

# The Virtual War on Terror: Counterterrorism Narratives in Video Games

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**Abstract** *Over the past decade, a great deal of research has been done to analyze the ways in which popular media, especially movies and television shows, construct fictional terrorist threats. However, little attention has been given to the extremely popular genre of counterterrorism video games and how they fit into the War on Terror media narrative. Counterterrorism video games reflect many of the themes of other media about terrorism, such as the demonization of terrorist enemies and the exaggeration of terrorist threats. However, video games strengthen these themes to make the threat of terrorism appear more pervasive and imminent. Consequently, counterterrorism games display an intensified vision of the War on Terror narrative, in which the entire world is a war zone. This leads game narratives to simulate and justify more extreme state responses to terrorism.*

## Introduction

The War on Terror has given rise to a great deal of terrorism-related media, including countless popular television programs, movies, books, and documentaries about real and fictional terrorist attacks.<sup>1</sup> These media representations of terrorism have received much scholarly attention and are an important subject of research, as media help to define terrorism, identify threats, characterize terrorists, and imagine the consequences of potential attacks.<sup>2</sup> However, the literature on terrorism in entertainment media suffers from a serious limitation in the range of media analyzed. Few studies of terrorism-related media discuss video games, and those that do tend to only mention them briefly.<sup>3</sup> Video games are even excluded from studies that address the representation of terrorism across various types of media, despite the fact that dozens of extremely popular video games about terrorism have been developed.<sup>4</sup> This is a serious oversight, which I will

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<sup>1</sup>Susan L. Carruthers, "No One's Looking: The Disappearing Audience for War," *Media, War & Conflict* 1:1 (2008), pp. 70–76; see also Elaine Martin, "Terrorism in Film Media: An International View of Theatrical Films," *Journal of War & Culture Studies* 4:2 (2011), pp. 207–222.

<sup>2</sup>Philip Seib and Dana M. Janbek, *Global Terrorism and New Media: The Post-Al Qaeda Generation* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*; see also David L. Altheide, *Terror Post 9/11 and the Media* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009); and Philip Jenkins, *Images of Terror: What We Can and Can't Know About Terrorism* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 2003).

<sup>4</sup>Susan Keith, Carol B. Schwalbe, B. William Silcock, "Comparing War Images across Media Platforms: Methodological Challenges for Content Analysis," *Media, War & Conflict* 3:1 (2011), pp. 87–98.

ameliorate in this article by showing how video games reproduce and intensify the War on Terror narrative.

There are several reasons why video games about terrorism deserve special attention from political scientists. First, these games reach large audiences. Some of the most popular are played by tens of millions of people around the world. Moreover, the popularity of these games has consistently increased even as interest in other entertainment media about terrorism has subsided.<sup>5</sup> Second, video games present information in a unique way. Television programs and movies usually adopt a detached, third-person viewpoint on events that shows multiple perspectives, and that may even provide a glimpse into the terrorist point of view. By contrast, counterterrorism games restrict players to a first-person view. Players are only able to see the game world from the perspective of the counterterrorist operatives they control, thereby concealing the terrorist Other, which can only be seen as an anonymous opponent. Finally, analysis of terrorism in video games can contribute to studies of the representation of terrorism and war across media. Video game depictions of terrorism parallel representation of terrorism in other types of entertainment media in many respects while also intensifying the fictional terrorist threat and developing it in new ways.

Video game narratives provide accounts of what the War on Terror is like, why it is being fought, and what its effects are. As my analysis of counterterrorist games will show, their characterization of the War on Terror is deeply problematic because of how they imagine the threat of terrorism and the conduct of counterterrorism operations. Games construct fictional terrorists that are extremely powerful and pervasive, capable of carrying out operations anywhere in the world, infiltrating the highest levels of government, and defeating conventional military forces. These terrorists pose an existential threat against the US and its allies, which functions to excuse it for any actions state security forces take to eliminate them, no matter how extreme. Moreover, even as counterterrorist forces resort to extreme strategies of defeating terrorists, games present the effects of violence as being fairly limited and benign. They give the impression that a total war against terrorism, even one involving the use of torture, extrajudicial killings, unrestricted drone strikes, and nuclear weapons, can be waged with precision and inflict virtually no civilian casualties. In doing so, video games portray the War on Terror as a clean war that is absolutely necessary and free from any harmful consequences.

Although the theme of a morally justified total war that is free of innocent casualties prevails in counterterrorism video games, these games also include some critical elements. As I will show, the intensification of the terrorist threat and responses to terrorism in some of these games is so extreme that it leads the games to expose some of the contradictions inherent in popular narratives about the War on Terror. The critical elements are far less overt than the overwhelming pro-war sentiment, and may even be inadvertent. Nevertheless, they are a sign that even

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<sup>5</sup> Carruthers, "No One's Looking"; see also Fred Dutton, "Call of Duty Elite Has 10 Million Users, 2 Million Pay," *EuroGamer*, May 2012, <<http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2012-05-09-call-of-duty-elite-has-10-million-users-2-million-pay>>; and Ben Kuchera, "6.5 Million *Modern Warfare 3* Units Sold, Profits Just Beginning," *Ars Technica*, November 2011, <<http://arstechnica.com/gaming/2011/11/activision-65-million-modern-warfare-3-units-sold-profits-just-beginning/>>.

though games reproduce misleading fantasies about terrorism, they do hold the capacity to have some critical import.

My analysis of the War on Terror in video games will focus on *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*, the most popular series of counterterrorism games. The three games in the series have sold almost sixty-five million copies, and have around forty million active players, who have logged over 1.6 billion hours of online play.<sup>6</sup> These are high figures compared to the size of audiences for other terrorism-related media. For example, the television series *24*, which has been the focus of much of the criticism of the representation of terrorism on television, received an average of eight to thirteen and a half million viewers per episode over its eight seasons.<sup>7</sup> The *Modern Warfare* games were also very well received by critics, with high aggregate reviewer and player scores.<sup>8</sup> Because of their popularity, these games play an important role in establishing the standards of the genre and the conventions that reappear in other games about terrorism and war. In addition to discussing *Modern Warfare* I will also draw comparisons between the series and other counterterrorist games to show the extent to which my analysis is generalizable to the many other video games set in the War on Terror.

The first section of this article will briefly discuss some of the research about terrorism-related entertainment on television and in movies to establish the themes of how terrorists and counterterrorist forces are depicted in these media. I will devote special attention to Van Veeren's four characteristics of the terrorist threat in entertainment media, as these help to identify how this threat appears in games.<sup>9</sup> In the second section, I will consider how counterterrorism games are structured. These games only show the War on Terror from the perspective of state security forces, thereby precluding any consideration of the conflict from other points of view. The third section offers a brief overview of the games in the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series, which will be used to illustrate my points about how video games simulate the War on Terror. The fourth and fifth sections will discuss the representation of terrorists in video games. I will argue that the virtual terrorists of video games generally lack ideologies or motives for fighting and that they are terrorists simply because of the type of threat they pose. Moreover, I will show that virtual terrorists not only reflect each of the four characteristics Van Veeren finds in television and film representations of terrorism but that these characteristics are actually intensified in video games. In the sixth section, I will assess the characteristics of the heroes in counterterrorism games. These are generally special operatives who act outside of the law and use any means necessary to defeat terrorists. These operatives must not only fight terrorists but also their own corrupt political and military leadership. In the final section, I will discuss some of the critical themes that appear in counterterrorism games.

<sup>6</sup> Dutton, "Call of Duty Elite Has 10 Million Users"; see also William D'Angelo, "Call of Duty: A Sales History," May 2012, <<http://www.vgchartz.com/article/250163/call-of-duty-a-sales-history/>>.

<sup>7</sup> Reuters, "Fox Cancels '24,' TV Show; Movie Version is Next," March 2010, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/03/27/us-idUSTRE62Q03020100327>>.

<sup>8</sup> Metacritic, <<http://www.metacritic.com/search/all/modern+warfare/results>>.

<sup>9</sup> Elspeth Van Veeren, "Interrogating 24: Making Sense of US Counter-terrorism in the Global War on Terrorism," *New Political Science* 31:3 (2009), pp. 361–384.

## Media Representations of Terrorism

Before analyzing video games about terrorism specifically, it is first important to consider some of the general themes in entertainment media about terrorism. Studies of terrorism in entertainment media generally find that representations of terrorism play a role in framing terrorist threats and responses to terrorism.<sup>10</sup> These framing effects can have significant political import if they are used for demonizing foreign populations, encouraging uncritical acceptance of information about terrorism, or building support for illegal or immoral responses.<sup>11</sup> It is all too often the case that popular media do contain these types of messages. Regardless of the type of media in which narratives about terrorism appear, content analyses frequently reveal that the representations of terrorism and terrorists are simplistic and misleading.

Many critiques of media representations of terrorism focus on the popular television show *24*, which follows Jack Bauer and his Counter Terrorist Unit (CTU) in their efforts to thwart terrorist attacks. Bauer routinely uses illegal tactics, including torture, and has been blamed for shaping viewers' attitudes about terrorism and torture in potentially harmful ways.<sup>12</sup> Van Veeren argues that *24* produces a fictional narrative that constructs terrorism and the US government's response to it in a way that encourages the use of extreme measures to prevent future attacks. As she says, "whether intended or not, *24*, like other popular cultural products, cannot be politically neutral but plays an important role in (re)producing political meaning."<sup>13</sup> Van Veeren finds a pattern in the way terrorism is represented on television that is exemplified in *24*, but that extends to other television shows and movies. This pattern is to portray terrorism as having four characteristics: "as new and exceptional, as well as ubiquitous, immediate and foreign."<sup>14</sup> The terrorist threat is exceptional in the sense that terrorists pose existential threats that excuse any means used to counteract them. In *24*, the heroes violate national and international laws by using torture, subvert political authorities, and disobey orders to uncover and eliminate terrorist cells. The terrorist threat is ubiquitous both because anyone can be a terrorist and because terrorists pose a constant threat to security. The underlying message of the theme of ubiquitous threat is that terrorist attacks can happen any time, in any place. The threat is immediate because it requires a quick reaction that cannot be carefully considered. Terrorism must be defeated with decisive violence, rather than

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<sup>10</sup> Douglas Kellner, "9/11, Spectacles of Terror, and Media Manipulation: A Critique of Jihadist and Bush Media Politics," *Critical Discourse Studies* 1:1 (2004), pp. 41–64; see also Douglas Kellner, "Bushspeak and the Politics of Lying: Presidential Rhetoric in the 'War on Terror,'" *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 37:4 (2007), pp. 622–645; Michael Griffin, "Media Images of War," *Media, War & Conflict* 3:1 (2010), pp. 7–41; Sudeshna Roy and Susan Dente Ross, "The Circle of Terror: Strategic Localizations of Global Media Terror Meta-Discourses in The US, India, and Scotland," *Media, War & Conflict* 4:3 (2011), pp. 287–301; and Van Veeren, "Interrogating 24."

<sup>11</sup> Erin Steuter and Deborah Wills, "'The Vermin Have Struck Again': Dehumanizing the Enemy in Post 9/11 Media Representations," *Media, War & Conflict* 3:2 (2010), pp. 152–167.

<sup>12</sup> Van Veeren, "Interrogating 24"; Jane Mayer, "Whatever It Takes," *The New Yorker*, September 2007, <[http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/02/19/070219fa\\_fact\\_mayer](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/02/19/070219fa_fact_mayer)>.

<sup>13</sup> Van Veeren, "Interrogating 24," p. 363.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 372.

through policy changes or negotiation. In 24, the immediacy of the threat is highlighted with the ticking clock that counts down to the moment of a terrorist attack. Finally, the terrorists are foreigners who penetrate the country's borders and threaten its security from inside.

Van Veeren argues that fictional terrorists and the counterterrorist operatives that oppose them are ideological constructs that present a simplistic view of the War on Terror. Terrorists are presented as being opportunists who will use any means available to inflict violence and the maximum level of destruction. They lack any sense of restraint and are willing to commit random acts of violence to mass casualty attacks. Even more problematically, popular representations of terrorism never explore terrorists' grievances. The terrorists are "ideological straw men" who cannot possibly have a legitimate goal.<sup>15</sup>

Other studies of terrorism on television have likewise shown terrorism presented in simplistic terms, as violence committed by relatively simplistic, malicious people who lack any legitimate grievances. Graham et al. argue that media narratives about terrorism create victims that are inherently good while terrorists comprise an evil Other that is beyond comprehension and that cannot be reasoned with.<sup>16</sup> Public support for government is depicted as necessary and elite government power as legitimate and benevolent. Roy and Ross agree with this analysis, as they maintain that "media in the US relentlessly demonized terrorists, distorting and inhibiting the free and fair flow of information about terrorism."<sup>17</sup>

The representations of terrorism are matched with a correspondingly distorted presentation of those who fight terrorism. Counterterrorist forces are heroic and good, ceaselessly waging war against terrorists and preventing their attacks from succeeding. They become heroes because they are willing to break any rules, violate any rights, and kill anyone in order to win. They are as unbounded and unrestrained as the terrorists, yet they always act in the interest of the public good. As Van Veeren puts it, "the capacity to step outside these boundaries is an essential part of the representation of the hero. Heroes, according to counterterrorist discourse, are the only characters capable of making this 'sacrifice' and therefore deserve our respect and admiration."<sup>18</sup> The heroes are therefore never ordinary people; they are superhuman figures who can be trusted with the power for judiciously using torture and with knowing when to disobey the orders of their political leaders. As outsiders, they are often left badly outnumbered by their opponents. Many of the counterterrorist heroes are lone heroes who foil terrorist plots with little or no assistance.<sup>19</sup> The heroes' goodness and efficacy make them feel just as unreal as their terrorist opponents.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 376.

<sup>16</sup> Phil Graham, Thomas Keenan and Anne-Maree Dowd, "A Call to Arms at the End of History: A Discourse Historical-Analysis of George W. Bush's Declaration of War on Terror," *Discourse & Society* 15:2-3 (2004), pp. 199-221.

<sup>17</sup> Sudeshna Roy and Susan Dente Ross, "The Circle of Terror: Strategic Localizations of Global Media Terror Meta-Discourses in the US, India, and Scotland," *Media, War & Conflict* 4:3 (2011), p. 289.

<sup>18</sup> Van Veeren, "Interrogating 24," p. 283.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Riegler, "Through the Lenses of Hollywood: Depictions of Terrorism in American Movies," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 4:2 (2010), pp. 35-45; see also Robertson Allen, "The Unreal Enemy of America's Army," *Games and Culture* 6:1 (2011), pp. 38-60.

## Counterterrorism Gaming

In this section I will discuss the various types of video games about terrorism and explain how video games differ from the media considered in the previous section. Video games have many different roles in the War on Terror. Some developers create games for advocacy purposes. These types of games have strong, overt political messages that are meant to serve strategic goals. *America's Army*, which was produced and distributed by the US Army for recruiting purposes, is a prime example of a game that is itself a tool in the War on Terror.<sup>20</sup> Other games have been developed by violent non-state actors, such as Hezbollah, to carry out their own public relations campaigns.<sup>21</sup> Some developers have also created games with the goal of transcending ongoing real-world conflicts by allowing players to simulate negotiations in order to peacefully resolve real conflicts.<sup>22</sup> Although advocacy games are noteworthy attempts to use games as a means of waging war or promoting peace, they are largely overshadowed by games that are primarily designed to simulate the War on Terror for entertainment purposes.

Video games about terrorism are among the most popular games on the market. Over the past decade, dozens of games have allowed players to take the role of special operatives battling terrorists around the world, establishing what I will call the "counterterrorism genre." These games are so popular that many have become franchises, which allow players to continually return to the battlefield for new adventures against terrorist enemies. Each franchise releases dozens of games and expansion packs for computers, an array of game consoles, and even for tablets and phones. Counterterrorism games have attracted player audiences that rival or even exceed the audiences of movies and television shows about terrorism. The three games in the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series have sold over 64.92 million copies.<sup>23</sup> The two games in the *Call of Duty: Black Ops* series, which are partly set in the Cold War and partly set in the War on Terror, sold nearly fifty-two million copies.<sup>24</sup> The many different Tom Clancy games dealing with terrorism, including the *Rainbow 6* series, the *Splinter Cell* series, and the *Ghost Recon* series sold a combined total of over forty-five million copies.<sup>25</sup> The two *Medal of Honor* games set in the War on Terror have sold over six million copies.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, it is important to bear in mind that the sales figures only include initial sales and do not account for the millions of copies of the games that are pirated, rented, or resold.

Unlike advocacy games, mainstream games do not have explicit political goals. They are not developed to encourage players to join the military or to change players' attitudes about ongoing conflicts. Nevertheless, because of how they construct the game experience and present information, these games

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<sup>20</sup> Roger Stahl, *Militainment, Inc.: War, Media, and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>21</sup> Vít Šisler, "Palestine in Pixels: The Holy Land, Arab-Israeli Conflict, and Reality Construction in Video Games," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 2:2 (2009), pp. 275–292.

<sup>22</sup> Philip Seib and Dana M. Janbek, *Global Terrorism and New Media: The Post-Al Qaeda Generation* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 69.

<sup>23</sup> D'Angelo "Call of Duty: A Sales History."

<sup>24</sup> VGchartz, <<http://www.vgchartz.com/>>.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

invariably reflect a strong pro-American bias that tacitly supports the US military, its allies, and its efforts in the War on Terror. Before turning to the specific messages these games contain, it is important to first consider how their mode of presentation differs from that of other media about terrorism. Although my analysis is of the textual content of video games about terrorism, and therefore does not rest on a particular theory of audience reception, it is vital to have some sense of how counterterrorism video games are played in order to understand these texts and how they differ from other media.

Unlike other media, such as television and film, which tend to show the actors involved in the War on Terror from a detached viewpoint that may shift to display many different points of view, counterterrorism games present events from an embedded viewpoint. Counterterrorism games are almost always first-person shooters (FPS), which attempt to make players feel that they are embodied in the game. FPS restrict players to the perspective of the characters they control, with player seeing through a single character's eyes as they play. They also use various effects to emphasize players' perceptual connection to those characters. For example, when grenades explode they temporarily stun the characters, turning the screen white and drowning out other sounds. Sustaining injuries causes the screen to darken, simulating the loss of blood and consciousness.

While some video games put players in control of characters that are customizable blank slates, counterterrorist games provide players with pre-constructed characters with their own histories, allegiances, and goals. They are almost exclusively American soldiers or soldiers from other western countries. The terrorists' perspective, or even the perspective of noncombatants, is hidden from view, as these characters are rarely playable or even characterized in any depth. Therefore, regardless of how individual players may interpret or react to the games, players are structurally confined to experiencing the games from the point of view of western military forces.

In addition to showing an extremely limited viewpoint, counterterrorism games are also realistic in a misleading way. The games are designed to provide the most authentic experience of combat possible, which leads them to emphasize the visual experience of war and to define realism on this basis. Each new game makes use of the latest graphics engines to more accurately render smoke and explosions, to make the characters appear more human, and to create more dramatic death sequences for those characters. The use of visual cues to indicate players' connection to the characters they control reflects this sense that the reality of war lies in the visual experience. However, as Galloway correctly points out, video games often equate realism with graphical realism—the creation of visually convincing characters and environments.<sup>27</sup> This type of realism tends to be relatively superficial, making games seem like simulations of real events even though their characters and narratives bear little resemblance to real-world people or events. Graphical realism is therefore deceptive; it allows the games to look like they accurately portray the realities of terrorism and violence even as they distort or omit critical information.

This is not to say that players always experience games in the same way or that players are simply passive consumers who uncritically accept the game

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<sup>27</sup> Alexander Galloway, "Social Realism in Gaming," *Game Studies* 4:1 (2004), < <http://gamestudies.org/1301> > (Accessed September 19, 2012).

narratives. Defenders of these games could rightly object, saying that players may enjoy these games while still remaining cognizant of what they obscure or omit. Players should not be reified into a homogenous collective, as different players may have much different experiences of the same games. My point is only that counterterrorism games are structured in a way that gives an extremely narrow perspective—one that tends to be even more restricted than the detached viewpoint used in other media—and that these games are designed to make this viewpoint look and feel real. These are fixed characteristics of counterterrorism games that remain true regardless of how players may react to the games.

### A New War on Terror

Any of the major franchises that produce counterterrorist games could be used as a case study of the genre, as each would provide a wealth of information about how terrorists and counterterrorist forces are represented that would hold true for most games. However, the *Modern Warfare* series offers one of the best case studies of video game representations of terrorism. Because *Modern Warfare* is the most popular counterterrorism game series, it has the broadest reach and sets many of the conventions other games emulate. The narratives and gameplay in these games can be accurately generalized for many other popular counterterrorism games. Although it exemplifies many of the common characteristics of counterterrorism games, the *Modern Warfare* series is also worthy of special attention because it sometimes deviates from the standards of the genre. It is unique among the popular video games in allowing players to occasionally take the perspective of a terrorist carrying out attacks on unarmed civilians and in including American soldiers among the game's enemies.

The three games of the *Modern Warfare* series tell the story of the War on Terror becoming World War III. Although the games show a mixture of conventional and unconventional military operations against regular military forces, insurgents, and terrorists, the games' central narrative is a conflict with a massive global terrorist network that triggers the world war. The *Modern Warfare* story follows multiple heroes. Over the course of the series, players control several different characters from the American and British armed forces, which allow the games to follow multiple story arcs that cover different campaigns in the War on Terror. The shifting perspective game mechanic has enormous potential to reflect on opposing points of view and could potentially overcome the problem of narrow narrative focus discussed in the previous section. It could allow players to control soldiers with different opinions about the War on Terror or even give them a chance to see through the eyes of one of the game's terrorist enemies, yet these possibilities go unrealized. Despite their apparent diversity, the characters are functionally identical, with the same beliefs and attitudes. They are only differentiated by their call signs and the weapons they can use. This game mechanic therefore not only avoids upsetting the one-sided perspective that typifies the genre, but actually reinforces it by insinuating that all perspectives on the conflict are essentially the same. All playable characters are unified in their unwavering and uncritical commitment to the war they are engaged in.

The first *Modern Warfare* game, which was released in 2007, consists of two main story arcs. The first follows a US invasion of an unnamed country in the Middle East that is launched with the goal of capturing the brutal dictator Khaled

Al-Asad. Despite the country's anonymity, the fictional invasion is clearly an allusion to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. This establishes the game's context in the War on Terror and emphasizes that although the events in the game are fictional, they are meant to parallel real events. During the invasion, players control an American Marine whose unit mounts several unsuccessful attempts to capture Al-Asad. Finally, when the Marines have Al-Asad cornered in the country's capital, the dictator detonates a nuclear bomb, destroying the city and killing many of the attacking Marines in the process. Players witness the agony of the final moments of the their character's life as he desperately tries to drag his shattered body away from the blast site, only to collapse and die from his injuries. The game's other story arc puts players in control of members of a fictional British counterterrorist force called Task Force 141. The operatives discover that the nuclear bomb that Al-Asad used to kill the American Marines was supplied by Russian terrorists and that the terrorists plan to seize control of a Russian missile base in order to launch a nuclear attack directly against the east coast of the US. In the end, a combined force of British and American operatives narrowly averts disaster by recapturing the missile base and remotely detonating the missiles while they are in flight toward their targets.

Players start *Modern Warfare 2* (2009) as an American Army Ranger who is recruited for an undercover mission to infiltrate the Russian terrorist cell responsible for the attempted nuclear attack in the previous game. To earn the terrorists' trust, the American operative becomes a terrorist, taking part in a brutal attack on civilians in a Russian airport. Players can choose to take part in the massacre by shooting the unarmed characters, or they may choose to refrain from shooting. Regardless of the choice, the terrorists carrying out the attack discover the American's identity and reveal it in order to implicate the US government in the attack, which then provokes Russia to invade the US. For the rest of the game, players switch perspectives between American soldiers fighting to expel the Russians from Virginia and Washington DC and Task Force 141 operatives tracking down and killing members of the terrorist organization responsible for instigating the war. The operatives of Task Force 141 manage to bring a temporary stop to the Russian invasion by triggering the launch of a Russian nuclear weapon, which detonates in the atmosphere above Washington DC and disables the Russian military's electronic weapons with an electromagnetic pulse.

In the final game in the series, *Modern Warfare 3* (2011), players find that the war between the US and Russia has spread to New York City. Then, the conflict intensifies as the Russian military launches poison gas attacks throughout Europe and follows these with a massive ground attack that puts them in control of much of western Europe. Again, players switch perspectives between American soldiers fighting the Russians in the US and Europe and members of Task Force 141, who travel around the world destroying terrorist cells. The former bring an end to the war by protecting peace talks between Russian and American leaders. The latter track down and kill Makarov, the leader of the Russian terrorist organization responsible for instigating the war.

This is only a cursory overview of the *Modern Warfare* series, yet it is enough to show that this fictional War on Terrorism is responsible for far more death and destruction than any real acts of terror. It is the War on Terror as a total war. Moreover, terrorism spreads to raise other security concerns. The joint attacks by terrorists and the Russian military reveal the merger of new enemies with those of

the Cold War. The use of deliberate violence against noncombatants, as well as the use of nuclear weapons, biological weapons, and torture, indicate the end of the legal and moral regulation of war. Thus, whereas movies and television shows set these consequences up as potential outcomes if terrorist attacks succeed, but usually allow disaster to be averted in the end, video games imagine a world in which the worst fears of terrorism are realized. This transforms the entire game world into a series of battlefields between terrorists and state military forces that pose existential threats to each other. This vision of the War on Terror is made possible by the type of threat terrorists pose and by the heroes' extreme responses.

### The Ubiquitous Terrorist Threat

In this section and the next I will describe some of the most salient characteristics of video game terrorists, focusing on the extent to which virtual terrorists are constructed according to a radical intensification of real terrorist threats. Real-world terrorists usually have strong ideologies or grievances that provide motives for action and that allow them to excuse activities that are widely considered immoral.<sup>28</sup> Understanding terrorism and effectively responding to it demands some knowledge of why terrorists use violence, what their objectives are, and how further violence might be prevented. Even if one considers terrorism to be intrinsically immoral and never justifiable, it may still be possible for those who carry out acts of terror to have legitimate reasons for engaging in violence that need to be addressed. Nevertheless, despite the importance of the ideological basis of terrorism, counterterrorist games omit discussion of terrorists' ideologies or reasons for fighting, except in extremely superficial terms. *Modern Warfare* says virtually nothing about why the terrorists commit acts of violence. Even over the course of three games, each lasting around ten hours, it is difficult to discover any details about the terrorists' motives. By limiting players to a first-person view that does not show any genuine alternative perspectives, the games also prevent the discovery of any contrary information within the game narrative.

The terrorists' only defining characteristic is that they are labeled "ultranationalists." This label, like the label "terrorist" itself, is used to characterize the enemies and to establish their hostility in the absence of any substantive information about them or their reasons for fighting. Other games follow the same pattern, with many failing to label the terrorists' ideologies at all. Terrorist threats emerge from nowhere, as if there were no social or economic forces causing them to come into existence or sustaining them. Counterterrorist games therefore suggest that terrorists simply exist and that they are enemies because they have been deemed terrorists. The label alone is sufficient to characterize these opponents as evil, to deny that the terrorists could have legitimate grievances, and to imply that there is no reason to inquire into why terrorists engage in violence.

Lacking any coherent identity or ideology, video game terrorists cannot be characterized in terms of what they believe. Instead, they are defined by the type of threat they pose. It is useful to assess the terrorists in these games according to

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<sup>28</sup> Jeffrey Sluka, "Terrorism and Taboo: An Anthropological Perspective on Political Violence against Civilians," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 1:2 (2008), pp. 167–183; see also Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

the four characteristics Van Veeren finds in representations of terrorists on television, as these help to identify what makes terrorists appear to pose a distinctive type of threat that is intrinsically dangerous, even apart from any specific ideology the terrorists may support.<sup>29</sup> Van Veeren's four categories not only highlight some of the fictional terrorists' most important characteristics but also help to illustrate how video game terrorists differ from those in other media. As I discussed in the first section, Van Veeren argues that terrorist threats in popular media are presented as ubiquitous, immediate, foreign, and exceptional. *Modern Warfare* not only displays each of these characteristics but shows them in a more extreme form than television and movies.

The terrorist threat in video games is even more ubiquitous than in other media. Almost every mission in counterterrorist games takes place in a completely different setting than the previous mission. Over the course of the *Modern Warfare* series, players travel around the world to places including the US, Russia, Brazil, Britain, France, Germany, India, the Czech Republic, Somalia, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, and the United Arab Emirates. Other counterterrorist games likewise visit dozens of locations. In *Rainbow 6: Vegas* and *Vegas 2*, players can battle terrorists in the opulent casinos of Las Vegas, the Hoover Dam, and Mexico. *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* takes players to places such as Pakistan, Somalia, the Philippines, Spain, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Yemen. These games therefore manifest terrorism as a truly global threat that is unconstrained by geography and found in virtually any location. In counterterrorism games, there is nothing beyond or outside the space of conflict. This also corresponds to a broader trend in other types war games, of instantiating conflicts in every conceivable geographical setting to the point that there is no space free from war.<sup>30</sup>

The terrorist threat in counterterrorism games is not only ubiquitous in its presence around the world but also in the sense that each particular location is so completely transformed by war that it exists as nothing other than a battlespace. This is most evident from the absence of civilians or neutral parties. Each location in counterterrorist games is almost exclusively populated by enemies. Only a few dozen civilians appear over the course of the *Modern Warfare* series, even when the fighting takes place in some of the world's most populous cities, such as New York and Paris. Instead, these locations appear as massive terrorist bases with threats around every corner. With virtually no civilians around, players are usually free to kill all non-player characters aside from their own teammates. In a world without civilians, there is no need to discriminate between those who can be attacked and those who cannot; everyone is a threat and a target to be killed using any means available.

The only mark of the civilian world comes from the civilian infrastructure. While fighting in urban areas, players may destroy vehicles, homes, and shops in ironically counterproductive struggles to prevent terrorists from destroying these locations themselves. Battles in exotic locations often take place in or around famous landmarks, and at times even allow players to demolish them. Among the many places destroyed in *Modern Warfare's* virtual War on Terror are the Eiffel

<sup>29</sup> Van Veeren, "Interrogating 24."

<sup>30</sup> Mark B. Salter, "The Geographical Imaginations of Video Games: *Diplomacy*, *Civilization*, *America's Army* and *Grand Theft Auto IV*," *Geopolitics* 16:2 (2011), pp. 359–388.

Tower, the White House, the New York Stock Exchange, and the British Houses of Parliament. Real terrorists frequently target these types of landmarks for their symbolic importance, so it is natural for these places to figure prominently in fears about future terrorist attacks.<sup>31</sup> However, rather than simply being demolished by terrorist attacks, these landmarks are settings that terrorists and counterterrorist forces destroy together as they battle against each other. Strangely, this makes the attacks on these locations into collaborative ventures. The accessibility and vulnerability of these famous landmarks further exaggerates the power of terrorist threats and serves to emphasize that each location has ceased to serve any function aside from being a war zone.

### The Power of the Terrorist Threat

Real-world terrorists tend to operate as lone individuals or in small cells. Most are at such a numerical and technical disadvantage that they resort to attacking relatively weak, unprotected targets.<sup>32</sup> The same is generally true of terrorists in movies and on television. Paramilitary-style terrorist organizations also exist, but few are large enough to contend with state military forces in pitched battles. The terrorists of video games, by contrast, are so numerous, well-organized, and well-equipped that they give the impression that terrorist organizations can rival the power of even the world's leading conventional militaries. These virtual terrorists pose an immediate threat as Van Veeren describes it.

Terrorists in video games have the power to infiltrate secret military bases, to launch nuclear missiles, and to assassinate heads of state. Their powerful weapons rival those of the world's most advanced militaries. Each terrorist organization is also linked to every other organization, giving terrorism the appearance of being a single unified phenomenon. Nevertheless, even with these many indications of immense power, no characteristic displays the magnitude of the terrorist threat quite like the terrorists' numerical strength. Virtual terrorists operate dozens of bases around the world, with hundreds or even thousands of members in each location. Counterterrorism games usually operate according to a body-count logic, according to which players win by killing as many terrorists as possible. This calls for huge reserves of enemies for players to fight and kill during every mission. A staple of *Modern Warfare* and other counterterrorism games are missions in which players must defend a fixed point for a certain length of time as it is attacked by limitless waves of enemies. In these missions, the immediacy of the terrorist threat is taken to the most extreme form, to exceed the boundaries of what is even physically possible.

The ubiquity and immense power of the terrorist threat in game worlds not only creates the impression that terrorists are serious foreign threats to national and international security but that almost anyone who is foreign constitutes a potential threat. This is a message that is implicit in the global scope of the virtual War on Terror, the lack of civilians in the games, and the uniformity of the playable

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<sup>31</sup> Brigitte Lebens Nacos, *Mass-Mediated Terrorism: The Central Role of the Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

<sup>32</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); see also Adam Dolnik, *Understanding Terrorist Innovation: Technology, Tactics and Global Trends* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

characters. There are no neutral parties or innocent people in the game worlds. There are not even allies with alternative perspectives. Instead, there are only friends and enemies that form largely homogenous opposing blocs. The US and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies are alone against what seems like a unified threat from the rest of the world. The foreign terrorists in *Modern Warfare* cooperate, despite their ethnic, religious, and geographical differences, to attack the US and its allies. The enemy is therefore not reducible to a particular terrorist organization. Rather, the enemy is global terrorism itself. This again shows an intensification of the conventional ways of representing terrorists in other media.

However, it is important to point out that while the threat to national security is primarily foreign, it is not exclusively foreign. This is one of the points at which video games deviate from the War on Terror narratives in other media. One of the major plot twists in the *Modern Warfare* series is when players learn that the attack on the Russian airport, which initiated the world war between the US and Russia, was actually orchestrated with the help of an American general. General Shepherd ordered the player-controlled Army Ranger to take part in the attack knowing that he would be discovered and cause an international crisis. This shows that while the terrorist threat in video games like *Modern Warfare* primarily consists of foreigners who challenge the US and its allies, it is so pervasive that no one, even high level military commanders, can be completely trusted. Other counterterrorism games likewise develop the theme of the internal threat. In *Medal of Honor*, players discover that members of Congress are conspiring to abandon American soldiers fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan. In *Call of Duty: Black Ops II*, terrorists manage to infiltrate the group of special operatives they are fighting. These and other examples show that the total nature of the terrorist threat in counterterrorist games is so exaggerated that it not only includes foreigners but also members of the heroes' own governments.

### **The Heroes of Counterterrorism**

In this section I will turn my attention to the special operatives who are the heroes of counterterrorism games. I will show how these heroes are constructed in opposition to the extreme threat of virtual terrorists and how this oppositional character leads the heroes to adopt correspondingly extreme counterterrorism strategies. The ubiquity and immediacy of the terrorist threat in *Modern Warfare*, and in other counterterrorism games, is exceptional because it presents such an overwhelming challenge to global security that all regulations on the use of force must be abandoned. The struggle against terrorism reverts to a persistent emergency situation and excuses the actions of the games' heroes. Although this exceptional threat is created by the terrorists, it is best understood as forming the basis of the characterization of the heroes in these games, as the heroes are largely defined through their response to the exceptional threat.

The theme of the unconventional counterterrorist forces breaking the rules, and even the law, is pervasive in popular media about terrorism, yet the extreme measures the heroes take are even more prominent in counterterrorist video games. As the first section showed, television and movies often lend support to torture and violations of civil liberties by suggesting that these tactics successfully prevent terrorist attacks. Video games go even further. They not only incorporate

these themes, with scenes of prisoner abuse and surveillance, but also exhibit far more aggressive strategies.

Most heroes of counterterrorism games are members of western special operations forces who carry out covert missions that have little oversight. The targets are often selected and attacked on the operatives' own initiative, without orders from their military and political leadership. At times these heroes even contradict orders from the commanders or from civilian leadership, as they believe they understand the terrorist threat better than anyone else. This level of autonomy conflicts with the ideal of the loyal, apolitical soldier who follows orders from the government, but it is a defining trait of the narrative of the lone hero that appears in popular media about terrorism. Once again, it is a theme that is intensified in video games about terrorism. *Modern Warfare* takes the lone hero to an extreme as the counterterrorists even become criminals in the eyes of their own governments after the members of Task Force 141 kill the corrupt General Shepherd without evidence against him. For much of the series, the members of the unit carry out their own War on Terrorism without state sanction. The heroes also violate the laws of countless countries as they travel around the world hunting suspected terrorists.

The *Modern Warfare* series' narrative suggests that the circumstances invariably excuse the extreme measures that are used to defeat terrorism. The members of Task Force 141 are the only people capable of defeating the terrorists, and disregarding legal constraints is the only way for them to succeed. Any tactic, no matter how destructive, turns out to be permissible. By acting outside the law and in ways that would produce enormous collateral damage to civilian populations, if civilians were present in the game world to begin with, the special operatives come very close to qualifying as terrorists themselves. Only the claims that they are always serving a greater good and that they are killing terrorists allows them to seem heroic.

One of the strangest moments of the series comes in *Modern Warfare 2*, when the members of Task Force 141 stall the Russian invasion of the US by triggering a nuclear missile launch from a Russian submarine. The missile detonates in the atmosphere above Washington DC, emitting an electromagnetic burst that disables electronic weapons in the area and renders the Russian forces unable to coordinate their attack. This unusual strategy allows the Americans defending the capitol building to halt the Russian invasion, yet the game does not consider the potential consequences of using nuclear weapons in this way or even the significance of this attack within the game narrative. The nuclear attack is ironic, as the men who trigger it are the same special operatives who previously prevented a nuclear attack on the US. They reenact and complete the mission they once prevented the terrorists from carrying out. This extreme attack, which would certainly result in destruction on a massive scale and might provoke a nuclear war, is excused within the context of the narrative because it is the only means of defeating Russian invasion. Thus, the decision of a few rogue operatives to unilaterally launch a nuclear missile appears to be the right course of action within the game narrative.

The nuclear missile strike is one of the many instances in which counterterrorism forces use technology to defeat their powerful and numerically superior terrorist threats. Throughout the *Modern Warfare* series and other counterterrorist games the heroes are shown to be masters of new technologies,

who carry out their intensification of the War on Terror through the use of advanced weaponry. The heroes in the War on Terror are inseparable from the expensive military hardware that is produced by the military-industrial complex. In almost every mission in counterterrorism games, players are introduced to new and more powerful weapons, to the point that the games often seem like tours through a weapons catalog. The central weapons in the game are rifles, machine guns, pistols, and shotguns from around the world. Players use everything from the famous AK-47 to new concept weapons that are currently in development. Although the games make a point of recreating the myriad small arms used throughout the world, the most impressive weapons are those that have come to define the War on Terror in recent years: unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), unmanned ground vehicles (UGVs), and guided missiles.

Several times throughout the *Modern Warfare* series, as well as in the *Medal of Honor* series and the *Black Ops* series, players take control of the Predator and Reaper drones that have been seen to carry out targeted killings in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen.<sup>33</sup> Players can exchange a rifle for a laptop, which can then be used to direct the UAVs' targeting systems. By controlling these weapons, the games' heroes are able to even the odds in battles against hordes of terrorists, killing them with impunity. At other times, players can call on support from long-range missiles with similar effects. Like the UAVs, missiles can be controlled with a laptop and steered into enemy buildings and vehicles to destroy them without inflicting any collateral damage. Counterterrorism games present an idealized view of these weapons, showing them to be extremely effective, discriminate in the damage they produce, and capable of giving the games' heroes the capacity to defeat their incredibly powerful terrorist opponents. They also appear to be necessary tools, without which the special operatives would be unable to defeat the terrorists. The implication is that any type advanced weaponry can fill a vital role in the War on Terror. No weapon is too expensive or too powerful to be used against the games' intensified vision of the terrorist threat.

The presentation of new technologies and methods of war as being precise, well-applied, and free of casualties, coincides with what Der Derian calls the "virtuous war."<sup>34</sup> As Der Derian says, "virtuous wars promote a vision of bloodless, humanitarian, hygienic wars."<sup>35</sup> This type of war is appealing in an age of heightened aversion to casualties and greater willingness to use technologies to mitigate risk, and relies heavily on fantasy. However, by simulating war as being free of consequences and presenting this type of clean war as being a product of advanced new weapons technologies, counterterrorism games suggest that this type of war is not only attainable, but that it is the normal way of war. The nearly complete absence of civilians and total nature of the battlespace also helps to reinforce this theme by ensuring that there are rarely innocent bystanders to injure and that every shot fired or bomb dropped is almost guaranteed to kill a few terrorists.

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<sup>33</sup>Jo Becker and Scott Shane, "Secret 'Kill List' Proves a Test of Obama's Principles and Will." *The New York Times*, May 2012, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/29/world/obamas-leadership-in-war-on-al-qaeda.html?pagewanted=all>> .

<sup>34</sup>James Der Derian, *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, xv.

### Locating Critical Themes

The foreign terrorist threat is only part of the justification for counterterrorist forces resorting to extreme measures to combat virtual terrorists. The heroes of counterterrorist games must also operate outside the law and against orders because they cannot trust their own leaders. This causes counterterrorism games to reveal ambivalence about political and military authorities that are shown to be incompetent or even malicious figures. Politicians only appear briefly throughout the *Modern Warfare* series. The games give little sense of who they are or what policies they support aside from how these affect the war effort. However, the consequences of their actions are revealing. The American and Russian leaders are dangerously inept, as they are unable to prevent a terrorist attack tenuously linked to one American soldier from escalating into a world war. The US and its allies are, despite having their enormous military and intelligence apparatus, incapable of detecting the Russian plans to initiate that war. Finally, the Russian government is easily manipulated and extremely militaristic. Moreover, as I mentioned previously, other counterterrorist games are likewise generally suspicious of political authorities, often portraying them as corrupt or incompetent figures.

In addition to taking a cynical view of politicians, high-ranking military officials are suspect in many counterterrorist games. In the *Modern Warfare* series, the plot to initiate a global war between the US and Russia is orchestrated by an American general who is so enthusiastic about his desire for a glorious war that he actively cooperates with terrorists who share his goal of initiating a war. When players confront General Shepherd in the final battle of *Modern Warfare 2*, the general explains that he decided to start the war to restore the country's lost greatness and to reassert American power around the world. The general's paranoia about the foreign terrorist threat leads him to provoke a war that transforms skirmishes between terrorists and special operatives into a global conflict. His fantasy of restoring American glory becomes a dangerous delusion resulting in countless deaths, and almost destroying the country he hoped to elevate to a higher status. The general's actions cause his imagined threats to national security to become real threats. In doing so, he commits one of the recurring faults in real-world efforts to end terrorism. The actions he takes out of fear of future threats cause him to make his imagined threats real by alienating potential allies and driving more people to engage in acts of terror.

The cynical representation of political and military authorities in counterterrorist games is significant because this leads the games to have some critical themes. The games simulate a War on Terror that is so exaggerated that it challenges the motives and capabilities of the people who are responsible for conducting that war. General Shepherd in particular, with his aspirations of American hegemony, is portrayed as a false hero. Under his façade of patriotism and courage he turns out to be as dangerous, if not more dangerous, than the games' terrorist enemies. The suggestion that Shepherd and other Western political and military elites manufacture the War on Terror and have little concern for the people who lose their lives in it demonstrates that, although *Modern Warfare* and games like it may be dominated by pro-war themes, they are not entirely reducible to those themes. There is some tension between the celebration of military heroism and a suspicion about the reasons that heroism is necessary. Unfortunately, counterterrorist games tend to hint at this tension and their critical themes, rather than making them core elements of the game narratives.

The terrorist attack on the Russian airport that initiates the world war between the US and Russia is another of the important moments of the *Modern Warfare* games, from a critical perspective. The attack is a collaborative massacre of civilians brought about by terrorists and an American soldier. Although the game does not reflect on this point, the implications are nevertheless striking. The two opposing factions in the counterterrorist narrative are joined in killing dozens of civilians who wish to have no part in the fighting. The American soldier who participates in the attack does so because he does not understand the events happening around him. He is ordered to assist in the brutal murder of civilians and follows his orders because he is assured that his atrocity will fulfill the logic of a higher plan that is beyond his understanding. This event, which is the consequence of blind obedience, shows that the game's heroes are capable of acting in extremely unheroic ways and that they may even be susceptible to becoming terrorists themselves. It would be unimaginable for Jack Bauer or another television hero to commit such an atrocity, yet the heroes in video games fight according to the logic of an intensified War on Terror that pushes them dangerously close to becoming the same as the enemies they are trying to defeat.

The joint attack on the airport is the only time in the game in which those labeled as terrorist actually succeed in carrying out an attack on civilians, but it is far from being the only attack on civilians. The worst atrocities of the games are committed not by terrorists but by state military forces. These include the British special operatives' nuclear missile strike to disable Russian forces in North America and the Russian military's poison gas attacks on western Europe. Again, this reveals that there is some critical potential in the game narrative. These events in the narrative raise the possibility that states attempting to prevent terrorism may respond to threats in ways that aggravate the threat or create new threats.

These critical themes in *Modern Warfare*, and those in other counterterrorism games, usually seem to be unintentional, as they are almost always understated and overshadowed by more militaristic themes. The themes may even be inherent in the logic of the types of conflicts the developers construct, naturally arising as games intensify the terrorist threat and the magnitude of counterterrorism responses to the point that the narrative begins to unravel. However, the existence of distinct critical themes shows that counterterrorism video games are not simply one-dimensional. They are complex texts that glorify the War on Terror while still manifesting some doubts about the conflict, especially the reasons for waging it. The existence of critical themes raises the possibility that games may take more thoughtful positions on terrorism or on armed conflicts in general. However, these themes would have to be strengthened for this potential to be realized.

## Conclusion

Although video games have been largely ignored in the literature on media representations of terrorism,<sup>36</sup> they play an important role in creating popular narratives about terrorism. Games reproduce many of the themes of other media

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<sup>36</sup> Keith, Schwalbe, and Silcock, "Comparing War Images across Media Platforms"; see also Kellner, "9/11, Spectacles of Terror, and Media Manipulation"; and Kellner, "Bushspeak and the Politics of Lying"; Seib and Janbek, *Global Terrorism and New Media*; Altheide, *Terror Post 9/11 and the Media*.

about terrorism, as they portray terrorists as inherently violent figures, devoid of ideology aside from their desire to inflict harm on the west. These terrorists present a powerful and pervasive threat that can only be defeated by heroes that are willing to ignore legal and moral restraints. Video games intensify these themes, making terrorists stronger and more numerous than they appear in other media and leading counterterrorist operatives to adopt more extreme responses to terrorism. Games also create the impression that the War on Terror is truly global, spanning every country. That everyone is a participant in the fighting eliminates the consideration of civilians or any neutral parties. This total War on Terrorism is reflected in the way counterterrorist games omit civilian characters, making everyone in the game worlds a friend or an enemy, and set battles in dozens of locations around the world to simulate a War on Terror that is truly global in its scope.

The intensification of terrorist threats in counterterrorist games leads these games to amplify the media distortion of terrorism and to simulate more extreme means of waging the War on Terror. However, as I have also pointed out, these games do contain some critical themes that must not be discounted even though the games are predominately supportive of the War on Terror narrative. The critical themes suggest that more extreme variants of the War on Terror narrative tend to become contradictory. The levels of violence employed by states responding to the intensified threat of virtual terrorism and their disregard for moral concerns bring them dangerously close to, and even of becoming, terrorists. The critical elements of the *Modern Warfare* series and other counterterrorist games are also cause for some hope about the future of gaming, as they indicate that games have the potential to take alternative viewpoints on the War on Terror and its media narratives. It remains to be seen whether games will continue to reproduce and intensify familiar narratives about terrorism or whether they may be used to challenge them.

The timing of this intensification of terrorist threats in video games is surprising, as there are some signs that the narratives about terrorism are undergoing a shift away from the uncritical narratives about terrorism. Many recent films about the War on Terror have been more critical of the US war effort, especially the war in Iraq. Movies such as *The Hurt Locker* (2008), *Jarhead* (2005), *Lions for Lambs* (2007), *Stop-Loss* (2008), and *Green Zone* (2010) have challenged American counterterrorism policies, shown the harmful effects of the war on civilians and American military personnel, and made war seem less glamorous than it has appeared in earlier movies or in the television programs about terrorism.<sup>37</sup> The number of movies and television shows about terrorism also seems to be in decline. It is difficult to determine whether this reveals a lasting change of perspective or is simply due to short-term disenchantment with the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. Whatever the source of this change, it is a trend that does not hold true across media. Video games about the War on Terror continue to be developed and attract larger player audiences every year, evidence that terrorism-related entertainment media continue to find an audience and that they continue to transmit and develop the War on Terror's defining narratives.

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<sup>37</sup> Carruthers, "No One's Looking"; see also Simon Philpott, "Is Anyone Watching? War, Cinema and Bearing Witness," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 23:2 (2010), pp. 325–348.

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