How Modern Warfare smooths over the horrors of war

Enlarge / Hadir, how old are you?
Activision and Infinity Ward

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It’s not that “We need that truck” and “Find a gun” are unusual orders to be given in a video game. Certainly not in a *Call of Duty* video game. The series has always impelled players forward with extended drills of Sergeant Simon Says (“Man that mortar!” “Plant those charges!” “Take out that sniper!”). So normally, I would hop to it reflexively. I’ve called in airstrikes and breached into rooms of uncounted hostiles just because some grizzled green beret barked at me. It’s not that.

What strikes me when playing the new *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* is that the directives are coming from someone who’s 10 years old, tops. He’s telling his sister (no older) to go kill a couple Russian soldiers and steal their truck.

I’m already familiar with these two as adults in the present, where they’re Hadir and Farah, ultracompetent freedom fighters for the nation of Urzikstan. But this is a flashback to what I’m to understand is their first brush with war, when occupying Russian forces gas their village and kill their father.

Mind you, that doesn’t stop them from sneaking through the

chlorine fog in gas masks, past troops firing perfunctory bullets into the dead or dying. It’s a gutsy performance. They don’t flinch at the gunshots—in fact, they’ve already killed one soldier by then. As Farah, I stalked that soldier from cover and stabbed at him precisely three times, the fatal number for most video game bosses (Hadir, encouragingly after one thrust: “It’s working!”). At the edge of town, Hadir stops near a transport guarded by two soldiers: “If we run away, they’ll catch us.”

Then, with composure befitting a tier one operator. “We need that truck,” I’m told. “Find a gun.”

Out of the mouths of relative babies, objectives are updated. The gun is graciously signposted—it’s on top of a covered well in the center of the scene. Hadir wants me to call his cell phone to distract the soldiers, grab the revolver, ice them, and steal the truck.

The sequence has the kind of logic that I imagine might appeal to a video game character. But I find that when I shoot one of the guards, the other immediately spots me in the tall grass: Game Over. I fail this routine a couple times before a solution occurs to me: I angle Farah up an incline to line up both guards’ heads behind the handgun’s sights, press L3 to steady her aim, and drop both with a single bullet.

Neither tween acknowledges the double headshot. But the game does: I get an achievement named “Two Birds.”

Double action

Released in late October, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* is filled with scenes and sequences that repackage the horrors of war in a distinctly video-gamey package. To put it plainly, this edition should be familiar to series veterans.

In the multiplayer mode of 2009's *Modern Warfare 2*, for instance, killing two people with one bullet earned you a prog rock riff and an achievement titled "Collateral Damage." It's both a plaudit for one of the miniature feats of dexterity players can pull off and a fun little nod to civilian war deaths.

I've known a double-kill is a thing you can do with guns in games for at least that long. It's one of the many factoids in my mind's "gun basket," as Kirk Hamilton would put it, alongside the relative merits of red dot and holographic sights. Same goes for where the magazine is located on a bullpup.

On the subject of storage, this rebooted *Modern Warfare* continues *Call of Duty*'s tradition of partitioning itself into

three discrete modes: campaign, competitive multiplayer, and cooperative multiplayer. These distinctions have been an aid to our own tendency as players to compartmentalize things, too. The campaigns bring the clearest authorial intent, but usually these stories clock in at a tidy five-to-seven hours. They're often viewed as an amuse bouche of wartime gravitas before the competitive multiplayer entrée, where mass murder becomes the swaggering *killstreak*, and collateral damage gets you new banner art for your player card.

Infinity Ward design their campaigns in such a way that a well-versed competitive player won't feel inhibited. Both modes run at the same heart-stopping pace, and skills translate between them one-to-one. So does the arsenal, now more foregrounded than ever, replete with weapon modeling modes that take the games' metaphorical status as a showroom for gun manufacturers and makes it literal. Want to know if a rifle features a "slow cycle rate" or "a short stroke piston system?" *Modern Warfare* expects that you do, and it may well be right.

Modern Warfare does reintroduce some friction into the series' patented feedback loop. Its multiplayer stages are rats' nests of back alleys and sneaky sight lines that bog down the flow of movement. I prefer it to the lane-style maps of previous games. It keeps me in the moment, attuned to my surroundings instead of sprinting around to make big, looping attacks on enemy flanks. The guns, which were starting to take on an interchangeable point-and-click precision over the years, now tend to have more dramatically different recoil profiles.

But these changes can hardly rein in a decades' worth of evolution in the name of slick, hypersynaptic ergonomy. The speed of *Call of Duty*, the sensation of being a free camera mounted on a gun, is unchanged, whether you're playing as a hardened SAS operative or a Middle Eastern child.

Perhaps that's why the most effective moments in the campaign

are the scenes just preceding that flashback moment, when Farah is trapped under the ruins of a bombed building and can’t move at all. White Helmets pull her from the rubble and deliver her to her father’s arms, and from there she can only witness the scenes of ensuing destruction in whirling glimpses.

Because as soon as she’s boots-on-the-ground again, she will be comfortably back in *Call of Duty*’s generous possibility space for e-athletes, where even a child who’s never held a gun can steady her aim to within a pixel’s breadth.

That multiplayer, tho

There’s an urgency to *Modern Warfare*’s campaign that’s come undone from any in-fiction justifications. I’m barely told who I’ll be shooting at or why before the game jams my hands full of C4 to plant, molotovs to lob, and remote controlled bombs to pilot. It’s *a lot*. I have the sensation being harried forward, forward… like some kind of Light Brigade cavalryman being ordered on into the fun, “theirs not to make reply, theirs not to reason why.”

Multiplayer neatly solves that problem by nuking any context from orbit. *Call of Duty* doesn't even name its factions "Opposing Force" anymore, let alone "Terrorists," as *Counterstrike* does. Here it's "Coalition" versus "Allegiance," variegated patchworks of nations and military-types, a proxy of proxy wars. They bomb and snipe across a changing series of maps and modes, like the new *Battlefield*-style large-scale "Ground War," or the compact 2v2 series, "Gunfight."

The game benefits, in a small but noteworthy way, from one successful attempt to capture the horror of war: the soundscape. Rich with booms, pings, and chattering fire, the audio environment plays devilishly with the rattle and spark of the visual environment, sending you ducking and whirling and thinking every explosion and whistle of a bullet was meant for you.

And the levels themselves, now dense with detail, have made it more difficult to pick out targets from the surroundings, rewarding patience and punishing carelessness. But fidelity (visual or otherwise) will only benefit these games if it can force them to slow down all the way to the point where players don't rack up body counts in the high hundreds—where the violence is forced to be fully considered, instead of just providing a new sheen for realistic weapons of war.

When it was revealed that *Modern Warfare* would include white phosphorous as a killstreak reward, there was a smattering of outcry. White phosphorous stands out for its gruesomeness, and for its prolonged, scarring effects, even as it resides in a gray area of international law.

Certainly there was already nothing humane about the gunships and bombing runs that populate the killstreak catalogue. But the inclusion of white phosphorous is glaring because until now, white phosphorus has had no effective PR. While spec operatives and .50 cal rifles, and even AC-130 gunships, have been treated to kind mentions in recent media, not many

storytellers have been willing to cast the horrors of white phosphorous in a positive light.

But the US has likely used white phosphorus in attacks, and so it must be due for image rehabilitation. Games can play an outsized PR role in this, and this attempt to sublimate white phosphorous into that pantheon must be seen as part of that effort. It *should* bother us, even if we've already accepted so much.

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