

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

War games have undergone changes over the years, from simple shooters like Doom (1993) where you fight monsters to realistic war games like Call of Duty. One of the most recent examples of this evolution is Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 (2023), a military simulation game that emphasizes geopolitical realism and modern warfare. The games adopt perspectives aligned with the point of view of the US military while presenting opposing factions as antagonistic actors within the narrative. These games often simplify geopolitical struggles into binary oppositions between heroes and enemies. As argued by Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter in *Games of Empire* (2009), contemporary war games contribute to the banalization of war by transforming complex geopolitical conflicts into simplified and operationalized missions.

From the perspective of game developers such as Activision and Sledgehammer Games, contemporary war narratives are primarily designed as immersive and cinematic gameplay experiences rather than direct political commentary. As co-studio head Grant Collier explained, the “Call of Duty feel” has historically relied on two powerful sides locked in a see-saw-like confrontation, with the player’s faction gradually pushing forward (Shacknews, 2007). This design philosophy favors symmetrical large-scale conflicts over asymmetric guerrilla warfare scenarios. In addition, developers of the Modern Warfare remake series emphasized that their campaign narratives aim to portray complex and multi-

perspective conflicts rather than a simplistic black-and-white depiction of a specific nation (Activision Blog, 2019). These statements suggest that the construction of powerful antagonistic factions may emerge from gameplay architecture and cinematic design logic. Nevertheless, within the framework of the Military-Entertainment Complex as argued by Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter in *Games of Empire* (2009), games may contribute to normalizing public perceptions of Eastern threats, often framing military intervention as necessary while positioning Eastern actors as potential enemies.

However, unlike the original *Modern Warfare* trilogy (2007–2011), which largely reflected post-9/11 counter-terrorism discourse and residual Cold War nostalgia, the reboot series (2019–2023) emerged within a substantially different geopolitical environment. Mumford & Carlucci (2022) describe this period as one characterized by renewed great-power competition and hybrid forms of warfare involving Russia and Western countries that are increasingly being framed through hybrid warfare, cyber operations, information warfare, and ultranationalist security threats rather than conventional ideological confrontation.

The release of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (2023) coincided with a period of heightened geopolitical tension involving Russia. At the time of the game's release, the Russia–Ukraine war remained one of the most prominent international conflicts and received extensive global media attention (The Guardian, 2023). The game's release was also discussed within gaming media in relation to this broader political context. *PC Gamer* (2023) noted that although the *Modern Warfare* reboot avoids directly recreating ongoing real-world conflicts, its military narrative inevitably invites comparison with contemporary geopolitical issues involving Russia. Although *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (2023) does not explicitly depict

the Russia–Ukraine war, it was released during a period in which representations of Russia occupied a significant place in international political discourse. This broader geopolitical context provides an important background for examining how Russian Ultranationalists are represented within the game's fictional narrative.

Scholarly research has examined similar patterns across different historical periods. Ispir (2015) notes that Russian antagonists in games are often portrayed as brutal and ideologically rigid, echoing Cold War-era imagery. Cronin (2019) further explains that while the form of representation has shifted from ideological superpower during the Cold War, to post-Soviet corruption and organized crime the underlying positioning of Russia as a recurring threat has remained relatively consistent. In more recent contexts often described as a “New Cold War,” Russian antagonists are frequently depicted as cybercriminals or ultranationalist destabilizers. Binns (2024), argues that video games influence how players interpret moral positioning through symbolic representation, visual codes, and narrative framing. In war games especially, this process positions certain nations as antagonists or villains whose presence justifies conflict within the game’s storyline.

Furthermore, Harrison (2021) similarly contends that Western war games often simplify and commodify military conflict to produce commercially appealing experiences, potentially reinforcing dominant geopolitical perspectives while limiting critical reflection.

Another research conducted by Bos (2016) analyzes how geopolitical imaginaries are represented, consumed, and produced across the Modern Warfare franchise. By integrating textual analysis, player-based research, and production studies, this work demonstrates how military-themed videogames are embedded within broader geopolitical discourses and cannot be dismissed as politically neutral entertainment.

From Hall's constructionist perspective, meanings are continuously reconstructed through changing signs and representational practices (Hall, 1997). Therefore, the changing forms of Russian antagonists identified by Cronin (2019) suggest that the visual signifiers associated with Russia continue to evolve alongside shifting geopolitical contexts. This continuity suggests that the conceptual meaning attached to Russia may remain relatively stable across changing visual representations as an enduring geopolitical threat that continues to legitimize Western military readiness. This persistent framing also aligns with Hall's (1997) concept of stereotyping as a representational strategy that fixes difference by reducing complex political identities into simplified and repetitive categories. This raises the possibility that contemporary military games such as *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (2023) employ similar representational strategies by constructing Russian Ultranationalists as symbolic antagonists through recurring visual and narrative conventions.

Previous studies largely analyze Russian antagonists at a broad ideological level, focusing on recurring Cold War narratives and generalized patterns of othering (Ispir, 2015; Cronin, 2019), or on Western ideological dominance in video games more generally and how geopolitical imaginaries are represented, consumed, and produced across the *Modern Warfare* franchise (Binns, 2024; Harrison, 2021; Bos, 2016). While previous studies primarily examined representations produced within Cold War nostalgia or post-9/11 security discourse, considerably less attention has been paid to how Russian Ultranationalists are represented in a game released during the contemporary geopolitical climate following the Russia–Ukraine war. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by analyzing the visual and narrative representation of Russian Ultranationalists as villains in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (2023). Using Stuart Hall's Theory of Representation (1997),

Gramsci's concept of Cultural Hegemony (1971), and Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) Visual Grammar, this study examines how visual and narrative resources construct geopolitical meanings within the game in the context of contemporary geopolitical tensions surrounding Russia.

1.2. Research Problems

The researcher formulated research question as below

1. How do the signifying practices embedded in the narrative structure and gameplay mechanics of Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 (2023) construct "Russia Ultranationalist" as an antagonistic identity associated with global threat and disorder?
2. How does the Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 (2023) alignment (forcing the player to occupy the perspective of Task Force 141) naturalize Western military invention?

1.3. Purpose of the Study

1. To examine how "Russia Ultranationalist" is constructed as a sign of villainy in Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 (2023) through narrative structure, visual coding, and gameplay mechanics, and how this construction naturalizes a Western-hero versus Eastern-villain geopolitical framework.
2. To examine how the game's narrative reinforces Western ideological dominance in shaping the portrayal of Russia Ultranationalist as an antagonist.

1.4. Scope of the Study

This research focuses on analyzing the representation of Russian Ultranationalists in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (2023) through its visual representation using Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) Visual Grammar, particularly the representational, interpersonal, and compositional metafunctions. The analysis is limited to visual elements such as character depiction, military symbols, settings, camera perspective, lighting, colour, and spatial composition. Dialogues and subtitles are included only as supporting contextual evidence to clarify the interpretation of the visual data and are not analyzed as independent linguistic structures.

1.5. Significance of the Study

This study aims to uncover several results in both academic and practical contexts. First, this analysis contributes to academic understanding of contemporary video games that construct and reinforce biased national identities, particularly through the portrayal of Russia Ultranationalist as the enemy in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (2023). Second, this aims to contribute to digital literacy and cultural studies by showing how Western ideological dominance functions through narratives, symbols, and visual representations in popular entertainment, especially in gaming. Finally, this aims to benefit gamers, educators, and future researchers by raising awareness of how video games influence perceptions of specific cultures and countries, thereby encouraging a critical approach to digital literacy and its ideological implications.

1.6. State of The Art

This research using the game *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (2023), which focuses on the representation of Russian Ultrationalists as a villain throughout the Western ideological stereotype to non-Western countries. These studies utilize *Call of duty Modern Warfare 3* (2023) using Stuart Hall's Theory of Representation (1997) in circuit of culture and Gramsci's concept of Cultural Hegemony (1971). Although the previous studies focused on recurring Cold War narratives and post 9/11 tragedy. This study focuses on how Russian Ultrationalists are represented through visual and narrative resources in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (2023). By employing Stuart Hall's Theory of Representation, Gramsci's concept of Cultural Hegemony, and Kress and van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar, this research investigates how contemporary geopolitical meanings are constructed within the game