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MEMORY OF WAR. REMEMBERING HOLLYWOOD'S VIETNAM WAR IN *CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS*

Abstract: The *Call of Duty* franchise is well-known for its setting in historical warfare and is frequently discussed under the themes of realism or its treatment of history. Whilst this is helpful to address historical inconsistencies and the often-resulting lack of critical perspective on warfare in general, it is perhaps more accurate to refer to *Call of Duty* as a site of memory. *Call of Duty* is not interested in an accurate historical retelling of war, rather, it is to evoke cultural memories usually produced by (popular) media related to specific events, repurposing them for entertainment. By analysing *Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War* through its Vietnam War missions, I explore the formal and narrative qualities of the game to examine what the game chooses to remember. Two key aspects can be found in its gameplay: the game takes on an exclusive U.S.-American perspective on the Vietnam War. Second, Vietnamese characters are largely absent or only exist as enemies. I will then discuss the game's use of the Vietnam War as a catharsis for its storytelling and how it fails to live up to any subversive potential it has concerning its treatment of memory. This essay will then conclude with final thoughts on how the Vietnam War is remembered in international politics and how its remembrance is also related to intergenerational divides within the Vietnamese diaspora.

Keywords: first-person shooter, memory, war, Vietnam War, Hollywood

Introduction – Call of Duty and War

As a first-person shooter, the staging of historical warfare has been at the heart of the *Call of Duty* (2003–) franchise. This has naturally invited research exploring the

games' display of realism¹ or treatment of history² – or their lack thereof. Consequentially, the franchise's premise of repurposing warfare based on imperial and colonial conquests of the U.S. for entertainment fits with critical perspectives on first-person shooter games in general: they “reinforce the hypermasculine values traditionally associated with war [...]”³, “simplify issues of violence and war and invite for a streamlined and sterilized perception of military action,”⁴ and finally, “deploy simplistic, romantic, and jingoistic depictions of the modern, high-tech battlefield.”⁵ The *Call of Duty* franchise can thus be identified as part of the military-entertainment complex, where, roughly speaking, entertainment industries and the U.S. military may collaborate and benefit from each other, in both implicit and explicit ways. Comparing it to blockbuster film titles, however, *Call of Duty* has not seen direct financial sponsorship by the U.S. Department of Defence, a strategy typical for Hollywood productions featuring militaristic stories, settings, and props. Regardless, in 2014, former writer and producer of *Call of Duty* Dave Anthony was invited by a former Pentagon official to a panel in Washington to speak about the “future of real-world modern warfare,” and was subsequently offered a fellowship at a “nonpartisan Washington-based think tank that advises on the future of unknown conflict.”⁶ Even if the games' connections to military institutions do not take on explicit forms of sponsorships, *Call of Duty*'s inherent affinity given its simulation of war and warfare places it as one of many components within the complex. Additionally, the franchise's success reaffirms Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter's observation that “video games are

¹ G. Schott, *Violent Games: Rules, Realism and Effect*, ser. Approaches to Digital Game Studies, vol. 3, Bloomsbury Academic, New York 2016; H. Pötzsch, P. Hammond, *Special Issue – War/Game: Studying Relations Between Violent Conflict, Games, and Play*, “Game Studies” 2016, vol. 16 (2), <http://gamestudies.org/1602/articles/potzschhammond> (accessed: 19.12.2022).

² C. Andersen, “*There Has To Be More To It*”: *Diegetic Violence and the Uncertainty of President Kennedy's Death*, “Game Studies” 2015, vol. 15 (2), <http://gamestudies.org/1502/articles/andersen> (accessed: 19.12.2022); H. Pötzsch, V. Šisler, *Playing Cultural Memory: Framing History in Call of Duty: Black Ops and Czechoslovakia 38–89: Assassination*, “Games and Culture” 2019, vol. 14 (1), pp. 3–25, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412016638603>; H. Gish, *Playing the Second World War: Call of Duty and the Telling of History*, “Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture” 2010, vol. 4 (2), pp. 167–180, <https://doi.org/10.7557/23.6042>.

³ R. House, *Reframing the Domestic Experience of War in This War of Mine* [in:] J. Saklofske, A. Arbuckle, J. Bath (eds.), *Feminist War Games? Mechanisms of War, Feminist Values, Interventional Games*, Routledge, New York 2020, p. 56.

⁴ H. Pötzsch, *Selective Realism: Filtering Experiences of War and Violence in First- and Third-Person Shooters*, “Games and Culture” 2017, vol. 12 (2), pp. 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412015587802>, p. 19 (accessed: 19.12.2022).

⁵ B. Keogh, *Spec Ops: The Line's Conventional Subversion of the Military Shooter* [in:] *DiGRA '13 – Proceedings of the 2013 DiGRA International Conference: DeFragging Game Studies*, vol. 7, 2014, p. 17, <http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/spec-ops-the-lines-conventional-subversion-of-the-military-shooter/> (accessed: 19.12.2022).

⁶ S. Parkin, *Call of Duty: Gaming's Role in the Military-Entertainment Complex*, “The Guardian”, sec. Games, 22.10.2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/oct/22/call-of-duty-gaming-role-military-entertainment-complex> (accessed: 19.12.2022).

a paradigmatic media of Empire – planetary, militarized hypercapitalism [...].”⁷ The Empire, according to Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter, is the “global capitalist ascendancy of the early twenty-first century”, “a regime of biopower based on corporative exploitation of myriad types of labor, paid and unpaid, for the continuous enrichment of a planetary plutocracy.”⁸ In other words, video games and particularly the *Call of Duty* franchise with its militaristic gameplay are a part of this system, working with and strengthening the very system it takes place in.

With *Call of Duty*’s placement in the military-entertainment complex and the not less implicated video game industry to questions of global capitalism, memory studies can serve as a nuanced vehicle to grasp media’s role in reproducing constructs of power and political struggle. Rather than only gauging the level of authenticity of *Call of Duty*’s (in)ability to portray historical warfare, memory studies are not primarily concerned with the ‘correct’ re-telling of history. Instead, they acknowledge memory as “notoriously unverifiable”, and “we can only «know» them through memory remains-images, objects, texts, stories.”⁹ Consequentially, exploring these memories shift “away from questions of truth and toward questions of political intent.”¹⁰ Marita Sturken specifically refers to media as “technologies of memory” to describe how cultural memory is produced, “memory that is shared outside the avenues of formal historical discourse yet is entangled with cultural products and imbued with cultural meaning.”¹¹ With reference to Hollywood, Viet Thanh Nguyen speaks of “industries of memory” that “exploit memory as a strategic resource.”¹² By extension, as part of the military-entertainment network, video games are also a technology of memory. This connection has been explored elsewhere already, for instance from their hegemonial memory-making potential,¹³ to questions of cultural¹⁴ and collective¹⁵ memory. This essay aims to expand this discourse towards the Vietnam War, a war that has “profoundly affected the experience of nationality [in America].”¹⁶ To this day, its cultural legacy is reflected in the entertainment industry

⁷ S. Parkin, *Call of Duty: Gaming’s Role...*, op. cit.

⁸ N. Dyer-Witthford, G. Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2009, p. xxiii.

⁹ M. Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1997, p. 9.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 10.

¹² V.T. Nguyen, *Just Memory* [in:] idem, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA–London 2016.

¹³ E.L. Hammar, *Producing & Playing Hegemonic Past: Historical Digital Games as Memory-Making Media* (PhD diss.), UiT Norges arktiske universitet, 2020, <https://munin.uit.no/handle/10037/17717> (accessed: 19.12.2022).

¹⁴ H. Pötzsch, V. Šisler, *Playing Cultural Memory...*, op. cit.

¹⁵ A. Chapman, *It’s Hard to Play in the Trenches: World War I, Collective Memory and Videogames*, “Game Studies” 2016, vol. 16 (2), <http://gamestudies.org/1602/articles/chapman> (accessed: 19.12.2022).

¹⁶ M. Sturken, *Tangled Memories...*, op. cit., p. 14.

that produces films, shows, or other media to remember and commemorate it, even as it is a few years short of its 50th anniversary at the time of writing. War and memory are perhaps intrinsically linked, as Nguyen proclaims: “[...] all wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory.”¹⁷

Call of Duty is no exception, featuring the Vietnam War in some of its titles. Here, I will explore *Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War* (2020), a title released in 2020 continuing the franchise’s success and blockbuster quality of video game entertainment. At its core, this essay will reflect on two aspects in *Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War*: first, if memory is used as a strategic resource, it is used to naturalise an exclusive U.S. American experience in the war. Secondly, it also serves to reproduce colonial and racialised narratives about Vietnamese people, despite their striking absence overall. Both aspects are a result of cultural memories embedded in narratives, especially in Hollywood films about Việt Nam.¹⁸ Furthermore, *Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War* itself uses memory as a device for its storytelling and gameplay. Although this opens subversive potential to reflect on the question of how (cultural) memories can be used and abused, *Call of Duty* never quite lives to this potential when it comes to the warfare it portrays. The essay will conclude with brief reflections on how the Vietnam War is still remembered today in international politics and the effects of it within the Vietnamese diaspora.

Vietnam, not Việt Nam: a Battlefield Forever

Already in its framing as the “Vietnam War” alone, it is clear that the U.S. American perspective remains dominant, as Viet Thanh Nguyen comments: “The very name «The Vietnam War» is a misnomer, not only because Viet Nam is a noun and not an adjective, a country and not a war [...].”¹⁹ However, to instead use “American War in Vietnam” in order to counter the term “Vietnam War” seems to be inadequate as well. Nguyen writes: “Not least the name encourages Vietnamese people to think of themselves as victims of aggression”²⁰ and continues:

[to] argue over the Vietnam War or the American war is thus to argue over false choices. Each name obscures human losses, financial costs, and capital gains, as well as how the war blazed through Cambodia and Laos, something both the Vietnamese and the Americans wish neither to acknowledge or remember.²¹

¹⁷ V.T. Nguyen, *Just Memory...*, op. cit., p. 4.

¹⁸ The spelling of “Việt Nam” will be used to refer to the country, while “Vietnam War” refers to the war. Diacritical marks will also be used for other names, terms or transcribed dialogues, unless they are directly quoted from other sources.

¹⁹ V.T. Nguyen, *Speak of the Dead, Speak of Viet Nam: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Minority Discourse*, “CR: The New Centennial Review” 2006, vol. 6 (2), p. 33.

²⁰ Idem, *Just Memory...*, op. cit., p. 8.

²¹ Ibidem.

In other words, the question of appropriate terminology is related to how this war is remembered and by whom. Applied to *Call of Duty*, it is the U.S. American experience of the Vietnam War and the “profound national identity crisis”²² it caused. Sturken views the Vietnam War and the AIDS epidemic in the same period as events that disrupted “master narratives, those of American imperialism, technology, science, and masculinity.”²³ The Vietnam War has entered cultural memory, the “symbolic order, the media, institutions, and practices by which social groups construct a shared past.”²⁴ In this way of remembrance, the Vietnam War puts its focus on America and Americans, rather than Việt Nam, Laos, or Cambodia. As will be demonstrated in more detail later with Hollywood films, this is possible through the countless pieces of texts, such as literature, film, and other media, where the conflict becomes an inward introspection of U.S. American identity. Nguyen, for instance, criticises Hollywood sharply for this:

For Americans, Hollywood turns a defeat by Vietnamese people into a conflict that is actually a civil war in the American soul, where Americans’ greatest enemies are actually themselves. In one of the stranger twists in self-aggrandizement, Hollywood renders Americans as the anti-heroes, which might seem odd given that Hollywood is America’s unofficial ministry of propaganda. The reason for this troubling treatment is simple: For Hollywood, and for Americans, it is better to be the villain or antihero rather than virtuous extra, so long as one occupies center stage.²⁵

Although Hollywood [allows American characters to occupy more ambivalent characters, there is little space for any other conceptualisation of the Vietnam War. In media, Việt Nam is always only Vietnam, a battlefield on which Vietnamese people rarely find a voice, if at all. How is this cultural memory embedded in both the story and spatial design of *CoD: Black Ops Cold War*? The next chapter will explore this through a close reading of Vietnam War missions, discussing how the conflict is framed in story and the formal qualities of its gameplay.

Remembering America in Việt Nam

Right from the beginning, *CoD: Black Ops Cold War* frames the Vietnam War as a retelling of past events – a memory. Protagonist and player-character code-named

²² C.G. Appy, *Who Are We?* [in:] idem, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity*, Viking, New York 2015.

²³ M. Sturken, *Tangled Memories...*, op. cit., p. 16.

²⁴ A. Erl, A. Nünning, S. Young (eds.), *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin–New York 2008, p. 5.

²⁵ V.T. Nguyen, *Vietnamese Lives, American Imperialist Views, Even in Da 5 Bloods*, “The New York Times”, sec. Movies, 24.06.2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/24/movies/da-5-bloods-vietnam.html> (accessed: 20.12.2022).

“Bell” speaks about their²⁶ experience of the Vietnam War to remember information relevant to the main mission of the story. At the same time, the game constructs a historical experience by showing video clips of news, snippets of newspapers illustrating the specific historical period the mission is situated in when commencing the mission. This is typical for the *Call of Duty* franchise, often using various audio snippets or video clips of, for instance, presidential speeches to support its narrative, integrated into their own fictional narrative for the campaign missions. Here, the player is sent to Đà Nẵng in 1968, a coastal city in Central Việt Nam to investigate. The starting point is a U.S. military camp called Camp Haskins where Bell wakes up and is deployed to the battle frontlines shortly after.

Camp Haskins signifies a haven to both player and player-character, in narrative and formal ways. The camp provides ammunition, soldiers are not hostile, and the player is unable to do any kind of battle related actions. CIA agent Russell Adler, also part of the Vietnam War mission, remarks: “Our little oasis in the middle of this godforsaken shitstorm. You are safe here.” Perhaps the greatest signifier of Camp Haskins as a safe haven is the background music playing *Magic Carpet Ride* by the band Steppenwolf through a radio. Various posters decorating the inside of the tent make references to 1960s music festivals in the U.S.; elsewhere inside, a U.S. flag hangs across the exit, but instead of the usual five-pointed stars in the left corner of the blue rectangle, it carries a peace symbol.

Camp Haskins, albeit brief in its appearance, captures an anti-war stance, one critical of U.S. involvement and yearning for a return home. This sentiment is seen through the tent’s pacifist symbols, references to anti-war protests and peace movements of the late 1960s where citizens and soldiers came to question the Vietnam War, eventually leading to the disruption of master narratives to America’s national identity. *Call of Duty* seems to encapsulate this most prominently through its use of music of that era, with prominent songs tied to the war such as *Fortunate Son* (1969) by Creedence Clearwater or *We Gotta Get Out of This Place* (1986) by The Animals. Although the Vietnam War era music would change according to cultural and political movements in the U.S. and therefore plays a significant role in understanding various stages of the war,²⁷ I would hesitate to frame this as a pursuit of historical authenticity. Rather, the deep entanglement of music and the Vietnam War has become an audio-visual trope in (war) films to signify this era, with some examples being *We Gotta Get Out of This Place* in *Hamburger Hill* (1987), *Run Through the Jungle* (1970) in *Tropic Thunder* (2008), or *Fortunate Son* in *Forrest Gump* (1994). The latter, a protest song written by John Cameron Fogerty of the band Creedence Clearwater Revival, addresses class inequalities of the Vietnam War draft criticising upper class citizens or policy makers who were influential in pushing U.S. involve-

²⁶ The neutral pronoun they/them will be used for Bell, as the player can configure Bell to be male, female, or non-binary.

²⁷ D. Bradley, C.H. Werner, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: The Soundtrack of the Vietnam War*, ser. Culture, Politics, and the Cold War, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst 2015, p. 4.

ment and yet protected their own children from the military draft.²⁸ It has also made numerous appearances in game titles, such as in the original *Call of Duty Black Ops* (2010) game, in the opening sequence to *Battlefield: Vietnam* (2004) and for the announcement trailer of *Battlefield: Bad Company 2: Vietnam* (2010).²⁹ In each of these cases, the use of Vietnam War era music gives the video game experience a cinematic quality, as the music is usually supported by exposition shots of the battlefield. When the player finally leaves Camp Haskins in *Black Ops Cold War*, *Magic Carpet Ride* is played again. This time however, it is not diegetic music from a radio anymore but a high-quality, extradiegetic version of it, giving the flight over Đà Nẵng a cinematic experience. As the helicopter takes off with the player, a cutscene takes place giving an overhead view of the upcoming battlefield. The photorealistic quality of the games' graphics emphasises the sunset's light covering the mountainous landscape in warm sepia colours. Despite the imminent battle, the visual details, the helicopter flight, and music evoke a cinematic experience that is almost beautiful. Any political or cultural sentiment that made many songs popular in the context of anti-war protests is usually lost, reduced for the experience of gameplay.

The almost exclusive U.S. perspective in the spatial design of Camp Haskins may "invite biased understandings and one-sided reenactments of historical actors and events."³⁰ This seems to be the case here, even if the game allows for a U.S. remembrance that is sometimes ambivalent or self-critical, as I will also illustrate later through the various characters that remember the war differently. This may leave the impression that *Call of Duty* is not as black and white as it seems to be, as some scholars indeed praise *Call of Duty* for its treatment of warfare. Clemens Reisner writes of an "authentic space,"³¹ and similarly, so does Marcus Schulzke when he writes of "convincing environments,"³² though without clearly defining what this authenticity applies to or the exact formal qualities of these environments. Admittedly, *Call of Duty*'s design to establish these missions draft on many historical events, in this case, from the initial audio-visual snippets to introduce the Vietnam War mission to the clear anti-war references prominent of U.S. culture in the late 1960s. If authenticity should serve as a measurement at all, then it is not because of the game's treatment of history. Rather, it is authentic because it successfully makes use of memory as a resource to evoke a cinematic experience, in other words, to reproduce (audio-visual)

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 94.

²⁹ *Battlefield: Bad Company 2 Vietnam*, E3 Announcement Trailer, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgFcJ38-IOc> (accessed: 20.12.2022).

³⁰ H. Pötzsch, V. Šisler, *Playing Cultural Memory...*, op. cit., p. 15.

³¹ C. Reisner, "The Reality Behind It All Is Very True": *Call of Duty: Black Ops and the Remembrance of the Cold War* [in:] M. Kapell, A.B.R. Elliott (eds.), *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, Bloomsbury Academic, New York 2013, pp. 247–260.

³² M. Schulzke, *Refighting the Cold War: Video Games and Speculative History* [in:] M. Kapell, A.B.R. Elliott (eds.), *Refighting the Cold War: Video Games and Speculative History*, Bloomsbury Academic, New York 2013, p. 275.

tropes of Hollywood. The next chapter will go into more detail on how this reproduction of tropes also determines the way Vietnamese people are portrayed in *Call of Duty*.

The Absence of Việt Nam

As Camp Haskins is the metaphorical space for America as a sanctuary, Việt Nam is a battlefield – in past, present and future. The only function of Việt Nam is to serve as a place where Americans fight for their national identity (or the disruption thereof) and Vietnamese die. In the process of attempting to break with an imperialist American identity, not only does the U.S. take an almost exclusive perspective of the war but also use Vietnamese lives as mere collateral. Like Camp Haskins, *Black Ops Cold War* uses the absence of Vietnamese from Hollywood to stage its story and game spaces. If they appear at all, it is to occupy a victim role with limited agency, whose ultimate fate is usually death.

When the player arrives at the battlefronts of Đà Nẵng after departing from Camp Haskins, it is obvious that at no point in this mission is the player burdened with shooting civilians. This is insofar paradoxical as the spatial design of Đà Nẵng suggests otherwise. While most iconography of the Vietnam War uses jungles and swamps as their primary landscape, *Black Ops Cold War* portrays the village as a well-developed area. Infrastructure, shop fronts, street and traffic signs, three-storey buildings serving as living quarters, outdoor plants and more. The symmetrical architecture featuring numerous arches and balusters evoke French architecture, visually inferring to Vietnam's occupation by France whose architectural style still survives in, for instance, today's French Quarter in Hanoi. Its fusion with Vietnamese culture is expressed through lanterns hanging off the walls or on ropes across the village's plaza, the wooden structures with ornaments, or the Chinese character for "longevity" carved in stone walls inside homes, often featured in temples or other Vietnamese architectural structures. Despite these stark signs of civilian life, the game space itself is conspicuously void of civilians and only Việt Cộng enemies can be found. The enemy character models clearly signify "Vietnamese" through their clothes and through their most striking visual marker, the *nón lá* (rice hat), although they will also wear a tactical helmet at times. Interestingly, the enemy character models of the Việt Cộng wear little to no armour, often only simple cotton or wool clothes while wearing a belt with additional ammunition. This stands in strong contrast with the Soviet soldiers the player encounters during this mission, wearing bullet proof vests, military camouflage jackets, masks, even headphones, presumably for soundproofing. Overall, enemies are the only Vietnamese the player ever faces. As far as gameplay is concerned, this ensures the enemy is marked visually clearly. Within the story, Vietnamese characters are always affiliated with the Việt Cộng and by proxy, with the Soviet Union. Once the player progresses far enough inside the village in this mission, the

player encounters Soviet soldiers, confirming the suspicions of Adler and the others that there had been Soviet interference. While Vietnamese civilians are absent, Vietnamese soldiers hold no agency as their existence is only for the sake of the Soviet Union or as the player's enemies.

Soviet influence over communist Việt Cộng forces is an idea partly rooted in pre-Vietnam War cinema when filmmakers put their attention on the First Indochina War. A conflict between the Viet Minh, later Việt Cộng, essentially revolting against French occupation, Hollywood would portray this conflict as an attempt by Soviet or Beijing forces to garner communist influence in Southeast Asia. In his analysis, Scott Laderman observes the use of this trope in various films, such as *Jump Into Hell* (1955), a film about a French military outpost at Điện Biên Phủ, surrounded by Việt Minh forces. The film begins with a newsreel-style introduction to its setting:

The “Viet Minh Reds,” the narrator asserts, were trying to conquer Vietnam “for international Communism,” drawing, audiences later learn, on the expertise of at least one “Red Chinese from Peiping” bearing “a gun from Moscow.” Yet, as a French officer maintains during a prisoner interrogation, the Viet Minh will “deceive no one.” The “whole world” will “learn the truth” that “our enemies were not nationalists but conquerors for Communism,” both “Chinese and Russian.”³³

Whilst *Jump Into Hell* did not garner favourable reviews from contemporary critics, it is important to note the involvement of both the French and U.S. American government in the film's production and their approval of the final script.³⁴ It is also worth noting the documentary-style framing of the film through this narration, a similar stylistic choice in *Black Ops* which uses snippets of audio and video from historical events to give it a more realistic framing. Even prior to the Vietnam War, Vietnamese had been described as “primitive,” “lazy,” and “cowardly” among others by French occupiers, and U.S. pre-war writings on Vietnam would evaluate French colonial rule as an “administrative, economic and moral failure. Any expression of Vietnamese nationalism was dismissed as the work of external, often Soviet agents.”³⁵ These descriptors turned Vietnamese into passive agents who were in need of better, more effective guidance, a discursive frontrunner to eventually justify U.S. intervention in Việt Nam. As Laderman notes, although none of the pre-war films were as successful as some of the post-war films such as *Rambo* (1982) or *Apocalypse Now* (1979), some were produced by major studios and others were low- to medium-budget efforts.³⁶ Indeed, individually, these films may not have been influential enough to perpetuate the image of the helpless Vietnamese and the dangers of impe-

³³ S. Laderman, *Hollywood's Vietnam, 1929–1964: Scripting Intervention, Spotlighting Injustice*, “Pacific Historical Review” 2009, vol. 78 (4), p. 588, <https://doi.org/10.1525/phr.2009.78.4.578>.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 589.

³⁵ M. Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919–1950*, ser. The New Cold War History, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill–London 2000, p. 46.

³⁶ S. Laderman, *Hollywood's Vietnam...*, op. cit., pp. 582–583.

rial communism, “collectively, however, they can lay claim to historical significance. [...] together they reached a significant audience that almost knew nothing about the revolutionary struggle in Indochina.”³⁷ As much as Hollywood would become “ideologically charged entertainment”³⁸ in the post-war era, a place “reconstituting an image – a «memory» – of Vietnam under the impetus of Reaganism [...] to fulfil a specific ideological mission,”³⁹ pre-war films were already filled with colonial ideologies paving the way for the industry of memory.

This memory of the Vietnam War lives on in *Call of Duty*, reproducing similar tropes for its gameplay, including the final purpose of any Vietnamese life in the game: death. As civilians are absent, only soldiers remain and yet their lack of agency, lack of voice renders them just as absent as the civilians. For the entirety of *Black Ops Cold War*, the player does not speak to a single Vietnamese character. In *Đà Nẵng*, the nameless Việt Cộng soldiers merely scream as they die, and in the very few moments the game allows them to have some voice lines, they are not translated or transcribed into the game’s subtitles.⁴⁰ The player is never meant to understand the Việt Cộng. The lack of unique character models and even voices create what Pötzsche describes as epistemological barriers:

By means of certain cues, the construction of a biased structure of engagement is motivated that unilaterally aligns and allies the spectator with one side, while it discourages such involvement with the enemy. This form of textual framing can be conceptualized as the drawing of an epistemological barrier that precludes access to the subjectivity, rationality, and humanity of the respective opponent.⁴¹

The epistemological barriers towards the Việt Cộng as well as the absent Vietnamese civilians are no *novum* but another continuation of Hollywood tropes. Even in recent attempts by Hollywood to deal with the Vietnam War by foregrounding Black American experiences in *Da 5 Bloods* (2020) by Spike Lee, Vietnamese lives are either considered victims or are part of the Việt Cộng, as Nguyen comments:

As a result, the Vietnamese appear as the tour guide, the sidekick, the “whore,” the mixed-race child, the beggar and the faceless enemy, all of whom play to American desires and fears. In a particularly absurd moment, a Vietnamese gangster threatens the Black veterans as he

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 586.

³⁸ G.A. Waller, *Rambo: Getting to Win This Time* [in:] L. Dittmar, G. Michaud (eds.), *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick 1990, p. 115.

³⁹ G. Studlar, D. Desser, *Never Having to Say You’re Sorry: Rambo’s Rewriting of the Vietnam War* [in:] L. Dittmar, G. Michaud, *From Hanoi to Hollywood...*, op. cit., p. 101.

⁴⁰ In this particular moment of the game, the player approaches three Việt Cộng enemies by crouching in tall grass. The Việt Cộng seem to be devising a new battle plan, as they say: VC 1: “*Minh tìm cách khác*” (We will find another way) / VC 2: “*Vậy mình không quan tâm chuyện này nữa*” (Then we won’t have to keep ourselves busy with this.) / VC 3: “*Bạn nghĩ sao?*” (What do you think?).

⁴¹ H. Pötzsch, *Ubiquitous Absence*, “Nordicom Review” 2013, vol. 34 (1), p. 128, <https://doi.org/10.2478/nor-2013-0047>.

recounts the My Lai massacre. While acknowledging the massacre of 500 Vietnamese civilians is important, it is also a clumsy exercise in American guilt that relegates the Vietnamese to victimhood, which is how Americans prefer to remember them, except when they remember them as Viet Cong.⁴²

Although *Call of Duty* never confronts the player with extremely disturbing cases of war crimes committed by the U.S. such as the My Lai massacre, the absence is unlikely out of consideration for the portrayal of Vietnamese as victims. Rather, it is to shy away from controversial debates around violence, to which the franchise is no stranger of.⁴³ In perhaps an even more reductive fashion than Hollywood, *Call of Duty* erases Vietnamese civilian lives completely.

The connection between Hollywood and *Call of Duty* has been made before. Reisner recognises the ties between *Black Ops* and Hollywood as it “relies on tropes, sequences, narrative structures, and some visual markers from movies.”⁴⁴ Although Reisner is aware that these films are already embedded in controversies concerning their “authenticity in their depiction of the Cold War,” he refuses to make a judgement over their connection, stating: “The complexity and diversity of the discourses surround the representation of the Vietnam War make it difficult to assess exactly the position *CoD: Black Ops* is taking.”⁴⁵ By using authenticity as a gauge to measure *Call of Duty*, Reisner fails to connect the games’ reliance on Hollywood and long-lasting imperial and colonial narratives. Indeed, *Call of Duty* reproduces the same narratives about Vietnamese people as the industry of memory has done so even decades ago by drawing simple binaries between good and bad, democracy and communism, Americans and Soviets, and by erasing Vietnamese perspectives.

Remembering Failed Memories, Fighting Memories

The Vietnam War serves as a catharsis in a story about remembering, failing to remember and finally, remembering falsely. In the beginning, player-character Bell might express their difficulties remembering the Vietnam War, depending on some of the dialogue choices. Even before commencing the mission, Adler first remarks: “Bell. You’re looking a little pale. You up for this?” Various dialogue options are available to the player, such as: “Never been better”, “I don’t know. Da Nang was

⁴² V.T. Nguyen, *Vietnamese Lives, American Imperialist Views, Even in Da 5 Bloods*, “The New York Times,” sec. Movies, 24.06.2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/24/movies/da-5-bloods-vietnam.html> (accessed: 20.12.2022).

⁴³ Although civilians are not frequently featured in the series, much less so as potential targets, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (2009) sparked a controversy as it features a (optional) mass shooting of civilians at an airport. For a more in-depth analysis of the controversy, as well as how the mission itself can be understood in more formal terms, see: G. Schott, *Violent Games: Rules, Realism and Effect...*, op. cit., pp. 197–223.

⁴⁴ C. Reisner, “*The Reality Behind It All Is Very True*” ..., op. cit., p. 251.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 252.

rough”, “I’m... struggling to recall Da Nang.” In this sequence, other characters also express varying degrees of being able or not able to remember and speak about their experiences in the Vietnam War, such as Adler and Sims. Adler remarks: “Don’t get soft like Sims. If we survived Vietnam we can survive talking about Vietnam”, to which Sims quickly interjects with: “Tell it to my shrink, Doc.” How the war is remembered and how the respective characters respond to it varies. In the last moments of the campaign, as if all roads lead back to Vietnam, Bell is “sent back” to Vietnam one more time. As Bell is gravely injured and Adler helps Bell to survive longer, he also pressures them into remembering the war: “Bell, listen to me. I need you to remember. Think back to our time in Vietnam. One more time. We need to finish what we started. We had a job to do.” Thus, the player finds themselves in the war one more time but gradually, game spaces become more surreal, from starting an ambush in a jungle against Việt Cộng units to going into a Soviet Bunker in the next moment. Adler narrates this part of the mission – recalling what Bell had allegedly done or not done, sometimes changing the scenario, or even skipping ahead. Should the player die during this scenario, Adler will confront Bell, noting death is not possible here and orders Bell to do it all over again. The memories of Vietnam, Adler and the CIA become more elusive as true intentions are revealed. Bell realises their memories had been false or rather, implanted, in fact, by the CIA to trick Bell into revealing information about Soviet spy Perseus. Forgotten by Bell, they had previously worked closely with Perseus and their memories were tampered with after being captured by the CIA.

In these final moments, the game convincingly shows how “unverifiable” memories can be, how they can be used for “political intent”, how they can be reshaped, repurposed, reproduced for a narrative. Adler, perhaps the embodiment of an idealised U.S. patriot and masculine figure, acts as a narrator, albeit an unreliable one as he changes scenarios at will. Bell’s loss of identity is deeply confusing for them, with dialogue options showing varying degrees of disappointment, sadness, or anger towards Adler. The cultural memory that gave Bell an alleged shared past with Adler, from their friendship to an allegiance with the CIA, as well as any patriotic notion towards the U.S. was no innate, “natural” bond but forged through the allure of images, narrations, and fiction. The connection between memories and media is further emphasised during hectic sequences, in which Bell moves between the Vietnam War and the bunker: cutscenes show a projector displaying scenes of the Vietnam War projected onto a white screen, in another moment, Bell needs to rearrange photographs, some of which depict scenes from the Vietnam War. Despite all of this, *Black Ops Cold War*’s final player decision – whether to reveal the truth about Perseus’ whereabouts and thus saving millions from nuclear disaster or lie – cuts back on any further meaningful engagement with memory. Rather, this is all pushed away by Adler who admits to manipulating Bell but all for a greater good. Now Bell, or rather the player, must decide between truth or lie. *Black Ops Cold War* does not ask more uncomfortable questions on the notion of memory because it never questions the allegedly his-

torical events and settings themselves, it also never explicitly questions naturalised perspectives on war. Although this analysis has pointed towards some formal game aspects that are more ambivalent than one might assume of a militaristic blockbuster franchise such as *Call of Duty*, it makes no efforts in challenging perceptions of war, or even cultural remembrances of it despite the direct connections made throughout its spatial design, gameplay, and story. Ultimately, this is where *Call of Duty* falls back into its franchise formula, to turn warfare into an entertaining video game.

Memory of the Vietnam War and the Frictions of Today

The cultural memory of the Vietnam War remains strong. Its memory and war imagery of the Vietnam War is invoked time and time again as a battlefield: U.S. Republican politician Mitch McConnell likened the withdrawal of the U.S. from Afghanistan in 2021 to the Fall of Saigon,⁴⁶ in reference to Russia's invasion, a "Time's" article is titled *The Ukraine War Is Becoming Putin's Vietnam*⁴⁷ and Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his troops named a system of trenches at the front lines "Vietnam – a nod to the mud of morass of a war they had seen in movies."⁴⁸ The Vietnam War becomes a political tool to express (failed) imperial military efforts, a metaphorical way of expressing a "long, painful misadventure." Meanwhile, 2022 sees the release of *The Greatest Beer Run Ever*, led by Oscar-winning director Peter Farrelly with actors Zac Efron and Russell Crowe in leading roles. The comedy-drama follows the story of Donohue, who sneaks into the Vietnam War to deliver beer to his friends. The cast features almost no Vietnamese, Vietnamese American, or even East Asian actors and the few that do exist occupy minor roles with little screen time. In this regard, the cultural memory of Vietnam has hardly changed, or put differently, Hollywood continues U.S.-centric narratives about the country even decades later.

How the Vietnam War is remembered relates to the increasing intergenerational divide among the Vietnamese diaspora in the United States. During the Capitol attack on January 6th 2021, one of the most incisive far-right extremist attacks on American democracy post 9/11, many flags beyond the U.S. flag were hissed: Donald J. Trump banners, Confederate flags and others evoking neo-Nazi imagery. In the sea of these were also protestors who swung the long defunct flag of the Republic of Vietnam, the democratic counterpart to communist North Vietnam. The flag bearers were "Vietnamese Americans, who in support of President Donald Trump, have often

⁴⁶ *Afghanistan Likened to Fall of Saigon as Officials Confirm Taliban Take Kandahar*, "The Guardian," sec. World News, 13.08.2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/13/afghanistan-likened-to-fall-of-saigon-as-us-and-uk-send-troops-to-aid-evacuation> (accessed: 20.12.2022).

⁴⁷ S. Shuster, *How Volodymyr Zelensky Defended Ukraine and United the World*, "Time," 2.03.2022, <https://time.com/6154139/volodymyr-zelensky-ukraine-profile-russia/> (accessed: 20.12.2022).

⁴⁸ J. Stavridis, *The Ukraine War Is Becoming Putin's Vietnam*, "Time," 9.06.2022, <https://time.com/6186033/ukraine-war-becoming-putins-vietnam/> (accessed: 20.12.2022).

used the emblem to express nostalgia for a lost home and opposition to communism.⁴⁹ The yellow banner with red stripes is more than just a question of identity for many of the Vietnamese diaspora

[...] because it evokes memories of life and death [...]. Due to their traumatic conditions of exit and the mixed contexts of reception, first-wave refugees were mostly concerned with how to survive and negotiate life in places that must have seemed incomprehensible to them. [...] It is the grief caused by this loss of situation which makes memory and commemoration so important for the Vietnamese diaspora community. At the same time, this also creates conflicts within a community that does not always remember or speak with one voice.⁵⁰

While at first glance it seems odd for members of the Vietnamese diaspora to align themselves with neo-Nazi symbolism and fascist ultranationalism, the often anti-communist stance and “a radicalized nostalgia for a lost country and a lost cause”⁵¹ inevitably united them on January 6th. Even prior to the insurrection, Vietnamese Americans were favouring the Republican Party and Donald Trump in great numbers; in fact, Vietnamese Americans were found to be the only group among Asian Americans who favoured electing Donald Trump (48% versus 36%) over Democratic candidate Joe Biden in 2020.⁵² By contrast, younger generations of Vietnamese Americans, including those born in the U.S., Vietnamese (American) intellectuals, scholars, authors, and also (North) Vietnamese immigrants who came to the U.S. later often have opposing views. Younger generations of Vietnamese-Americans “are also very aware of the Vietnamese elders’ experiences and are deeply affected by their family histories,”⁵³ whereas intellectuals find themselves “*in between* the world of diaspora and the world of Western intellectual tradition.”⁵⁴ Additionally, younger generations may not “resonate as strongly” with a “concern of injustices of the past and the effort to be heard,” or whether they are communist or anti-communist, however, “they are still burdened by the weight of their own history.”⁵⁵ This observation by Anna Vu in her case study through interviews with members of the Vietnamese American community is consistent with other reports on young Vietnamese-Amer-

⁴⁹ C. Wang, *Why the Defunct South Vietnam Flag Was Flown at the Capitol Riot*, NBC News, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/why-defunct-south-vietnam-flag-was-flown-capitol-riot-n1254306> (accessed: 21.12.2022).

⁵⁰ A. Vu, *The Politics of Remembering: Intergenerational Tensions in the Vietnamese Diaspora* [in:] V. Satzewich, A. Vu (eds.), *The Vietnamese Diaspora in a Transnational Context: Contested Spaces, Contested Narratives*, Brill, Leiden–Boston 2022, p. 66, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004513969>.

⁵¹ V.T. Nguyen, *Perspective / There’s a Reason the South Vietnamese Flag Flew during the Capitol Riot*, “The Washington Post,” 14.01.2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/01/14/south-vietnam-flag-capitol-riot/> (accessed: 21.12.2022).

⁵² APIAVote (Asian and Pacific Islander American Vote), 2020 Asian American Voter Survey, 15.09.2020, <https://apiavote.org/wp-content/uploads/2020-Asian-American-Voter-Survey-Sept-15.pdf>.

⁵³ A. Vu, *The Politics of Remembering...*, op. cit., p. 63.

⁵⁴ Ibidem, p. 69.

⁵⁵ Ibidem, p. 79.

ican progressives who are “bound to be called a communist [...], once you openly express any left-leaning political views”⁵⁶ and online forums of young Vietnamese-Americans exchanging experiences about their gradually tense relationships with elders or parents. As Terry Nguyen comments:

I find that there is something uniquely cruel about this political divide among a war-torn generation and their children, that beyond the language and cultural barriers that already alienate older Vietnamese Americans, there is now a stark political wedge rooted in hate, misunderstanding, and trauma.⁵⁷

This political divide is causing clashes between various groups of the Vietnamese diaspora in the U.S. and elsewhere as the group is now politically diverse, remembers the war in different ways, deals with issues of intergenerational trauma in addition to questions of political injustices and (anti-)communist legacies. These topics rarely find a space within greater discourses of American identity or even American history even when speaking about the Vietnam War itself, despite large numbers of (former) Vietnamese refugees, Vietnamese diaspora, and Vietnamese Americans living and having lived in the U.S. for centuries now.

Call of Duty is neither the root nor the direct cause for this divide and tensions between different generations and groups of the Vietnamese American community. Due to its reductive nature in its portrayal of U.S. imperialism and warfare however, it reproduces binaries fuelling these conflicts, despite not being represented in these media. Viet Thanh Nguyen sees these binaries embraced within the Vietnamese refugee community itself, “where people dwell on their victimization by their communist enemies. The fervor of that feeling means that they find it almost impossible to consider a world that is not divided neatly into a binary: us vs. them, anti-communist vs. communist, good vs. evil, victim vs. victimizer.”⁵⁸ In this case, *Call of Duty* plays directly into these binary narratives, just as the player’s final decision is between the truth or to lie. Although one of the main critiques of this paper has been the absence of Vietnamese characters in Vietnam War scenarios in the game, simply including them in binary categories will continue the reductive nature of the game’s storytelling and by extension, the long-upheld perceptions of warfare and Vietnamese people as victims. This is slowly changing in literature, with authors and poets such as Viet Thanh Nguyen, Ocean Vuong, and Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai, and others, whose writing often feature torn, complex, and imperfect characters, at times directly confronting the cultural memory of Vietnam in America. It is questionable whether the franchise can ever move away from its inherent disposition as a militaristic game and as shown here, there is little to no space for an alternative perspective on the Vietnam War or

⁵⁶ T. Nguyen, *48% of Vietnamese Americans Say They’re Voting for Trump. Here’s Why*, Vox, 30.10.2020, <https://www.vox.com/first-person/2020/10/30/21540263/vietnamese-american-support-trump-2020> (accessed: 21.12.2022).

⁵⁷ Ibidem.

⁵⁸ V.T. Nguyen, *Perspective / There’s a Reason the South Vietnamese Flag...*, op. cit.

even for Vietnamese experiences. After all, the Vietnam War is only one of many U.S. conflicts to tell the grander “history” of the Cold War, where countries like Vietnam merely pose a stop among many.

Conclusion

Although the Vietnam War ended over four decades ago, its memory lives on in literature, art, film and video games. The *Call of Duty* franchise reproduces cultural memories rooted in American-centric, colonial, and imperial perspectives, and it is for this reason the games need to be critically analysed to assess their role in memory production today. This essay specifically looked at the Vietnam War missions in *Black Ops Cold War* to understand how its mode of cultural memory is deeply tied to Hollywood and the pertaining tropes that come with it. This essay extended the existing scholarship on warfare in videogames by shifting the focus solely to the Vietnam War, rather than how it is usually contextualised as a conflict within the Cold War. This was done to reveal the often-naturalised perspective on the war, with little to no regard for Vietnamese lives or for them to have no agency. As wars and conflicts rage on, the question of how the dead and survivors will be remembered will linger even long after military violence ceases. Memory is another battlefield – an uphill battle to resist, an uphill battle to challenge narratives of colonialism and imperialism, an uphill battle to carve out a space in which people can tell their own stories.

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