of the United States but because, from what we see within the game, the United States is now the most diverse country in the world, and as a result, the only country to beat the Nazis.

This final scene of the game speaks volumes of what is required of America to return to an exceptionalist state when it is lost through the hatred, repression, and marginalization of other people. It shows a dystopian state of America that, while extreme, is not too far from where we come at times. This successful resistance and the new rise in American Exceptionalism can only have been achieved when the elitist ways that led America to a loss in the previous game are cast aside and diversity is allowed to take hold in the Resistance. This message could be easily seen as a message to the world in which the game was created. It shows what could happen to America if division is a constant threat and what can happen if togetherness is accepted. The makers of the game create a virtual model of what can happen if white supremacy is not stopped, and hatred is not cooled. It also shows us a way to rise and be exceptional, and the way to do so was inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty the entire time. When the tired, poor, and those often perceived as wretched come together, a new and exceptional America can be born.

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APPENDIX A: OFFICE OF RESEARCH INTEGRITY APPROVAL LETTER



Office of Research Integrity

February 26, 2018

Jonathan Nance
Department of English
Corbly Hall 441
Marshall University

Dear Mr. Nance:

This letter is in response to the submitted thesis abstract entitled "*Thumb Sticks and Hand Grenades: An Analysis of War and Perspectives in Video Games.*" After assessing the abstract, it has been deemed not to be human subject research and therefore exempt from oversight of the Marshall University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The Code of Federal Regulations (45CFR46) has set forth the criteria utilized in making this determination. Since the information in this study does not involve human subjects as defined in the above referenced instruction, it is not considered human subject research. If there are any changes to the abstract you provided then you would need to resubmit that information to the Office of Research Integrity for review and a determination.

I appreciate your willingness to submit the abstract for determination. Please feel free to contact the Office of Research Integrity if you have any questions regarding future protocols that may require IRB review.

Sincerely,

Bruce F. Day, ThD, CIP
Director

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