Call of Duty Black Ops Cold War: Official US propaganda and historical falsification, the game

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In late 2020, *Call of Duty Black Ops: Cold War* was released on all major video game consoles. It quickly became the best-selling game of 2020, the best-selling game of the month for each month up to the time of this article's writing and the 20th best-selling game in the history of US recorded game sales.

The game's initial marketing featured a flashy teaser trailer with news clips intercut with footage of Soviet KGB informant, defector and conspiracy theorist Yuri Bezmenov (1939-1993). In the clips, Bezmenov claims the USSR had in-depth plans for subverting other countries, in particular the US. The trailer makes sure to emphasize the supposed historical inspiration for the campaign (i.e., the game's story mode) with the tagline, "Know your history or be doomed to repeat it."

Cold War's trailer, with images of protests and military and police crackdowns, was released a month after the eruption of the mass international protests against the police murder of George Floyd. Bezmenov's claims of a Soviet plot to destabilize opposing governments dovetails neatly with the ongoing anti-China and anti-Russia campaigns, which assert that domestic protests are the result of "foreign meddling."

The story in *Call of Duty Black Ops: Cold War* centers on the primary villain Perseus, a KGB agent supposedly based on a real-life counterpart who was likely an amalgam of various individuals and propaganda inventions. Perseus appears as a puppet master working from the shadows, with his hands in everything from the Vietnam War to the 1979-81 hostage crisis in Iran. Halfway through the story, it is revealed that Perseus plans to set off neutron bombs that have been planted throughout Western Europe by the US.

For hours, the game's campaign subjects the player to the presence of its sociopathic cast and a stream of gunning sections in which the only way to progress is to mow down Soviet, Cuban or Vietnamese soldiers. Two prominent characters, CIA special ops Frank Woods and Russell Adler, carry out murders and offer sadistic jokes and commentary throughout the story. In the first mission, Adler throws a captured enemy off a building without a second thought. In one cutscene (a sequence that is not interactive, breaking up the gameplay), Woods places a wager on who can kill Cuban leader Fidel Castro. He then fistbumps another agent.

These fascistic thugs are the heroes of the game. Later sections of the campaign reveal that "Bell," the player's character, was Perseus' former agent who was captured and brainwashed by Adler and the CIA to serve in the mission to take down Perseus. If the player wants to get the "Good Ending" in the campaign, he or she must go along with Adler and divulge information on Perseus that foils his plan. After this, Adler delivers a bombastic speech in a special cutscene rewarded to the player before the final mission for the "Good Ending."

"We'll do whatever it takes. Some of us will cross the line to make sure the line is still there in the morning. No one's gonna brand us heroes or villains. They don't know us," Adler says.

While the game's plot is obviously fictitious, this speech and the thrust of the entire campaign uphold and defend the filthy, anti-democratic activities of the American military-intelligence apparatus worldwide. This message is reinforced by the alternative in the

"Bad" ending, in which the player chooses to *oppose* the CIA. Here, Perseus wins, successfully annihilating Western Europe with neutron bombs, setting into motion his plans to expand the Soviet Union into an unchallenged world superpower. In other words, without covert murder by the CIA, the world faces apocalypse!

Unsurprisingly, *Cold War* distorts the history of both the Vietnam War and the Iran hostage crisis beyond recognition. In regard to the latter, the game removes the Iranian popular anger—rooted in US and CIA support for the Shah's torture regime—driving the embassy event and its connection to the 1979 Iranian Revolution (that goes barely mentioned), transforming it into an event orchestrated by Perseus' goons. Likewise, while it doesn't distort the causes of the Vietnam War, it simply doesn't present any, instead choosing to focus on pseudo-history involving large-scale Soviet intervention in the war.

The close of the "Good Ending" also includes dialogue from two US agents claiming the necessity of expanding surveillance into the American population to root out any remaining Perseus agents. Referencing the Patriot Act and other expansions of invasive state surveillance of the population, this scene serves to establish a narrative for using such attacks on democratic rights "to make sure the line is still there in the morning."

Historical falsification in the service of government propaganda is not new to the *Call of Duty* (COD) franchise, of which this is the 17th installment. Another recent example appears in *COD: Modern Warfare* (2019). *Modern Warfare* 's campaign overwrites a historical massacre of retreating Iraqi soldiers by the US military during the 1991 Gulf War, known as the "Highway of Death." In the game, the Iraqis are massacred by *Russian*, not American, forces. This fabrication crudely attempts to shift the blame for one of US imperialism's most notorious recent crimes.

It is no surprise these propagandistic efforts appear in such a pronounced fashion in recent *COD* titles, given the US military's long-standing involvement in the franchise. In 2015, concurrent with video gaming e-sports' breakthrough into the mainstream, the Pentagon included electronic games as a medium that could "benefit Military Service recruiting and retention programs." By 2018, the military had an e-sports team,

which has since penetrated *Call of Duty* and other popular games like *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive, Fortnite, League of Legends, Overwatch,* and *Magic: The Gathering.* The US Army has even created a Twitch channel for streaming, which it has used for free giveaways that funnel kids as young as 12 into recruitment applications.

The overlap of the military's growing involvement in gaming and *Cold War* 's constant kowtowing and distortions in service of its political-historical line speak to larger issues. The campaign's cast of fascistic CIA and special-ops goons has a newfound relevance in the wake of the failed January 6 coup attempt by Donald Trump. The vociferous anti-communism and sociopathic treatment of every enemy confronted by both the game's cast and the player's character are further expressions of the growth of ultra-right sentiment within the military and its hangers-on.

The popularity of *COD* games lies principally in their easy-to-pick-up gameplay, over-the-top Tarantino-esque set-pieces and stories, and relatively restrained use of violence (compared to other franchises like *The Last of Us*). However, in so far as is possible, the games' adventurous, action-movie depiction of war is meant to dull the instinctive and, in fact, growing opposition of young people to militarism and war and render them more susceptible to the propaganda campaigns relentlessly hatched by the powers that be.

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