Portrayals of Nazisploitation and the Exploration of War and Hero in Popular Media: A Case

Study of *Call of Duty: World at War*

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The Nazisploitation cinema genre is one that presents the Nazis as the moral paradigm of evil, rather than the real "specific personages of the past" that had existed.[1] The Nazisploitation genre disregards the history of World War II, the Holocaust, and its victims in favor of pornographic, misogynistic, and graphic reconstructions of the past.[2] This case study of Treyarch's 2008 videogame, *Call of Duty: World at War*, seeks to understand how the game developers implemented Nazisploitation, and its resulting influence on both historical representation and the rhetorical dimension of the videogame. In addition, this case study aims to highlight the relevance of studying videogames as a cultural resource with value for historical research.

World at War is the fifth installment of the Call of Duty videogame series released in 2008. *World at War* stands out from its predecessors through its more graphically violent, and horrific approach to depicting war and heroes in videogames. In its attempt to heighten historical realism and broaden the variety of war experiences and hero personas, Treyarch emphasizes the brutality of war, and demonstrates how heroes can be vengeful, and their morals, questionable. Treyarch's videogame emphasizes Nazi violence but forgoes the fantastical and sexual elements of Nazisploitation. In comparison to cartoonish caricatures found in other videogames or game modes, *World at War* has a more serious approach to depicting war that suggests claim to historical authenticity. Regardless, the reliance on the Nazisploitation genre ultimately results in the simplification of the history of war in the Eastern Front. World War II is reframed into a conflict between good and evil detached from the real historical context and experiences of those involved. Although nuance is introduced by reflecting on the barbarity of war and heroes, the

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[1] Daniel H. Magilow, "Introduction: Nazisploitation! The Nazi Image in Low-Brow Cinema and Culture," in *Nazisploitation! The Nazi Image in Low-brow Cinema and Culture* (New York: Continuum), 2012.
[2] Ibid., 7.

exploitive elements of *World at War* demonstrate the continued relevance of American and post-Soviet popular remembrance, and the ideal conceptualization of World War II and its heroes.

Ultimately, the argument above raises an important question. Do videogames warrant critical attention for objective study, like film and literature? This paper takes inspiration from historian Maarten Pereboom, who argues for the use of film as a historical source. He states that film, like the written source, can function as an alternative means of presenting the past, or providing historical interpretations of it.[3] Film can be a rich source because it is part of human cultural products, which are demonstrable in human activities such as "religion, politics, food, sports, art, and music."[4] Pereboom's perspective from film will be used in this discussion of videogames. This essay will analyze *World at War* as a secondary source, an interpretation of the past. After all, the experience of the gamer is one that is designed by developers who recall the history of World War II, the Eastern Front, and its participants. This will also require a discussion on the historical accuracy or the lack thereof in the videogame to demonstrate how Nazisploitation changes or omits history, and ultimately, shapes the past into a narrative supporting Allied ideals of war and heroism. Because this analysis of *World at War* focuses on the disassociation of the Nazisploitation genre from its fantastic elements, the arcade and multiplayer game modes, such as *Nazi Zombies,* will not be included.

The analysis of videogames should also consider the unique aspect of this medium: interactivity. Ergo, it is important to understand that videogames must also be studied with methods from ludology. Ludology is an approach to studying videogames that considers the gamer, their agency, and their ability through gameplay (means by which the player interacts

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[3] Maarten Pereboom, *History and Film* (Old Tappan: Routledge, 2011), 4.
[4] Ibid., 4.

with the game), to act as an important component of both the narrative and the videogame space.[5] The fundamental difference with videogames from other art mediums is that the gamer can apply action through the simulated world.[6] In static art mediums such as print, the audience understand the meanings and themes artists convey by assessing the emotional and intellectual experience provided.[7] In videogames, the actions performed in the simulation also shapes the discourse. This key quality of gaming makes both the gamer's choices, and how the gamer's choices are shaped important considerations in understanding the overall discourse of the videogame. Through this approach, the paper will consider the actions players apply in the videogame space of *World at War*, and the conclusions derived from it.

The World War II first-person shooter genre of videogames utilized the tropes and themes popular in the World War II film genre. These films that the videogame genre emulated were inspired by the commemorations of the fiftieth-year anniversary of World War II.[8] The earlier games such as the first *Call of Duty* in 2003, or *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* (released in 2002), utilized the same music styles used in the 1998 film *Saving Private Ryan*, or the 2001 miniseries *Band of Brothers*. Here, the solemn music is used to recall the achievements of soldiers' sacrifices, and their qualities of valor and duty. These games also reproduced the same images and moments from the D-Day landing in *Saving Private Ryan*, the Paratrooper plane jumps from *Band of Brothers*, or the Russian infantry charge in the 2001 film, *Enemy at the Gates*. These reproductions in the videogames recalled similar sequences of sacrifice, camaraderie, collective action, and brotherhood seen in the film format. By closely following the

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[5] Dave Jones, "Narrative Reformulated: Storytelling in Videogames." *CEA Critic* 70, no. 3 (2008): 21.
[6] Ibid., 25.
[7] Ibid., 25.
[8] Trevor B. McCrisken and Andrew Pepper, "Saving the Good War: Hollywood and World War II in the Post-Cold War World: Saving Private Ryan; The Thin Red Line; U-571; Pearl Harbor," In *American History and Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 8.

patterns established by Hollywood, videogames also replicated the American "good war" meta-narrative which resurged in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This narrative is defined as the American popular imagination, that depicts the United States as a "benevolent nation", whose foreign policy is motivated by a concern for the greater good of humanity.[9] In this narrative, World War II is the "golden age" of America's goodness, where the fight against the enemy was clear and purposeful.[10] World War II is mythologized as the peak of American society, the place of ideal American traits such as collective courage, and the conflict where the "good guys" - the Allied forces - achieved the happy ending.[11] With this Americentric notion, the ideas regarding heroism are in part related to how an individual or collective group upholds this purposeful sacrifice for the greater good. It is by this standard which this research paper will define the use of the terms, "heroism", and "heroes."

In *World at War*, the designers use the American "good war" meta-narrative to reiterate the believed moral clarity of World War II. This reiteration also coincides with long established ideals of heroism in the former Soviet Union. The popular Soviet culture of remembrance used in the videogame is the mythological Ivan, the Soviet reimagination of the Russian soldier in World War II, who was romanticized as the self-sacrificing volunteer "who would do battle for the motherland."[12] The Ivan myth was, and still continues to be popular because it provided a sense of purpose, glorified the brutality of the killing that is inherent in wars, and gave "a cloak of indemnity for crimes."[13] The Ivan myth was also important in symbolizing Russian pride for

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[9] Ibid., 2.
[10] Ibid., 3.
[11] Ibid., 3.
[12] Catherine Merridale, *Ivan's War: The Red Army 1939-45* (London: Faber, 2005), 321.
[13] Ibid., 321.

when the Soviet Union began to falter.[14] This culture of remembrance was rooted in Joseph

Stalin's invocation that it was his revolution in the 1930s that established his totalitarian regime

which won the war.[15] This narrative would retransform through different political contexts and

leaders, but altogether remain a central aspect of Russia's understanding of itself and its past.[16]

To create heroes according to these established ideal standards, the plot of *World at War*

directs the player to identify the "good" and the "bad", and why those on the side of good must

fight. For example, in the first Russian mission, "Vendetta," a key secondary character, Sergeant

Viktor Reznov, narrates the conditions of the German occupation that began in 1941 with

Operation Barbarossa. Meanwhile, a documentary style cutscene (a noninteractive cinematic

sequence) plays archival images and film clips of the war in the background. During Reznov's

monologue where he describes the Germans as a "rotten cancer" that ravages Europe like a

plague," the collection of images show a group of Russian POWs swinging in the wind with their

necks tied, a group of Russian villagers weeping, and combat footage showcasing the German

advance and their military technology.[17] All these images, along with other key cutscenes

throughout the game, such as the execution and looting of Russian soldiers, highlight the

consequences of the German occupation, and help the player understand how to identify and

differentiate between the two moral sides.

World at War achieves the moral clarity of the American "good war" meta-narrative, and

the Ivan myth by borrowing methods from the Nazisploitation genre of cinema. As discussed

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[14] Ibid., 322-323.

[15] Mark Edele, "The Soviet Culture of Victory." *Journal of Contemporary History* 54, no. 4 (October 2019): 785-786.

[16] Ibid., 786.

[17] Treyarch, *Call of Duty: World at War*. Videogame. Directed by Cesar Stastny, Santa Monica, California: *Activision Publishing, Inc.*, 2008.

above, the tropes borrowed from this genre caricatures the Nazi as the figure of extreme sadism detached from the history it uses. The genre simplifies Germans into malevolent Nazis over which the "good guys" can claim the moral high ground.[18] The Nazisploitation genre is also effective in creating moral clarity by giving an honorable meaning to the "destructive sublime," which is defined as the "pleasure taken in witnessing devastation."[19] The first-person shooter genre fundamentally engages the destructive sublime as its central gameplay allure is entertainment via shooting an enemy. By generalizing the entire *Wehrmacht* as the ultimate evil, an honorable meaning is derived from the destructive sublime when players participate in violent combat sequences.[20] The Nazisploitation genre minimizes the horror the player may feel from killing and justifies entertainment from the murder of virtual Nazis.

The cutscene discussed above along with others such as the massacre of Red Army soldiers in Stalingrad, the looting of dead soldiers, and archival images of German soldiers in combat all highlight the essential evilness of those on the bad side. This helps the player identify the "dangers of the game world," that make the interactive violence in the game appear warranted.[21] The single-toned representation of Germans as purely maniacal and destructive demonstrates how ideas of the Nazi past are employed to "legitimize spectacles of violence" and "domination" in missions where the Russians gain the upper hand.[22] This Nazi past is used to

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[18] Magilow, "Introduction: Nazisploitation!" 6.

[19] Tanine Allison, "Introduction: A Retrospective Look at the World War II Combat Genre." In *Destructive Sublime: World War II in American Film and Media*, (New Brunswick, Camden, Newark, New Jersey; London: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 6.

[20] Ibid., 6.

[21] Tanine Allison, "Simulating War on an Algorithmic Playground," in *Destructive Sublime: World War II in American Film and Media* (New Brunswick, Camden, Newark, New Jersey; London: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 20.

[22] Jeff Hayton, "Digital Nazis: Genre, History and the Displacement of Evil in First-Person Shooters" in *Nazisploitation! The Nazi Image in Low-brow Cinema and Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 200.

create a war according to a strict moral order divided between good and evil.[23] The narrative form of *World at War* is designed in a way that invests solely on the perspective of the Red Army. The Red Army is mythologized as the just warriors on the side of good. The player is persuaded to empathize with the Red Army by witnessing the violence inflicted on their ranks. When the player is invited to join in a brutal combat of violent excess by participating in the execution of German POWs, and the destruction of Berlin, the brutality has been made acceptable because the actions are argued for justice. Nazisploitation in this case sustains the myths and ideals found in both American and Soviet cultures of remembrance. The conflict in *World at War* demonstrates the ideal characteristics of courage and self-sacrifice against difficult odds for the furtherance of the good.

The story of *World at War* is structured as a revenge narrative. The gameplay allows the player to progress the story forward with an array of firearms capable of inflicting extreme violence onto the virtual bodies of the *Wehrmacht*. The narrative structure and the violent gameplay elements create two contradictory ends; the narrative validates the Red Army's use of violence as honorable and justified, and the violent gameplay encourages the player to reconsider their heroes' actions. Throughout the game, the player is given multiple moments of self-reflection on the violence they use. Private Chernov, the hesitant Red Army soldier that acts as a foil to the other Russian characters, repeatedly questions the commands given to him or expresses his disdain with their violent excesses. He also offers three lines of unique dialogue depending on the actions the player takes towards German POWs. Then, at the end of the game, the player is given a cutscene of General Douglas MacArthur's speech in Tokyo. There, he speaks of mankind's hope to emerge from carnage for a world of freedom and justice.

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[23] Ibid., 208.

Immediately after this, the speech cuts to black to a bold text highlighting the casualties of World War II, while a single eerie note plays. These added elements are used to question the player's actions and remind them of the horrors they witnessed or participated in. The changing dialogue lines Chernov gives based on the player's actions are meant to either reward the player or implicate them with guilt if they had indulged in the killing of German POWs. As for the ending, General MacArthur's speech accompanied by the eerie atmosphere reinforces the horrific violence that accompanied victory, and what the virtual deaths players witnessed in game really entailed in history. Altogether, these elements, which were not used in the earlier patriotic games, derive different meanings from the player's violence. In *World at War*, the horrific atmosphere before, during, and even after the game conflict with the honor that was usually attached to the victory and sacrifices of the "good" forces.

This presentation is more serious in tone, and – at least in appearance – more critical of the heroes of war. The grittier tone and depiction of war, the unrestrained use of archival footages, and the end credits that state that the videogame is "dedicated to the veterans of World War II who sacrificed their lives for the preservation of liberty," all work to create a structure of maturity and realism. [24] Borrowing from media scholars Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, Jeff Hayton argues that Nazisploitation can be "remediated" for a newer audience which allows for the movement of low-brow cinema themes into the mainstream.[25] *World at War* exemplifies this remediation. The horror approach in *World at War* and the removal of sexual and fantastical elements of Nazisploitation ultimately work to heighten "history." Treyarch's methods allow players to access emotional reactions on the basis that the suffering witnessed in the game was

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[24] Treyarch, *Call of Duty: World at War*, 2008.
[25] Hayton, "Digital Nazis," 202.

exacted on people that had existed. Through this remediation, the depiction in *World at War* suggestively lays claim to a more historically "real" and authentic representation of the past by including the violence of heroes and abandoning the more discernible aspects of Nazisploitation, such as pornography and insane scientists.

Regardless of the new approach taken in *World at War*, the reinterpretation of the conflict in the Eastern Front buttressed with Nazisploitation ultimately results in a World War II stripped of its historical context. The *Wehrmacht* is reasoned as brutal simply because of excessive violence, creating a reimagination of the enemy that wields the *Wehrmacht* uniform and equipment, but not the racial Nazi ideology that was the fundamental core of World War II and the horrific atrocities in the Eastern Front. Adolf Hitler's Jewish Bolshevism provided the racist biological foundation that bolstered long-established imperialist perceptions in Germany that claimed superiority over Slavic peoples.[26] World War II was a conflict to create Hitler's German empire, where Slavic people were envisioned to be the slave labor of the "master race."[27] The ideological basis of the war that motivated real atrocities and produced the memories of *Wehrmacht* brutality that the game renders on screen never surfaces. In the videogame, the commentary that accompanies archival images of the war contextualize the destruction simply as the product of Nazi "brutality" and "arrogance."[28]

In addition, the Nazisploitation elements also simplify war into a battle between good and evil, minimizing the multi-vocal nature of history. To elaborate, simplification negates the diversity of historical narratives produced by the position of an individual or a collective group

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[26] Wolfram Wette and Deborah Lucas Schneider, "Perceptions of Russia, the Soviet Union, and Bolshevism as Enemies," in *The Wehrmacht: History, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: Harvard University Press, 2006), 7-8.

[27] Ibid., 16.

[28] Treyarch, *Call of Duty: World at War*, 2008.

in a particular place and time. For example, the poor military leadership in the Red Army is silenced to highlight the established motifs in the Soviet historiography of the Red Army's heroism, courage, resilience, and patriotism.[29] In the early period of the German invasion, Red Army officers in the field of battle feared breaking directives from their top commanders, resulting in the lack of initiative and poorly planned attacks that led to considerable human casualties.[30] *World at War* also does not direct any attention to the large number of Russian soldiers who surrendered or were willing to collaborate to fight with Germany against the Soviet state, who repressed the Russian population through collectivization and economic oppression.[31] Positive traits are idealized while troublesome aspects are silenced.

The emphasis Treyarch places on the victors' myths also frames the Nazis as the primary cause of the Red Army's radicalization into more violent behaviors, minimizing how the Red Army was radicalized by the Soviet state. Treyarch's reliance on this popular memorialization of the war disables it from showing the unique dynamics of the Soviet Union which resulted in the radicalization of its forces. The Red Army became more brutal in part due to Stalin's deliberately ambiguous signals on behavior and policy to escalate German POW executions, which could then be pulled back or made punishable when executions became excessive.[32] Violence was also structurally ingrained in the Red Army, which brutalized soldiers even before the war with Germany. Fifty percent of the male draft cohorts in the Red Army soldiers had, by the end of World War II, also experienced or witnessed violence from the Russian Civil War.[33] Violence

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[29] Andrei Grinëv Val'Terovich. "The Evaluation of the Military Qualities of the Red Army in 1941-1945 by German Memoirs and Analytic Materials." *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 29, no. 2 (2016): 2,5.

[30] Ibid., 6

[31] Ibid., 8.

[32] Mark Edele, "Take (No) Prisoners! The Red Army and German POWs, 1941–1943 *." *The Journal of Modern History* 88, no. 2 (2016): 356-357.

[33] Ibid., 363.

within the ranks also existed through "a chain of command of punching" because of a military culture of brute force in which commanders were able to inflict excess abuse upon their own soldiers.[34] Other examples of the Red Army's radicalization before World War II were the wars against the peasantry of the 1930s and the Great Terror of Stalin, which were important factors to their violent behaviors that was not solely the product of Nazi terror.[35] These absent details in *World at War* cement the popular history of Germany's role as the sole explanation to the excess of violence within the Red Army.

The violence of the Red Army in *World at War* is driven by necessity and justice, while the true personages of the past were driven by a complex web of influences including fear, coercion, and suffering from the state they fought for. The Red Army here remains a digital stand-in for Ivan. Its iconography and tropes are displayed on screen, but the stories behind the digital faces are silent. Merridale's investigations on the social history of the Red Army reveal the complicated narrative of the Russian soldier. While celebrated as heroes, they are also victims of the Soviet state.[36] *World at War* exemplifies the ongoing fascination foreigners have of Russia's soldiers, in terms of both their veracity, and their great suffering.[37] While the videogame does show aspects of Russian patriotism such as the love for home, family, the prewar world, and revenge,[38] emphasis is placed on their suffering at German hands, which motivate the hard-earned battle towards victory. *World at War* demonstrates some taboos such as excessive murders, but the context of these behaviors point to the Nazi regime as the cause. As

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[34] Ibid., 365.
[35] Ibid., 378.
[36] Merridale, *Ivan's War*, 6.
[37] Catherine Merridale, "Culture, Ideology and Combat in the Red Army, 1939-45." *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no. 2 (2006): 305.
[38] Ibid., 315.

discussed above, in *World at War*, the Soviet state's victimization of the Red Army is not

included. Merridale's work highlights the ubiquitous fear in the Red Army fostered by the Soviet

secret police (the NKVD), blocking units aimed at fellow Russian soldiers to discourage retreat,

past brutalities in the Russian civil war, and two decades of Soviet poverty.[39] In addition, there

were also members of the Soviet Union, such as the Ukrainians, who were forcefully compelled

into the Red Army by violence.[40] The memory found in Treyarch's videogame conjures the

difficult quest for vengeance that brought victory. In this way, Treyarch contributes to the ideal

collective memory in Russia as the defender against fascism that soothes and raises confidence.[41]

The digital Red Army represented in *World at War*, are heroes for their willingness to partake in

violence for the victory of the good. The sacrifice of both the body and their morality to ensure

victory is almost sacrosanct. The heroes are ultimately elevated from blame.

   World at War's portrayal of the German army as a terribly violent and evil military force

also erases the multiple historical narratives of the different *Wehrmacht* units and the individuals

within them. It is difficult to ascribe "one master narrative" for all the German units involved in

Operation Barbarossa as they had all faced different circumstances.[42] The commanders of the

Wehrmacht 121st division in the city of Pavlovsk, for example, noticed their soldiers were

worried about finding civilians outside of the city and having to shoot them, despite repeated

orders to halt all civilian traffic with brute force.[43] Unwilling to execute civilians, the 121st also

attempted to gain the goodwill of the Pavlovsk inhabitants through medical care, the reduction of

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[39] Ibid., 318-320.

[40] Merridale, *Ivan's War*, 329.

[41] Ibid., 6, 9.

[42] Jeff Rutherford, *Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front: The German Infantry's War, 1941-1944* (Cambridge Military Histories. 2014), 1.

[43] Ibid., 5.

forced requisitions, and the assistance of homeless evacuees to minimize people's support for the Soviets without utilizing violence.[44] When the *Einsatzgruppen* units caught up and working relations had developed with the 121st to weaken partisans and eliminate Jews, the 121st were complicit but did not become violently capricious to maintain a positive image for the non-Jewish population.[45] In Leningrad, the *Wirtschaftsstab Ost* (Economic Staff East) constantly discussed strict separation rules between Germans and Russians because they were disappointed at the *Wehrmacht*'s poor discipline for breaking rules to give food to the inhabitants.[46]

At the individual level, the war memoir of Willy Reese, *Mir selber seltsam Fremd*, depicts an experience of a drafted upper-class German who perceived war apolitically and artistically as a battle for the individual's personal development rather than the racial or geopolitical war espoused by the leadership of the Nazi regime.[47] Reese reveals his loneliness and isolation from his comrades, describing the relationships within the *Wehrmacht* as characterized by bullying and indifference which contrasts with other memoirs that celebrated Wehrmacht camaraderie.[48] Edgar Klaus, another memoirist, officer and former POW, declined an offer from Russian soldiers to join in the anti-fascist movement, not because of loyalty to Hitler, but instead for honor as his duty as a German military officer.[49] These historical narratives in the military unit and individual level exemplify the difficulty of achieving the "master narrative" of the evil *Wehrmacht*.

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[44] Ibid., 13.

[45] Ibid., 17.

[46] Ibid., 28-30.

[47] Hope Sneddon and Jesper Gulddal, "War Stories: Narrative Sense-Making in German Eastern Front Soldier Memoirs." In *Sic* 3, no. 2 (2013), DOI: 10.15291/SIC/2.3.LC.6 (accessed March 25, 2020), 3-5.

[48] Ibid., 4.

[49] Ibid., 10.

The social history of the common *Wehrmact* soldier highlights that ideology, individual choice, and circumstances had a particular dynamic in the German army. Ordinary soldiers were confronted with rationalizing their moral compass and the racial ideology of the state they fought for. While it is important to acknowledge the difficulty in assigning master narratives, it is undeniable that the German army had committed egregious atrocities in the Eastern Front. Historian Ben Shepard highlights the convoluted narrative of German brutality in the Eastern Front in his survey of the *Wehrmacht*, in particular the *Ostheer* – the German East Army involved in the partisan campaign.[50] Shephard shows that while there were regional variations of violence among different German units in regards to both the degree and method of violence, as well as variation in the perceptions of ideological enemies based on personal biographical backgrounds, terror was extensively used to "annihilate" ideological enemies, and plunder for labor and economic resources.[51]

The demonization of the German enemy was in part produced by the Soviet state before Red Army soldiers had military encounters with them. The German "Commissar Order" for example, a Nazi order to execute Soviet political commissars, was consciously reframed and circulated in Red Army propaganda through frontline papers and embedded army agitators as a German order to shoot all captured Russians.[52] Regardless of Soviet atrocity propaganda agitating its ranks, the German army facilitated Soviet propaganda. The *Wehrmacht* extensively provided examples of the crimes against Russian POWs and civilians to form a narrative that could "develop among the (Red Army) troops the desire to take revenge for the atrocities…"[53]

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[50] Ben Shepherd, "The Clean Wehrmacht, the War of Extermination, and Beyond." *The Historical Journal* 52, no. 2 (2009): 458.

[51] Ibid., 458, 468-471.

[52] Edele, "Take (No) Prisoners!" 368.

[53] Ibid., 367.

Although the Red Army had particular internal dynamics that brutalized its ranks such as those discussed above, the Soviet Union established POW camps and administrative systems for captured enemy soldiers.[54] Moreover, they made an effort to understand Stalin's ambiguous messages to limit POW executions.[55] The violent excesses of the German army on the other hand had been motivated "ideologically," and were "implemented with the consent of many troops."[56]

History literature like Christopher Browning's work on Police Battalion 101 exemplifies the negotiation of individual stance towards personal morals, war, and the ideological mission to execute the Final Solution, the eradication of Jews. Browning demonstrates how the Germans were not inherently violent, indoctrinated, Nazified killers. The perpetrators of the Final Solution were not a monolith of trained killers, but a pluralistic agglomerate of ordinary men who became participants due to situational and environmental factors. Browning shows the diverse positions held by those in the battalion. In the end, they became effective parts of the Final Solution due to factors such as the polarization between one's own people and the enemy. This created an environment of psychological distancing which facilitated killing.[57] There was also the exposure to workshops, books, and pamphlets such as "The Politics of Race," and the "SS Man and the Question of Blood" that encouraged a separation of people into racial communities.[58] The implementation of labor division also contributed to the sense of detachment felt by Nazis when murder was committed in extermination camps, which was also aided by the use of *Trawnikis,* Soviet territory POWs, who were assigned the violent duties of shooting Jews.[59] While

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[54] Ibid., 375.

[55] Ibid., 353.

[56] Ibid., 378.

[57] Christopher R. Browning and Mazal Holocaust Collection. *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Perennial; Revised edition., 2017), 162.

[58] Ibid., 180-181.

[59] Ibid., 77.

individual soldiers could negotiate their personal perspectives regarding the racial ideology of

the Eastern Front, enough ordinary men were a part of it to result in the atrocities so well

remembered. Ultimately, Treyarch's work is detached from this interesting dynamic. There are

no ordinary men confronted with rationalizing their war. Moreover, there is certainly no

reflection of the ideological qualities of World War II.

The violence that Treyarch focuses on and the reflection on heroes it wishes to encourage

ultimately reflects Hayton's observation. Nazisploitation can be remediated, which allows it to

enter the mainstream, and thus the legitimate realm. This remediation is especially necessary,

because American memory also has a "war is hell" concept as a popular form of remembrance.

The emphasis on horror, bleakness, and brutality in *World at War* shows inspirations from the

American portrayals of war in the late 1960s to the 1970s. During this period, cynical and

traumatic portrayals of combat became prominent in films due to the disillusionment from the

Vietnam War.[60] Filmic representations and stories about war and America's soldiers began to be

inverted and satirized by filmmakers because of the discovery of corruption, abuses, lies, and

heinous war crimes by the American forces in Vietnam.[61] Films focused instead on exploring

the insanity, horror, moral ambiguity of war, and the depravity of the American soldier, which

was contrary to past idealizations of American heroism.[62] After the fiftieth anniversary of World

War II, which tended to inspire more patriotic stories and depictions of war, a rebalancing of

portrayals returned. The end of the first decade of the new millennium ushered in once again the

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[60] McCrisken and Pepper, "Saving the Good War," 6.
[61] Ibid., 6.
[62] Ibid., 7.

exploration and remembrance of the American as a perpetrator, and war, in general, as inhumane and cruel.

The developers of *World at War* use this form of remembrance by creating heroes reliant on brutality. The gameplay forces players to tackle harsh images of war and play a protagonist whose heroic status they may question because of their violent actions. Though the Russian army is victorious in the end, they too were involved in brutal acts such as the execution of helpless *Wehrmacht* soldiers. Although the actions players commit in-game are justified, they are also difficult to confront. This horror approach is ultimately meant to enhance the historical authenticity of the game. Just as ideal heroes are a popular form of remembrance, so are the memories that emphasize the hellish nature of war. By including this aspect of war, the violent experiences in *World at War* become legitimated as more historically real in a sense that it seemingly does not foster praise and heroism in combat. However, brutal heroism is heroism regardless. As Merridale's work shows, both Ivan's ferocity and suffering continually remain a subject of admiration. All in all, despite the historical legitimacy gained from the depiction of brutality the videogame emphasizes, the comparison above between history and remembrance shows otherwise. Because of Nazisploitation, the conflict remembered in *World at War* is ultimately not the historical conflict of racial ideology, nor a conflict fought by nuanced personages. History here is a medium where the action of the story takes place. History remains a visual background, and the people are caricatures, distant from their specific contexts. The violence is abstract rather than ideological, an exploration of the nature of war and warriors detached from a specific history.

The comparison above between history and the history remembered in *World at War* serves to demonstrate the richness of nuance that fades because of the simple arrangements

established by Nazisploitation. However, should that be the focus? Magilow argues that the difference between "proper" representations, and "exploitive" ones are not as great.[63] Both forms of representation can demonstrate the "protocols," or the "implicit and explicit rules" that determine expectations in regard to the representation, understanding, and critique of the portrayals of the Nazi regime and World War II.[64] These rules elucidate what is considered historical canon, and the process involved in the formation of that narrative.[65] Nazisploitation and the horror approach of *World at War* exemplifies that the myths of Ivan and the American "good war" meta-narrative remain a relevant historical canon. Horror is used to ultimately increase the value of Allied heroes who were subjected to utilizing violence for rightful justice against the Nazi evil. These heroes are presented as worthy of praise, for being willing to put themselves through barbarity. The heroes in-game do not commit unjustified atrocities. They are not victims of oppressive regimes, and neither are they ordinary men who navigated morality and ideology. The heroes of World War II are now more violent, but they are ultimately still heroes.

In conclusion, Treyarch's use of Nazisploitation is two-fold. One, it justifies the violence the players experience in the game by reiterating the American "good war" meta-narrative and the Ivan myth. Two, the acceptability allows the developers to use extreme violence to expose the players to horrific acts that are meant to be questioned. Horrific gameplay and stylistic elements, along with the revenge narrative of the game appear to be critical of the idealization of war and heroes. However, because of Nazisploitation, the videogame ultimately remains detached from the history it uses. The violence and Nazisploitation are remediated to further cement formerly established concepts of victors' mythical heroes. The analysis of *World at War*

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[63] Magilow, "Introduction: Nazisploitation!" 8-9.
[64] Ibid., 9.
[65] Ibid., 9.

is not to highlight how poorly videogames use history, reprimand developers' understanding of the past, demand nuance, or worse, prove the superiority of academic study over popular culture. Instead, the analysis demonstrates two points. First, the discrepancy between history and recall is something of value. Studying memories, especially those that are emphasized above others, communicates what a collective group could consider historically real, authentic, or true. As the case study of this videogame shows, the continuation of idealized heroes in combat with ultimate evil speak to their undying resonance to the victors of World War II. Moreover, it demonstrates the comforting capacity of these popular memories in comparison to the history discussed. History is intertwined and nuanced with clear lines between victims and perpetrators unclear and, at times, disappointing in comparison to beloved narratives. The comparison between historical detail and remembrance in this paper shows the long-lasting potencies of the clear, and linear histories of the American "good war" meta-narrative and Ivan myth. Second, this analysis shows that videogames can be used as a source to study memory and remembrance. Videogames speak less of the histories they use but highlight excellently the memories particular collective groups emphasize. As a cultural medium, videogames are interpretative and communicative of ideas, making them great sources to critically engage with for the insights they may offer.

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