Playing the Hero:

Examining the Discrepancies between Political Ideology and Usage of the First-Person Shooter Video Game, *Call of Duty*

by

Phoebe Greene
Department of Sociology
University of Colorado

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Committee Members:
Dr. Mathieu Hikaru Desan, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology (Thesis Advisor)
Dr. Amanda Stewart, Assistant Teaching Professor, Department of Sociology (Honors Council Member)
Dr. Andrew Young, Assistant Professor, Department of Critical Media Practices (Outside Reader)

Abstract

The objective of this study is to examine how men of draft-eligible age (18-25) who self-identify as on the left of the political spectrum, and who hold an abstract anti-war stance, reconcile playing the first-person shooter game Call of Duty. I am hoping to understand how individuals reconcile their personal beliefs with the actions that they take; in this circumstance, the examined reconciliation is that between playing Call of Duty and identifying as anti-war. First-person shooter (FPS) games have become incredibly popular in the 21st century, coinciding with the start of the War on Terror and the post-9/11 world. Existing research has found that motivations for playing video games include a drive for competition, as well as social connection (Kasumovic et. al 2015, Ghuman and Griffiths 2012). Within the context of video games, situational action theory has been applied to understand the role of video games as actors within individuals' interactions, and how these actors might manipulate players' opinions and understandings of their own personal agency (Crawford 2018). Geopolitical ramifications have been examined to conclude that many FPS games tend to push a pro-capitalist, pro-Western, pro-democratic attitude that may unconsciously disseminate to players (Godfrey 2021). There is a significant gap in academic research connecting left-wing beliefs of war and seemingly contrasting motivations for playing first-person shooter games that would allow for a window of opportunity to sociologically examine the disconnects between identities and behaviors. By using Sykes and Matza (1957)'s theory of neutralization, this research examines the five different ways in which the target population personally reconciles with enjoying and participating in a game that goes against their political beliefs.

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Introduction

Call of Duty (Activision 2003 - Present) is the wildly popular first-person shooter (FPS)

game that allows players to play campaigns, multiplayer modes, battle royales, and co-operative

modes on several different consoles. Since its inception, *Call of Duty* has become a staple of adolescence for thousands of Americans. The *Call of Duty* franchise and its content has become associated with right-wing politics and ideologies, specifically through its portrayal of intense, graphic, and realistic war that is based in reality, though further manipulated to become exaggerated and glorified. This research examines the ways in which self-identified politically left-wing men of ages 18-25 personally reconcile their political beliefs as active players of *Call of Duty*, a game that seemingly goes against their presumed political preferences. Applying the sociological theory of neutralization, first established by Sykes and Matza (1957) allows me to examine the ways in which this reconciliation occurs. *Call of Duty* was selected to be the primary focus of this research due to both the popularity of the franchise and a personal interest in how players interact with the game outside of a gaming setting.

Research was conducted through a qualitative lens. The sample for this research was found initially through a survey distributed to as many people as possible; based on responses to that survey, qualified respondents were contacted to potentially schedule an interview. Interviews were approximately 60 minutes long, and covered topics such as the individual's personal political beliefs, issues held important to them, their experiences and reasonings for playing *Call of Duty,* and how they grappled with any contradictions that presented themselves. It is important to acknowledge that there has been little qualitative research conducted on the contradictions of personal identity and video game content. Some research has been conducted on the personal identity of gamers (Muriel 2022), but little has been conducted on how this identity might contradict any other identities held by individuals.

Literature Review

History of Call of Duty

   To establish a better understanding of the research being presented in this thesis, it is

necessary to first establish the style, history, and plot of the video game franchise *Call of Duty.*

Call of Duty is a first-person shooter (FPS) video game franchise that spans 21 major games. Most *Call of Duty* games fit into one of three arcs: World War II, Modern Warfare, and Black Ops. A few outliers feature futuristic plots that allow the player to engage in new technologies. Campaigns allow players to play from the perspectives of multiple characters, ranging from American to Russian (Warby 2023). The original game, *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward 2003) was a World War II game that allowed players to portray American, British, and Soviet soldiers in a campaign that switches between characters. Much of the campaign featured real battles of World War II. This first game was initially only released for PC (personal computer), and saw 4.5 million downloads. The first iteration of the Modern Warfare arc was *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward 2007); shifting to a modern setting, this game followed conflicts in the Middle East following the execution of a political leader, as well as ultranationalism in Russia. Players could portray a U.S. Marine and a British SAS officer. *Modern Warfare* was ridiculously popular, with 15.7 million downloads. At this point in *Call of Duty'*s history, games were available for consoles like XBox and Playstation, as well as for PC (Warby 2023). The first Black Ops game was *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (Treyarch 2010). This game expanded on different multiplayer options and shifted the setting to the Cold War, particularly in the Vietnam War, and only continued the significant success of the *Call of Duty* franchise, with 30.72 million downloads (Warby 2023).

The first *Call of Duty* was released in 2003 by Infinity Ward. Infinity Ward was created in response to EA's wildly successful World War II, FPS game *Medal of Honor* (EA Games 1999 - Present). After successful releases of the first three *Medal of Honor* games, a group of EA developers decided to leave the company following disputes and form their own studio, Infinity Ward. Activision sponsored the release of the first *Call of Duty* game in 2003, which was notably

different from *Medal of Honor* in that *Call of Duty* featured a rotating roster of playable

characters in its campaign; *Medal of Honor* featured only one. *Call of Duty* received acclaim for

its technological advances in the FPS gaming world (Ramsay 2015). Non-player characters

(NPCs) were created to have meaningful interactions with the players, and as Vince Zampella, an

original developer of *Call of Duty* and founder of Infinity Ward, said in a 2003 interview, "*Call

of Duty* is all about fighting as a group--it's not about one-man armies. Fighting alongside

friendly soldiers--even friendly tanks en masse, in some missions--is the core theme for many

missions" (Gamespot Staff 2003). This style of collaborative, meaningful gameplay that engages

the players is considered a landmark in the development of FPS games, as *Call of Duty* became a

superstar in the gaming world (Ramsay 2015).

Gaming Motivations

Understanding the motivations behind why individuals choose to play video games is

paramount to understanding how individuals might reconcile playing games that differ from their

ideological views. Kasumovic, et al. (2015) explain that "video games are thought to satisfy the

basic needs of competence… autonomy… and social connectedness" (204). Social connection

and community are hugely important to individuals, particularly during an era such as the

COVID-19 pandemic. Online games provide space for individuals to forge those necessary social

bonds by sharing a common interest. Primary motivators for playing video games are challenges

and competition (Kasumovic, et al. 2015, Woods 2022). Games provide a space for players to

demonstrate their technical skills, giving them confidence that they may lack in real life (Woods

2022). It is also believed that social status can be a motivating factor for playing video games

(Kasumovic, et al. 2015). Successful gamers perceive their gaming competencies to be more valuable to society, which in turn increases their own self-worth (Kasumovic, et al. 2015).

Video games have also created a space where hegemonic masculinity can thrive without fear of judgment or retribution (Kasumovic, et al. 2015, Muriel 2022, Woods 2022). Stereotypically, gamers are "young, male, and heterosexual" (Consalvo 2007, 22). Video games are often a space where men can explore their own masculinities in ways that they may not be able to in real life (Woods 2022). The exploration of masculinity allows gamers to establish their own identities within the game, as well as outside of it. Woods (2022) explains E. Tory Higgins's psychological theory of self-discrepancy, which postulates that there is an "actual" and an "ideal" self. Higgins believes that the "actual" self is who a person truly is, wherein the "ideal" self is who a person aspires to be. Video game characters often become representations of an individual's goals or aspirations, allowing them to merge their actual and ideal selves into one. When the differences between one's actual self and ideal self are too significant, it can lead to "problematic gaming behaviors" (4), such as toxic masculinity (Woods 2022, Fox et. al 2018). Men tend to play more video games than women or other genders, though the number of women playing games is increasing (Kasumovic, et al. 2015). Women, queer people, and BIPOC are often left out of the gaming narrative (Muriel 2022). This in turn creates a gaming culture that is exclusionary, as it only creates space for young, rich, straight men to succeed, which in turn helps uphold these ideals at the expense of anybody who may be different (Muriel 2022).

War in Video Games

It is also important to understand the ways in which war is portrayed in FPS video games. Video games are a part of what some call the "military-entertainment complex" (633), a structure of capitalism that uses the military to create and market entertaining content for a profit,

bolstering the status of both the producers and the military through means of propaganda (Godfrey 2022). FPS games were first developed during the Persian Gulf War (Godfrey 2022, Payne 2016). Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, FPS games shifted to a period of counterinsurgent, simulational war culture (Payne 2016). The games of the 21st century are significantly more realistic than the games of the 1980s, an intentional shift by gaming developers that intended to use real-life conflicts as inspiration for games in an attempt to allow the player to feel as if they are a part of the conflict (Godfrey 2022, Payne 2016). Part of this immersive element of conflict in FPS games is through the pace of conflict. Original *Call of Duty* games were set in World War II, which featured large battle fronts of many soldiers. *Modern Warfare* and *Black Ops* games featured a much slower, smaller pace of conflict with less group confrontation and more lower-scale conflict, mimicking the Cold War instead (Godfrey 2022, Payne 2016). Apart from the Cold War's influence in the development of the games of *Call of Duty,* Reaganism and xenophobia also served as formative aspects in the franchise, demonstrated through plots that target drug cartels and Muslims, for example (Payne 2016). FPS video games often portray Americans and other Western powers in a positive light (Abdullayeva 2022, Payne 2016). Enemies in games like *Call of Duty* are often from the Middle East or Eastern Europe, and the subconscious goal of each game is often to flaunt American military dominance and destroy any other political or religious structures that go against American values. Abdullayeva (2022) explains how Anthony Gramsci's philosophical idea of hegemony is represented in *Call of Duty* through the upholding of the idea of Islamophobia. *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* in particular drew inspiration from the War on Terror following 9/11, and features an unnamed Middle Eastern country that Western forces must tackle. The *Modern*

Warfare franchise serves as a prime example of Islamophobia in mainstream media, and is further upheld by requiring players of the games to massacre Muslims (Abdullayeva 2022).

Godfrey (2022) explains how Debord's idea of the spectacle creates power and social structures by being consumed. The spectacle functions "to isolate us, keep us subdued, [and] keep us absorbed on the consumption of the spectacle and of spectacular reality" (Godfrey 2022, 665). By viewing FPS video games, and particularly *Call of Duty,* as a spectacle, Godfrey argues that the American market for the military entertainment complex has become effectively numb to the realities of simulating war. One such example of this is the "No Russian" campaign in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (2009). "No Russian" is a simulation where an undercover American agent, trying to get intel on Russian spies, accompanies a group of soldiers to a Russian airport. The player is instructed to kill as many Russians as possible as a test of loyalty, committing an atrocious mass shooting in the airport. Should the player oblige, Russian forces will kill the character afterwards, claiming to have known their true intentions. Should the player not oblige, Russian forces will kill the character there (Payne 2016). The "No Russian" campaign represents what Payne (2016) considers an act of "sacrificial citizenship" (80), as the character is expected to sacrifice their own morals in an attempt to gain intel on the enemy. Godfrey (2022) also argues that the "No Russian" campaign serves to "legitimise military force both in the game and in the real world" (674), a concept that further enforces the idea of military propaganda as embedded in popular culture through video games.

The connection between video games and the United States military industrial complex goes further than simply just using real-life conflicts as inspiration. *America's Army* (2002) was a FPS developed by the United States Army. The game was released less than a year after 9/11, and was developed as an attempt to boost recruitment numbers for the military (Godfrey 2022).

Godfrey (2022) explains that "by forcing all players to play as US military personnel, the game promotes ongoing operations in the War on Terror by presenting only one distinct viewpoint, that of the US military" (673). *America's Army* was free-to-play for all consumers, which further bolstered its popularity (Godfrey 2022).

Neutralization

Taking the history of war portrayed in video games, along with motivations for why individuals choose to play video games, I next wanted to examine how people might explain their motivations to play video games that went against their politics. The research conducted for this thesis was analyzed through the lens of neutralization theory. Neutralization theory is a theory presented by Sykes and Matza (1957) that attempts to explain how individuals rationalize committing crimes. This theory was developed after many observations that delinquents often feel guilt after committing an act that they know is morally unjust. This immorality is often defined through the enforcement of social norms (Jukschat 2021, Sykes and Matza 1957). The action of neutralization occurs when "disapproval flowing from internalized norms and conforming others in the social environment is neutralized, turned back, or deflected in advance" (Sykes and Matza 1957, 666-7). Neutralization allows individuals to participate in deviant behaviors while still attempting to adhere to social norms (Jukschat 2021). The idea of neutralizing delinquency spawns from the standard of social norms and the existence of deviance against those social norms (Mitchell and Dodder 1983). Neutralization techniques are methods that individuals use to excuse acts that are deviant. These neutralizing methods are often augmentations of traditional defenses of crimes, manipulated to appease the individual's moral guilt or panic over committing an act of deviance (Costello 2000, Sykes and Matza 1957).

Notably, Mitchell and Dodder (1983) found that the seriousness of the act of delinquency or deviance is often correlated with a reduction in neutralization.

Sykes and Matza (1957) identified five techniques of neutralization that delinquents use to alleviate personal guilt when violating social norms: denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemners, and appeal to higher loyalties. To further understand each of these techniques of neutralization, the reader will consider multiple studies where neutralization was applied. The first is an examination of how neutralization is used to explain gaming disorders, and is presented by Nadine Jukschat (2021). The next is an examination of neutralization being used to rationalize college students who use non-prescription stimulant drugs, and is presented by Kristin A. Cutler (2014). The third is a study of how white-collar criminals use neutralization to explain their own acts of deviance, and is presented by James William Coleman (1987).

The first technique of neutralization that Sykes and Matza (1957) introduced is the **denial of responsibility.** This technique occurs when an individual attempts to shift blame onto somebody else, rather than themselves, to absolve all personal responsibility (Sykes and Matza 1957). Sykes and Matza (1957) provide the example that a delinquent may place the blame of responsibility onto external forces, "such as unloving parents, bad companions, or an unloving neighborhood" (667) in order to deny themselves of the responsibility of committing a delinquent act. Jukschat (2021) found that gamers suffering from gaming addiction used this technique to deflect the blame of their addiction onto other factors. Participants would explain that gaming addiction was merely a result of the way that their brains were wired. One even stated that gaming addiction was an extension of their epilepsy (Jukschat 2021). Cutler (2014) found that college students using non-prescription stimulant drugs rationalized their drug use by

claiming a lack of proper education. Many respondents explained they had never been told that drugs such as Adderall were bad for them (Cutler 2014). Further, many college students believed that because stimulant drugs were so common, they could not be considered any different than eating candy or drinking caffeine (Cutler 2014). Coleman (1987) found that white-collar criminals often justified their actions of deviance by claiming that they needed the money, and that theft was merely just a consequence of need to further themselves in the political or economic world.

The next technique of neutralization that Sykes and Matza (1957) introduced is the **denial of injury.** This technique implements the debate between actions considered *mala in se* vs *mala prohibita,* or rather "between acts that are wrong in themselves and acts that are illegal but not immoral" (Sykes and Matza 1957, 667). When considering delinquency and deviance, the question to consider in this technique of neutralization is whether or not anybody actually got hurt by the act of deviance (Sykes and Matza 1957). An individual committing an act of deviance must weigh how much harm is actually caused by a specific action; when it is determined that little to no harm was actually caused, the denial of injury technique of neutralization may be used (Sykes and Matza 1957). Sykes and Matza (1957) provide the example of a delinquent committing vandalism on a wealthy person's home, knowing that the residents could easily afford to remove any graffiti. Jukschat (2021) found that many gaming addicts did not consider themselves to be addicted, therefore denying their own self-injury. Many respondents compared their own gaming behaviors to others, explaining that others were "more addicted" and allowing them to deflect any individual harm (Jukschat 2021). Cutler (2014) found that many participants denied that anybody had ever been harmed by taking stimulant drugs without appropriate prescriptions. Further, many argued that the benefits of performance in

classroom settings were enough to outweigh any potential negative effects (Cutler 2014). Coleman (1987) found that many white-collar criminals felt entitled to money that they stole, as a form of reparation from the company they were taking it from. Offenders believed that their own personal needs were greater than stealing from companies, and that the companies would not be greatly impacted by their actions (Coleman 1987).

The third technique of neutralization posited by Sykes and Matza (1957) is the **denial of the victim.** Rather than the previous technique, this one considers how an individual responds when injury is caused to a victim; neutralization occurs when the individual committing the act of deviance suggests that the victim deserved it (Sykes and Matza 1957). Sykes and Matza (1957) also argue that the absence of knowledge of a victim from an act of deviance contributes to this technique: "Internalized norms and anticipations of the reactions of others must somehow be activated, if they are to serve as guides for behavior; and it is possible that a diminished awareness of the victim plays an important part in determining whether or not this process is set in motion" (668). Sykes and Matza (1957) present the example of an individual enacting revenge on a teacher who may have treated the delinquent unfairly to help understand this technique. Jukschat (2021) found that gaming addicts that were conscious of their addictions would often try to spin their addictions in a positive light, therefore negating any potential harm they might consider themselves to have experienced. Arguments in favor of social connection and education were provided when gamers were asked to explain their behaviors (Jukschat 2021). Cutler (2014) found that college students who used stimulants without prescriptions often compared the usage of such drugs to the usage of caffeine, therefore negating the severity of drug usage. One respondent claimed that mixing stimulant drugs with alcohol was no different than mixing caffeinated beverages like Red Bull with alcohol; since the effects of mixing caffeine and alcohol

were minimal, it would logically follow that the effects of mixing stimulants and alcohol were minimal as well (Cutler 2014). Coleman (1987) found that white-collar criminals often felt that the companies and systems they were a part of were far too corrupt for them to not take advantage of. One respondent explained that the system he worked for was abusive and unethical, and therefore justified his own acts of corruption within the system (Coleman 1987).

The fourth technique of neutralization brought forth by Sykes and Matza (1957) is the **condemnation of the condemners.** This technique occurs when a delinquent shifts blame onto the people who are critiquing the delinquents action, therefore creating animosity towards the enforcers of the norms being violated (Sykes and Matza 1957). Sykes and Matza (1957) explain how this technique occurs by shifting "the subject of the conversation in the dialogue between [the delinquent's] own deviant impulses and the reaction of others; and by attacking others, the wrongfulness of [the delinquent's] own behavior is more easily repressed or lost to view" (668). Sykes and Matza (1957) give the example of a delinquent committing a crime to spite the police, who some consider to be a corrupt institution. Jukschat (2021) found that gaming addicts often deflected their own addictions onto societal norms that believe that gaming addictions are problematic. Cutler (2014) found that many college students using stimulants blamed healthcare providers for prescribing stimulants at high rates, in an attempt to shift blame onto the higher availability of these drugs. Coleman (1987) found that many white-collar criminals were frustrated that many others were committing similar crimes and were not being punished, claiming that they as individuals should not be held responsible if nobody else was.

The last technique of neutralization that Sykes and Matza (1957) found is the **appeal to higher loyalties.** Sykes and Matza (1957) explain that this technique is used when a delinquent attempts to claim loyalty to a force higher than themselves, believing that any deviance was to

display loyalty to a larger group or system. It is necessary for a delinquent to allow the institution or group to which it ascribes to take precedence (Sykes and Matza 1957). Sykes and Matza (1957) provide the example of an individual committing an act of delinquency under the guise of helping a friend, rather than for themselves. Jukschat (2021) found that gaming addicts sometimes argued that their gaming behaviors were helpful in developing knowledge and skills that other traditional societal institutions, like schools, also taught. One respondent argued that simulating a game that took place in the Middle Ages was effective in teaching her the history and culture of the period (Jukschat 2021). Cutler (2014) found that college students using stimulant drugs often believed that their parents would be "ambivalent" towards their childrens' drug usage, which students interpreted as approval. Respondents believed that their parents would understand that the usage of these drugs was to find more success in school, and therefore would make them proud (Cutler 2014). Coleman (1987) found that many white-collar offenders committed crimes because their employers expected them to. Many feared retribution, punishment, or relegation from their employer if they were not to commit an act of deviance, which motivated them to do so (Coleman 1987).

By using the lens of neutralization, I hope to understand individuals' reasonings for playing *Call of Duty* when they hold political beliefs that seem to oppose the contents of the games. I hope to analyze how the five different techniques of neutralization might unearth any personal reconciliations individuals may enact when attempting to explain the discrepancies between their political beliefs and the content of the games they play.

Methods

This research aimed to understand how individuals being interviewed explained their reasonings for playing *Call of Duty,* a game that goes against their politics. The design of this study utilized quantitative data, gathered through Qualtrics, which was then analyzed to find participants for semi-structured interviews to gain qualitative data. This design was intended to

ensure that participants were members of the target population, as well as gain preliminary

information that was then used in interviews. A qualitative approach was used in order to allow

participants to fully explain their reasonings for the reasons that they play *Call of Duty* in their

own words. I felt that using an interview structure would create the opportunity to target specific

plot points of the games that individuals played and connect them to the political beliefs that they

indicated were most important to them. The goal was to present the participant with an inherent

dichotomy that they would then have to explain.

To conduct this study, I was required to receive IRB approval, as my research directly

involved human subjects. I received IRB approval on December 13, 2022. M

The target population for this study was men aged 18-25, who self-identify as on the left

of the political spectrum, and who play *Call of Duty* at least once a week on average. This

population was initially selected to represent draft-eligible participants. Notably, the target

population did not account for transgender participants, which shifted the population to reflect

ideals of masculinity to only reflect cisgender masculinity. The interest of selecting

left-identifying participants was to understand any potential discrepancies between a participant's

ideologies and behaviors. This choice was made primarily through the general understanding that

left-leaning political stances tend to be more opposed to war, in contrast to right-leaning political

stances. The requirement of *Call of Duty* playing time was to ensure that all participants actively

engaged in the *Call of Duty* franchise at a rate regular enough to be influenced by the game,

whether consciously or subconsciously.

An initial survey was created using Qualtrics. The survey was distributed using a

snowball sample, where I shared a link to the survey with my friends who I knew to play *Call of

Duty* and asked if they could send the link to their gaming networks. A detailed outline of the

research project at hand was presented at the beginning of the survey. This section was designed to allow all prospective respondents to give their informed consent. The first section of the survey was designed to ensure that respondents fit each of the four requirements (age, gender, political stance, and average *Call of Duty* play on a weekly basis). If a participant selected "Yes" to all questions, the survey would continue. If a participant selected "No" to any of these questions, SkipLogics were implemented to bring them to the end of the survey. The next two sections allowed participants to indicate their political beliefs and *Call of Duty* habits. The final section of the survey allowed participants to indicate if they were willing to participate in an interview. A full copy of the survey used can be found in Appendix A.

I received 45 responses from participants who were fully eligible to participate and indicated that they were willing to participate in an interview. I reached out to all 45 up to three times to ask if they were interested in participating in an interview, and sent a link to a SignUpGenius to allow them to anonymously register for a predetermined time slot. Of these 45, I interviewed eight participants, seven of whom are included in the data analyzed. Once a participant indicated their desired time, I created a Zoom meeting and sent them the invitation. Interviews were conducted to be semi-structured. This was intentional, to allow for each interview to be individually tailored to the participant. Interview participants were not asked their specific age during the interview, but almost all indicated that they were currently college students. Participants were not asked to disclose their race. I chose to not directly ask these demographics in an attempt to limit any potential factors that could be attributed to either age or racial bias in my results. All interviews were conducted and recorded over Zoom. When a participant joined the call, I introduced myself and explained a bit about the research being

conducted. I asked each participant if they consented to being recorded. All participants indicated that they consented to be recorded.

After the recording of the interview began, participants were asked to choose a pseudonym for themselves, to help protect their identity. After selecting their pseudonym, I began asking interview questions. Interviews were structured to cover two general topics, which were then combined. The first part of the interview covered the participant's political beliefs that they had indicated in the survey. Using the data gathered from their initial survey response, I structured questions to have each participant explain their most important political beliefs, and how those mattered to them. The second part of the interview covered the participant's *Call of Duty* behaviors and opinions. Participants were first asked to explain why they played *Call of Duty* in their own words. Following this, questions were more individually tailored based on their preferred games and game modes as indicated from the survey. This part of the interview also allowed participants to highlight any other video games, both FPS and not, to better gauge an understanding of the participant's general gaming habits and preferences. The final part of the interview covered the participant's understandings and explanations of any contradictions that presented themselves based on their initial responses to the survey. This part of the interview combined survey data covering the participant's political beliefs and *Call of Duty* habits; I would then find two to three instances from their favorite *Call of Duty* games and game modes that directly contradicted their political beliefs. Participants were asked to explain their understanding of any contradictions and differences, as well as how they felt about them. The last question each participant was asked was to explain why they continued to play *Call of Duty* given our conversation. This was asked at the end to allow the participant to again state in their own words

why they played; I was curious to see if their reasoning might have changed from when I asked them earlier in the interview. A full list of interview questions can be found in Appendix B.

Survey data was kept on my password-protected and fingerprint-protected Qualtrics account. I kept the data of participants who were interviewed only, to ensure that any participant data that were eligible but did not sign up for an interview could not be accessed. All interview guides were kept in a secure, password-protected and fingerprint-protected Google Drive on my personal computer. Interview guides were created prior to each individual interview to be tailored to the interviewee's survey responses. Interview guides were labeled based on the participant's chosen pseudonym. I took brief notes on each interview guide during interviews. Zoom recordings were kept in my private Zoom app. During each interview, participants were asked to turn their cameras off to protect their anonymity. I used the Zoom transcription service, then corrected and refined each transcription by listening to the recording. Transcriptions of each interview were attached to the participant's initial interview guide, allowing them to again be linked to their chosen pseudonym.

The coding process was deductive, and attempted to examine the five general techniques of neutralization presented by Sykes and Matza. Each interview transcription was analyzed to highlight examples of the different techniques of neutralization. This was analyzed based on participants' given reasonings and defenses during their interviews. Once each interview was transcribed and analyzed for these different techniques, I then compiled the data from all seven interviews to search for recurring themes.

Results and Discussion

In this section, I first present a general summary of the survey results, which allow for a better understanding of the seven interviewees I spoke with. Next, using the lens of Sykes and Matza's theory of neutralization, I analyzed my data to find examples of techniques of neutralization through asking my interviewees questions about their political beliefs and their understandings and habits surrounding *Call of Duty* as a franchise. I found that interviewees (n = 7) used the technique of the denial of injury most often. Participants also used the techniques of the denial of responsibility and appealing to higher loyalties quite commonly. Finally, I chose to group the two techniques of denial of the victim and condemnation of the condemners together.

There is a significant amount of overlap between these different techniques and their applications by the interviewees. I selected examples and themes that arose throughout the interview process and categorized them to what I felt was most applicable, but I do recognize that certain examples can also be interpreted through other lenses of neutralization.

It is also important to recognize that Sykes and Matza's theory was developed to analyze deviant behavior as it applied to crime, and is often applied when there is a clear perpetrator and a clear victim. In the instance of this research, I found that the perpetrator, or interviewee, often tended to neutralize his behaviors by portraying himself to be the victim, as well. I try to acknowledge this as it appears in different examples.

Survey Results

From the preliminary survey, I found that six of seven total participants indicated that women's rights were an issue of political importance to them. Five listed racism; five listed

environmentalism; four listed LGBTQ+ rights; three listed capitalism; two listed immigration; and one listed xenophobia. Six participants stated that the U.S. was not justified in invading Iraq, with the seventh stating that he did not know enough to have an opinion on the matter. Four participants stated that the U.S. was not justified in invading Afghanistan, while the other three stated that the U.S. was justified in invading Afghanistan, but the war went on for too long. Four participants stated that it was not necessary that the U.S. enter the War on Terror; one stated that it was necessary that the U.S. enter the War on Terror, and that the War on Terror should still be fought today; one stated that it was necessary that the U.S. enter the War on Terror, and that the War on Terror is over; and one stated that he did not know enough to have an opinion on the matter.

All but two participants stated that they play *Call of Duty* for 0-5 hours per week, on average; the other two stated that they play *Call of Duty* for 6-10 hours per week, on average. All participants stated that they play *Call of Duty* on either a personal computer (PC), an Xbox, or on their mobile phone. The most popular *Call of Duty* game listed as a favorite by participants was *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019). *Call of Duty: Black Ops II* (2012) was the second-most popular game. Every single participant listed Multiplayer as a favorite game mode. A full table of survey results can be found in Appendix C.

Denial of Responsibility

For the purpose of this research, I interpreted **denial of responsibility** to consider how respondents would compare *Call of Duty* games to other forms of media. In a criminological context, this interpretation considers playing the game to be an act of perpetration; the comprehension of the content of the game is considered the responsibility. Examining the denial

of responsibility therefore entailed asking participants to explain whether or not *Call of Duty* was problematic in its depiction of war in comparison to other media. Every participant provided an example of the denial of responsibility through comparing the games to other forms of media. While some participants considered *Call of Duty* to be the same type of media as a movie or a TV show, other participants acknowledged a discrepancy between different forms of media, considering *Call of Duty* to be different in its active, participatory nature.

The claims to equate *Call of Duty* to other forms of media helped form a perspective that claimed to deny responsibility from all forms of media. As Ghost said, "It's just another visual representation of things that could be, or… a story. And I think you kind of have to take that for what you will and learn from it even." Ghost's technique of denying responsibility of *Call of Duty* effectively places blame on all media equally. This form of denial creates the sentiment of, "Well, it's all bad." This approach therefore helps to remove any direct responsibility on *Call of Duty,* and allows Ghost to feel more comfortable in his playing habits.

Three participants compared *Call of Duty* and its depiction of potentially problematic or harmful content to other forms of media. There were two common approaches to this: one approach where *Call of Duty* was considered less harmful than other forms of media, and another where *Call of Duty* was considered more harmful. Nate explained his understanding of the effects of *Call of Duty* and his belief that the games were less problematic than other media:

> "I don't think it's more problematic than like, the, the way war is depicted in any other medium. I think it's actually probably better than most mediums. I mean *Call of Duty* probably depicts it better than most movies, and I'm not sure if I know any like war TV shows, but it's probably better than that. I think, besides, like books, maybe, and like a one-to-one recount with, like, a veteran, I think *Call of Duty* is probably really in the middle for the most part. But of course it's not great. It's American propaganda. It's like glorification in a lot of ways… I think movies, movies, I feel like exclusively, are like glorifying these type of events, and, like the people who are in them, and like how things went down. And the Americans were righteous, and they, you know. No one. no one like you ever care about ever died; they all came out fine and did good. I feel like *Call of Duty*

kind of differs from that. I feel like there's a lot of, at least in the, the games that I played the campaigns with, there's a lot of, there's a lot of death, and it's like, big characters that you care about will be the people who are dying. And I feel like it depicts it in a lot more gruesome of a scenario than some World War II movie, where this guy shoots a tank and it blows up. The Americans all survived, and it was great. "

Nate's reasoning seemed to be an attempt to spin the narrative of death and brutality in the games to displace the blame from *Call of Duty* onto other forms of media in an attempt to neutralize his own feelings of discomfort when asked to consider the problematic effects of playing *Call of Duty.* By denying the responsibility of *Call of Duty* and instead comparing it to other media, Nate is able to provide a rationale for his continued enjoyment of the game, as if to say, "It's not as bad as the others."

Conversely, the other four participants pointed out the participatory nature of *Call of Duty,* and how that might lead to a level of accountability for players. These participants explained that *Call of Duty* was different from movies, as they had to actively make choices and interact with the game. Despite these acknowledgments, these four participants were still able to remove themselves from the responsibilities of making decisions regarding war. One participant, Carl, explained that he felt that the participatory aspect of *Call of Duty* could potentially lead susceptible gamers to engage in game behaviors in real life, but that he was intelligent enough to separate the game from reality. The other three participants who indicated that they noticed a difference between FPS shooters like *Call of Duty* and other forms of media also indicated that intelligence and knowledge of the real world were what allowed them to separate themselves from that act of participation. For these participants, denial of responsibility is shifted into a denial of impressionability, allowing participants to consider their own personal education and knowledge as factors that help them separate the game from real life.

Denial of Injury

I defined **denial of injury** in participants' responses to being asked if they saw any particular issues with *Call of Duty* going against their expressed political beliefs. In this context, the perpetrator would be a participant playing games within the *Call of Duty* franchise, while the victim would be respondents considering themselves negatively impacted or affected by *Call of Duty*'s content. Participants often attempted to neutralize the contradiction between personal beliefs and game content by explaining the positive effects that the game had on them.

This technique revealed itself through many participants trying to positively twist their gaming behaviors, in an attempt to shift away from the discussion of negative effects of playing *Call of Duty*. Every participant stated that they found playing *Call of Duty* to be fun, through social interaction and mindless, repetitive actions. A common theme found was that participants claimed that *Call of Duty* was a way for them to disconnect from the real world for a few hours while they played. Bob explained that he plays *Call of Duty* "because I think it's entertaining for a little bit. You know, just kind of, it takes, it's a way to distract from, you know, to occupy myself, to distract from, you know, everyday life. It's something to do." Similarly, Carl stated that he enjoyed "the simplicity of it. It's just really easy to turn my brain off, and just not think about like, real world stresses while I'm doing it." In both of these cases, these participants were able to neutralize the content of *Call of Duty* as a franchise to be something that didn't require them to think about the real world, effectively allowing them to disconnect from reality.

I found this particularly interesting, as the content of *Call of Duty* is often rooted specifically in real-world situations and conflicts that the United States is directly involved in. Many participants indicated in the preliminary survey that they considered themselves to be pacifists; in their interviews, Bob and Carl both also expressed disdain for America's

involvement in the War on Terror and the Afghanistan War. When asked about how he felt about this direct contradiction, Bob stated:

> "I don't know. It's not indifferent, but it's, it is interesting to think about. I guess I'm kind of. I guess it's kind of a realization, like. Well, I, really, I, it's like, interesting that I didn't really realize as much of the connection. So it's kind of like, not so much eye-opening. But yeah, it's, it's like, oh, maybe you could have thought about it."

This was a theme that presented itself throughout my interviews. Participants explained that they were unaware that these contradictions existed, or that they had not considered them prior to our discussion. Participants were denying themselves of being impacted by these contradictions by stating that they were unaware of any discrepancies, therefore excusing themselves of any wrongdoing by affirming ignorance.

Ghost provided a more defensive answer when asked a similar question. He had indicated on the survey and explained that *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019) was one of his favorite games; in our discussion, he also stated that *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (2022) was another favorite. In the first part of our interview, Ghost had explained how xenophobia and immigration were two political issues that he considered to be of utmost importance to him. Further, he had also indicated that the U.S. was not justified in invading Iraq. I asked him how he felt about the fact that *Modern Warfare* and *Modern Warfare 2* used the Iraq War as inspiration, as well as incorporating stereotypes rooted in anti-immigration (through the missions to destroy a Mexican drug cartel) and xenophobia (through the missions to destroy a Middle Eastern terrorist group) to shape its plot. His response was this:

> "I, I can understand what you're saying, but I don't feel that the game was really pushing a political narrative. I really actually don't think that all those things are too far off from reality actually, and, and, and you do have, like, inclusiveness. ...And I think [the depiction of Mexican cartels] in some of the early levels when you're in, like the Mexican village, and like how it corrupts the, the community and the safety of these people, just

trying to live. I think that its depictions of like, Mexico and the situation down there was actually very fair. I didn't really see a kind of, the rhetoric of, you know, we gotta keep these people out, and maybe that's just me coming like, from that like, background of like, knowing what how things are down there. I really thought, I was actually somewhat impressed by how it didn't like, try to like, push anything. And then I thought it, it showed a very real depiction of like, cartel and life in Mexico under the cartels, and just how dangerous they can be. And they were, I think, a, a somewhat smaller, you know, plot point in the grand scheme of things. I mean, I guess you could say that like, oh, yeah, cartels are scary, but I, I don't think it offered immigration as a solution to those issues, which is why I'm not necessarily sure… I wouldn't agree with the, that point. And then, not to mention, if you want to talk about like, Middle Eastern xenophobia, you do, you know, meet up with Farrah and her forces there in the Middle East, and you work as allies to bring down a common enemy. And then ultimately, I mean, the bad guys were people in the United States. Corrupt officials. So I, I think it's okay in that aspect."

Ghost's response was an interesting way for him to both deny himself of injury through the game's contents, by claiming that he disagreed with my assertions, as well as provide examples of the benefits that *Call of Duty* brought to him. Rather than admit any potential harm that the game could bring him, Ghost defended himself by spinning the stereotypical depictions into positive aspects that he could learn from.

Another similar, intriguing theme that appeared was that participants attempted to deny any negative implications of playing *Call of Duty* by describing playing the game as somewhat of an escape. A total of five interviewees used words like "easy," "mindless," and "simple" to explain why they enjoyed playing. Rat explains: "I'm used to those games. It's an FPS game. So I kind of like, zone out sometimes when I play." Nate expanded on this idea: "I feel like I'm able to just take a break from being like, an S-tier player in *Valorant* [another popular FPS game], and playing for money, and this, that, the other, and boosting people, and this game… It's good to just take a break and sit back and just click on people's heads in a *Call of Duty* game." Other respondents indicated that they felt similarly to the escapism that the game brought them. In these instances, injury is denied by countering with positive consequences that allow these

individuals to separate themselves from any potential harm. In this instance, participants seem to make the argument, "Well, it can't be that bad, if there is good that comes from it, too."

A third theme that arose in the framework of the denial of personal injury for the respondents was the claim that the content and political ramifications of *Call of Duty* did not seem to bother them. This theme of separation was common, and also played a large part in utilizing the technique of the denial of responsibility. Extending on this, respondents claimed that, because they are not responsible for the act of participating in the game, they can therefore not be injured by participating in the game. This idea seemed to assert that without responsibility, no harm can come. This further allowed players to separate themselves from the realities of the game.

A particularly interesting example of the denial of injury came when discussing the "No Russian" campaign plot of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*. In this plot, the player is an American spy, working to infiltrate a Russian terrorist organization. The player is expected to enter a Russian airport and kill hundreds of civilians to appease the Russian terrorists, who are also participating. The player is expected to kill as many people as possible, but ultimately ends up being killed by the terrorist organization after the completion of the mission, the reasoning being that the Russians were already aware that the player was a spy. Participants who had played the "No Russian" campaign provided differing techniques of the denial of injury. Nate explained that he was not distraught by this campaign because he was not affected by such violence, even saying "I'm not really shook up by that, those sorts of things." Nate neutralized playing this campaign by denying himself the injury of committing a mass shooting through an effort of desensitization. Price provided a different approach, stating that "it's hard to defend" a mission like "No Russian," but that *Call of Duty* has tried to alleviate any negative consequences

by providing players a warning before the mission starts. Price believes that, by placing the responsibility onto the player, the player themselves can decide whether or not to play "No Russian," and therefore can decide if they will be injured by this campaign. Price's perspective combines the techniques of the denial of responsibility and the denial of injury by presenting the campaign as a voluntary choice for players to participate in.

Denial of the Victim and Condemnation of the Condemners

In the analysis of my interviews, I defined **denial of the victim** and **condemnation of the condemners** together, through respondents' experiences with the *Call of Duty* culture, and how respondents separated themselves from the typically right-wing culture that surrounds *Call of Duty.* I grouped these two together in an attempt to understand how respondents viewed other members of the *Call of Duty* community, and how the respondents were able to distinguish themselves from that community. This tended to occur by players comparing themselves to this culture, and how they were able to prove their superiority over traditional *Call of Duty* gamers. To better understand this, consider playing *Call of Duty* to be the act of deviance, while the condemners are other players that respondents interacted with.

Almost every respondent indicated an understanding that the culture of *Call of Duty* gamers was typically very toxic. A common stereotype of *Call of Duty* players, particularly those who use voice chat while playing, is that of a person who is incredibly racist, sexist, homophobic, and bigoted, who will say offensive things without any sort of filter. When I asked about how participants felt about the culture surrounding *Call of Duty*, many explained that the typical chat user was an incredibly aggressive, young, male player. As Nate explained: "I've never heard a woman speak in a *Call of Duty* game chat, and I think that's, that's for a reason."

I asked participants to explain where they thought this culture of toxicity in *Call of Duty* games came from. Gilbert provided an interesting perspective:

> "I think it also comes from kind of a, a competitive place, and then also kind of an insecure place, as well. Like, from the average player, of a, you know, wanting to do, be better than everyone else. And that's being insecure about, you know, stuff like that."

To separate himself, Gilbert established the basis of competition and insecurity, explaining how individuals who contribute to the negative culture of *Call of Duty* stem from places of rather unforthcoming feelings. Gilbert believed that, by identifying a specific flaw in individuals who are part of this culture, and implying that he does not experience the same flaw, he is therefore able to absolve himself from any of the responsibilities associated with being a part of that culture. In a way, Gilbert is therefore denying himself of victimhood, saying rather that the right-wing, racist gamers are victims of a drive for competition and insecurity, a fact which he removes himself from. This separation of the individual interviewees from the greater *Call of Duty* gamer population appeared in other interviews as well. When asked about where he thought the *Call of Duty* culture came from, Carl explained that "it might be the accessibility of the game, just how simple it is. There's going to be more, I guess, simple-minded people doing it. Yeah." Again, the interviewee distinguished himself from the broader culture on the basis of "simple-mindedness," allowing him to deny himself victimhood while placing the blame onto the intelligence of the larger population.

Three explained that one particular reason for the culture was the level of anonymity being online. When a player says an offensive comment over their microphone, their personal identity is not linked to their gamer tag; therefore, they cannot experience any real-life consequences for being problematic. Price explained how *Call of Duty* was one of the first games to incorporate game chat, allowing players to talk freely and without regulation while playing.

By highlighting the level of anonymity, participants could condemn the culture of the game by maintaining that the lack of tangible accountability outside of the game was something that motivated players to contribute to this culture. This also allowed participants to place themselves at a higher moral ground by explaining that they did not participate in this culture, because they did not feel the need to express hateful sentiments anonymously through game chat.

Condemnation of the broader population was also used as a motivator for why one participant, Nate, enjoyed playing. Nate described how he enjoyed playing *Call of Duty* to set a positive example for other gamers in the lobbies he played with, in an attempt to prevent the spread of bigotry across the platform:

> "It is valuable, like again, for me to be that best player in the lobby… I may be some lib loser who's like this, that, the other, and like, is telling people that calling people the N-word is bad, but I mean, this lib loser is at the top of the leaderboard smoking all of you guys by like 140%. So it's like, I mean, maybe this lib loser is actually better than me at this fucking game. And they're not… maybe they get a little sense to it."

In this sense, Nate was able to both separate himself from the culture of the game while providing a positive reason for playing that helps to counteract the negative culture surrounding the game. Nate condemned the culture, denied himself of being a part of it, and asserted that the problematic members of the culture deserved to be beaten brutally by better players, all while claiming to be helping reverse the culture.

Appeal to Higher Loyalties

Finally, I interpreted **appeals to higher loyalties** to consider how respondents shifted their explanations of why they engaged in playing *Call of Duty,* despite being aware of its contradictions to their political beliefs, onto other people. For this technique, consider playing *Call of Duty* as an act of perpetration, and the player as the deviant. Every single participant used

this technique multiple times throughout their interviews. This technique was largely found when participants were first asked the question, "Why do you play *Call of Duty?"*

Every single participant described how important the social aspect of *Call of Duty* was in influencing their playing behaviors. Themes of social interaction and connection were prominent, an idea particularly emphasized through COVID-19 and the inability to see friends in person. Each participant described different ways that *Call of Duty* in particular allowed them to socialize and spend time with their friends virtually, a fact that seemed to hold significant importance. Gilbert also explained that adulthood contributed to a sense of social isolation, but *Call of Duty* helped foster connections virtually: "It's a good way to, I don't know, you feel like you could hang out with someone just on like, a random Tuesday without having to make plans or anything."

Expanding on this, six of seven participants explained that their initial interest in *Call of Duty* came from playing with friends when they were younger. Participants described a social culture, for which many of them found themselves immersed in while in middle school and high school, that revolved around playing *Call of Duty* with friends. When asked about what he liked about his favorite games, Rat expanded on this idea of a young player history, explaining that this allowed him to experience nostalgia in the current day:

> "Just how impactful they were for the generation, like, most of my friends have memories from, you know, being like a teenager coming out of like middle school or something, and coming home to play like *Call of Duty,* like *Black Ops,* like you're playing Zombies with your friends til like, 10 PM."

The theme of nostalgia was present for many respondents. By explaining playing behaviors through the consideration of nostalgia, participants are able to claim that they are only playing to relive old memories that they associate with friends. This removes them from the conscious

decision-making to currently engage in the game, as it gives them a socially acceptable reason to enjoy playing *Call of Duty.*

Another aspect that two respondents, Nate and Price, talked about was the YouTube culture of *Call of Duty.* As Price explained:

> "Honestly, I don't think I would have loved *Call of Duty* as much as I do if I hadn't grown up on it. Social, like… Youtube, when I was a little kid, [I] watched all my favorite *Call of Duty* players upload their videos and post and talk about it, and make jokes and record videos together. And what I really liked was that all those people recording videos together. I think it had less to do with *Call of Duty* and more about that. And that's what got me into the game."

With this, Price shifted his intentions for playing *Call of Duty* onto an idealization of participating in something that others played. This allowed him to neutralize his own personal responsibility for participating in the game, thus placing the blame on the content creators that he looked up to and aspired to be like.

In my interviews, I asked respondents the question, "Why do you play *Call of Duty?*" twice: once at the beginning of the portion of the interview where we discussed video games, and once at the end, after discussing the interactions between the franchise and their personal political beliefs. In this second question, I asked participants to consider our conversations regarding how their political beliefs contradicted the game, and whether or not their ideas had changed from when I first asked them. Overwhelmingly, every single participant asserted that the opportunity to play with their friends and have fun was what kept them coming back to the game. Each participant was able to acknowledge that *Call of Duty* as a franchise did go against their politics, but that the opportunity to spend time with friends in this medium was more valuable to them than upholding their political beliefs. In this way, each participant neutralized their

behavior of engaging in the game by appealing to the idea of social connection, claiming that to

be more important to them.

Limitations

A large limitation for this study was the time I had to conduct research. I received IRB approval in December, and finished data collection in March. This time period of 3 months was not long enough for me to conduct more interviews, or interviews that were longer and went more in-depth. To continue the study of how left-identifying men engage with *Call of Duty,* it would be extremely valuable to conduct more interviews with players, as well as extend the time frames of each individual interview.

In addition, with the original timeline of my project being only eight months, I had to limit other contributing factors, such as gender. Research on women and gender non-conforming individuals who identify as on the left of the political spectrum, and who play *Call of Duty,* would be paramount to further the understanding of the messages that the game sends, as well as analyzing if there are gender-based discrepancies that factor into engagement with the game.

Another factor that was limited was the selection of the franchise, *Call of Duty.* While I chose *Call of Duty* as a result of personal experience and interest in examining how players interact with the game, there are myriad other FPS games that simulate war in similar ways. Conducting this study with a broader range of video games may also illuminate some of the discrepancies between players, as well as the depictions of war in FPS games.

Regardless of these constraints, this research is important, as it examines how individuals hold political identities in comparison to their personal interests, a matter of utmost importance as America continues to navigate a tumultuous and divided landscape. Through a sociopolitical lens, this research also allows for the application of Sykes and Matza's theory of neutralization, as well as the concept of deviance at large. For the individual participants, all indicated that our interviews allowed them to reflect on the contradictions between their gaming habits and their

political identities, and to begin to consider changing their behaviors to avoid any further

contradictions.

Conclusion

This research examined how self-identifying, politically left men, aged 18-25, reconciled their individual political identities with contrasting depictions of war and violence in the first-person shooter game, *Call of Duty.* Using Sykes and Matza's theory of neutralization, I was able to examine how individuals used neutralizing techniques to defend their actions as video game players.

To accomplish this thesis, I first created and distributed a preliminary survey. In this survey, participants were asked to identify their political beliefs, matters of importance, and labels. Participants were also asked to describe their *Call of Duty* gaming habits and preferences. From this survey, I contacted all eligible and interested respondents for interviews. I conducted eight interviews, seven of which were used in my final analysis. These interviews expanded on the topics discussed in the preliminary survey, as well as created the opportunity for me to present the interviewees with contradictions between their ideologies and the games they enjoyed. These interviews were conducted to serve as a space where respondents could explain their reasonings for engaging in contradictory behavior.

Each interview was transcribed, coded, and analyzed for occurrences of each of the five neutralization techniques. I found that respondents engaged in the neutralizing techniques of the denial of responsibility, the denial of injury, the denial of the victim, the condemnation of the condemners, and the appeal to higher loyalties. Denial of injury was the most common technique used, as respondents denied their own personal injury from playing the game throughout their interviews. Appeal to higher loyalties was also common, with participants explaining that the social aspect of the game was too significant for them to place their own political beliefs above the content or beliefs of *Call of Duty.* The denial of responsibility was used commonly as well,

with participants comparing *Call of Duty* to other forms of media, such as TV shows or movies. Finally, I chose to combine the denial of the victim techniques with the condemnation of the condemners techniques to analyze how interviewees felt towards other *Call of Duty* players, and how they were able to separate themselves. Ultimately, I found that all seven interviewees defended their choice to actively play *Call of Duty,* despite confirming that the game went against their politics, using one or more of these neutralizing techniques. Each respondent confirmed that *Call of Duty* was a space for them to sacrifice their political beliefs to benefit their personal needs.

This research is beneficial to the field of sociology, as it uses the application of the theory of neutralization in a context of non-traditional deviance, thus proving that Sykes and Matza's theory is widely applicable. Further, this research can be beneficial to understand how the marketing and design techniques of *Call of Duty,* as well as other FPS games, might be influenced by political forces to purposely create a space where players detach from their personal beliefs. With the military-entertainment-complex only expanding as the world of digital media continues to grow, video games like *Call of Duty* will continue to serve as places for players to detach from the real world while simulating war. Further research should aim to delve into the efforts of games like *Call of Duty* to not only help establish this disconnect of personal beliefs, but even examine how games like *Call of Duty* can be used as military recruitment tools for the U.S. military.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Preliminary Survey with Informed Consent

Introduction

My name is Phoebe Greene, and I am a current senior at the University of Colorado at Boulder conducting research to write an undergraduate thesis on the sociopolitical reconciliations of young adults who play the first-person-shooter video game Call of Duty.

The purpose of this study is to examine the ways in which individuals who self-identify as being on the left of the political spectrum reconcile being active players of the video game Call of Duty. Through my personal experience of watching friends play Call of Duty, I have noticed a discrepancy between expressed political beliefs and eagerness to participate in the first-person shooter (FPS) setting of Call of Duty games. Socially, one's political identity has become a significant aspect of defining an individual's character. Many adults aged 18-25 consider themselves to be politically active and committed to their political identity; however, this identity often gets blurred in other social settings that may contradict the ideas one is "supposed" to adhere to. The goal of this research is to better understand the mechanisms used to reconcile contrasting ideological views, using the example of FPS video games and Call of Duty. Using a sociological lens, I hope to better understand the role that video games play in young adults' perceptions of political conflict and identity. For this study, I will only be examining the left side of the political spectrum. To participate in this study, you must identify as a man, be aged 18-25, self-identify as on the left of the political spectrum, and play Call of Duty at least once a week on average,

I will be interviewing up to 30 respondents. Data will first be collected through a survey, and respondents of the survey may be contacted to participate in a 60-minute interview upon completion of the survey if they choose to be contacted. Both the survey and the interview will cover both your political beliefs and your video game usage. I expect the survey to take no more than 20 minutes, and for the interviews to take approximately 60 minutes. Interviews will be conducted in a private location that is convenient to you, which may include over Zoom. You will only be interviewed once. The audio of your interview will be recorded through my personal computer by using Zoom, and later transcribed into a document. This audio recording will be deleted after having been fully transcribed.

Whether or not you take part in this research is your choice. You may stop the survey or the interview at any point and it will not be held against you. Should you choose to stop the survey or the interview, any information you have provided will be destroyed and you will not be contacted again. If you complete the survey or the interview and later choose that you would not like to be included in the data, all information you have provided will be destroyed and you will not be contacted again. If you are a CU Boulder student, taking part in this research is not part of your classwork or duties. You can refuse to enroll, or withdraw after enrolling at any time, with no effect on your class standing, grades, or job at CU Boulder. You will not be offered or receive any special consideration if you take part in this research. I will tell you about any new information relevant to my study that may affect your health, welfare, or choice to stay in the research.

I foresee minimal risks for individuals who choose to participate in this study. You will have the choice of discussing political stances that they hold, and you will not be asked to disclose anything potentially controversial. If you would like to have any of your responses removed from the data record as a result of discomfort or any other reason, you may do so at any point during or after the interview. You are welcome to leave the survey without completing at any moment. If you complete the survey and later decide that you would not like your data used, I will delete your survey response. I will delete the Zoom recording and any transcriptions linked to you. I will check in with you throughout the interview process to confirm that you are comfortable and confident in your data being used for this study.

I cannot promise any benefits to you or others from your taking part in this research. However, possible benefits include contribution to a lesser-studied field of political sociology and critical media studies. You will be participating in an academic study about a popular form of media, and will get to describe the reasons why you enjoy playing Call of Duty.

Information obtained about you for this study will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law. Research information that identifies you may be shared with the University of Colorado Boulder Institutional Review Board (IRB) and others who are responsible for ensuring compliance with laws and regulations related to research, including people on behalf of the Office for Human Research Protections. The information from this research may be published for scientific purposes; however, your identity will not be given out. I will be asking each respondent to pick a pseudonym for themselves to be referred to throughout my research; this is to remove their name from the record. All respondents will be referred to with their selected pseudonym in my writing. I will record the audio of my interviews by using Zoom on my

personal computer, and these recordings will then be stored on a secure Google Drive file on my personal laptop. Both my Google Drive and my laptop are password-protected and finger-print-protected. I will erase audio-taped interviews after I have completed data transcription and analysis. I will keep a personal record of your preferred email if you would be interested in reading my final thesis on this topic. This email list will also live in the same password-protected Google Drive folder. Apart from these factors, I will not be collecting any other personal data.

You will not be paid to be in this study.

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, please reach out to my primary advisor, Dr. Mathieu Desan, at mathieu.desan@colorado.edu. If you have questions regarding the honors process in the Sociology department, please contact the Honors Program Coordinator, Dr. Amanda Stewart, at amanda.stewart-1@colorado.edu. This research has been reviewed and approved by an IRB. You may talk to them at (303) 735-3702 or irbadmin@colorado.edu if: your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team; you cannot reach the research team; you want to talk to someone besides the research team; you have questions about your rights as a research subject; or you want to get information or provide input about this research. I will keep a copy of your survey response and consent to participate for my records, and an email will be sent to you for your own records and personal information.

By selecting "Yes," you document your permission to take part in this research project entitled "Examining the Discrepancies between Political Ideology and Usage of the First-Person Shooter Game Call of Duty".

○ Yes
○ No

Preliminary Questions

What is your age?

○ Under 18
○ 18-25
○ 25+

What is your gender?

○ Man
○ Woman
○ Non-binary / third gender
○ Prefer not to say
○ Other

Do you consider yourself to be politically left-wing?

○ Yes
○ Maybe
○ No

Do you play Call of Duty at least once per week on average?

○ Yes
○ Maybe
○ No

Political Stances

What ideological label(s) do you most align yourself with? You may select more than 1.

☐ Left-wing
☐ Liberal
☐ Democratic
☐ Leftist
☐ Socialist
☐ Democratic Socialist
☐ Anarchist
☐ Communist
☐ Other:

Do you consider yourself to be a pacifist?

○ Yes

○ Maybe

○ No

What political issue(s) do you consider to be the most important? Please select no more than 5.

☐ Women's rights

☐ Immigration

☐ Xenophobia

☐ Racism

☐ Capitalism

☐ Social justice

☐ LGBTQ+ rights

☐ Pacifism

☐ Health inequity

☐ Environmentalism

☐ War

☐ Other: [_____]

Do you consider yourself to be politically active?

○ Definitely not

○ Probably not

○ Might or might not

○ Probably yes

○ Definitely yes

Do you belong to any political organizations? If so, which one(s)?

○ Yes [   ]

○ No

○ Unsure

What is your opinion of America's involvement in the Iraq War? Please select the option that best fits your opinion.

○ The US was justified in invading Iraq, and the war ended when it should have.

○ The US was justified in invading Iraq, but the war went on for too long.

○ The US was not justified in invading Iraq.

○ I don't know enough to have an opinion.

What is your opinion of America's involvement in the Afghanistan War? Please select the option that best fits your opinion.

○ The US was justified in invading Afghanistan, and the war ended when it should have.

○ The US was justified in invading Afghanistan, but the war went on for too long.

○ The US was not justified in invading Afghanistan.

○ I don't know enough to have an opinion.

What is your opinion of America's involvement in the War on Terror? Please select the option that best fits your opinion.

○ It was necessary that the US enter the War on Terror. The War on Terror should still be fought today.

○ It was necessary that the US enter the War on Terror. The War on Terror should be over.

○ It was necessary that the US enter the War on Terror. The War on Terror is over.

○ It was not necessary that the US enter the War on Terror.

○ I don't know enough to have an opinion.

Call of Duty

How often do you play Call of Duty?

○ 0-5 hours per week

○ 6-10 hours per week

○ 11-15 hours per week

○ 16+ hours per week

How do you play Call of Duty? You may select more than 1.

☐ PlayStation

☐ XBox

☐ Personal Computer

☐ Mobile Phone

☐ Other [   ]

Which Call of Duty game(s) have you played? You may select more than 1.

☐ Call of Duty (2003)

☐ Call of Duty 2 (2005)

☐ Call of Duty 3 (2006)

☐ Call of Duty: Roads to Victory (2007)

☐ Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare (2007)

☐ Call of Duty: World at War (2008)

☐ Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 (2009)

☐ Call of Duty: Black Ops (2010)

☐ Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 (2011)

☐ Call of Duty: Black Ops II (2012)

☐ Call of Duty Online (2013)

☐ Call of Duty: Ghosts (2013)

☐ Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare (2014)

☐ Call of Duty: Black Ops III (2015)

☐ Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare (2016)

☐ Call of Duty: WWII (2017)

☐ Call of Duty: Black Ops 4 (2018)

☐ Call of Duty: Mobile (2019)

☐ Call of Duty: Modern Warfare (2019)

☐ Call of Duty: Warzone (2020)

☐ Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War (2020)

☐ Call of Duty: Vanguard (2021)

☐ Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II (2022)

Which Call of Duty game(s) are your favorite? You may select more than 1.

☐ Call of Duty (2003)

☐ Call of Duty 2 (2005)

☐ Call of Duty 3 (2006)

☐ Call of Duty: Roads to Victory (2007)

☐ Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare (2007)

☐ Call of Duty: World at War (2008)

☐ Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 (2009)

☐ Call of Duty: Black Ops (2010)

☐ Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 (2011)

☐ Call of Duty: Black Ops II (2012)

☐ Call of Duty Online (2013)

☐ Call of Duty: Ghosts (2013)

☐ Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare (2014)

☐ Call of Duty: Black Ops III (2015)

☐ Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare (2016)

☐ Call of Duty: WWII (2017)

☐ Call of Duty: Black Ops 4 (2018)

☐ Call of Duty: Mobile (2019)

☐ Call of Duty: Modern Warfare (2019)

☐ Call of Duty: Warzone (2020)

☐ Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War (2020)

☐ Call of Duty: Vanguard (2021)

☐ Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II (2022)

Which Call of Duty game(s) are your least favorite? You may select more than 1.

- [ ] Call of Duty (2003)
- [ ] Call of Duty 2 (2005)
- [ ] Call of Duty 3 (2006)
- [ ] Call of Duty: Roads to Victory (2007)
- [ ] Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare (2007)
- [ ] Call of Duty: World at War (2008)
- [ ] Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 (2009)
- [ ] Call of Duty: Black Ops (2010)
- [ ] Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 (2011)
- [ ] Call of Duty: Black Ops II (2012)
- [ ] Call of Duty Online (2013)
- [ ] Call of Duty: Ghosts (2013)
- [ ] Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare (2014)
- [ ] Call of Duty: Black Ops III (2015)
- [ ] Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare (2016)
- [ ] Call of Duty: WWII (2017)
- [ ] Call of Duty: Black Ops 4 (2018)
- [ ] Call of Duty: Mobile (2019)
- [ ] Call of Duty: Modern Warfare (2019)
- [ ] Call of Duty: Warzone (2020)
- [ ] Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War (2020)
- [ ] Call of Duty: Vanguard (2021)
- [ ] Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II (2022)

What game mode(s) do you like to play? You may select more than 1.

- [ ] Multiplayer
- [ ] Warzone
- [ ] Campaign

☐ Other: [_____]

Final Questions

Would you be willing to participate in a 60-minute interview (in-person or over Zoom) to discuss your responses to this survey?

○ Yes
○ Maybe
○ No

What is your email?

[_____]

May I contact you through email?

○ Yes
○ No

What is a good email to contact you at?

[_____]

Appendix B: Interview Guide

Interview Questions

For you personally, what does it mean to identify as on the left of the political spectrum?

In the pre-screening questionnaire, you stated that [INSERT RESPONSE] were the most important political issues to you. What about those issues are important to you?

How do you stay politically active in your everyday life? How might that vary in certain circumstances (e.x., an election year)?

In the pre-screening questionnaire, you stated that you were [INSERT GENERAL, PERSONAL, AND POLITICAL OPINIONS OF WAR]. What do you make of the differences between those opinions?

Why do you play *Call of Duty?* Are there parts of the franchise that you particularly like or dislike?

Have you played other first-person shooter games before? What did you like or dislike about those?

Apart from those, what other video games do you like to play? Why do you play those?

You stated that your favorite *Call of Duty* games were [INSERT SURVEY RESPONSES]. What do you like about those?

What do you understand the general story of your favorite *Call of Duty* game to be?

Confronting them: how do you reconcile your political commitments and beliefs with the game? (be specific)

- **The story line of [INSERT FAVORITE *CALL OF DUTY* GAME] is [INSERT STORY LINE OF FAVORITE *CALL OF DUTY* GAME]. How does playing this story line contradict your previous response to [RELEVANT POLITICAL OPINION]?**

- **Are you aware of these contradictions?**

- **What do you feel when you consider these contradictions?**

- **How do you reconcile these contradictions?**

Appendix 3: Survey Results

Survey Results, Political Opinions

Name	Political Labels	Pacifist?	Issues of Importance	Politically active?	Iraq War	Afghanistan War	War on Terror
Nate	Left-wing, Other: "I don't use labels, I find they restrict one's world view."	Maybe	Women's rights, racism, capitalism, LGBTQ+ rights, environmentalism	Probably yes	The US was not justified in invading Iraq.	The US was not justified in invading Afghanistan.	It was necessary that the US enter the War on Terror. The War on Terror is over.
Ghost	Left-wing, Liberal, Democratic, Democratic Socialist	Yes	Women's rights, immigration, xenophobia, health inequity, environmentalism	Probably yes	The US was not justified in invading Iraq.	The US was justified in invading Afghanistan, but the war went on for too long.	It was necessary that the US enter the War on Terror. The War on Terror should still be fought today.
Price	Democratic Socialist	Yes	Racism, capitalism, environmentalism	Definitely yes	The US was not justified in invading Iraq.	The US was not justified in invading Afghanistan.	It was not necessary that the US enter the War on Terror.
Bob	Democratic	Maybe	Women's rights, immigration, racism, social justice, LGBTQ+ rights	Probably not	I don't know enough to have an opinion.	The US was justified in invading Afghanistan, but the war went on for too long.	I don't know enough to have an opinion.
Carl	Left-wing, Liberal, Leftist, Socialist	Yes	Women's rights, racism, social justice, LGBTQ+ rights, health inequity	Probably yes	The US was not justified in invading Iraq.	The US was justified in invading Afghanistan, but the war went on for too long.	It was not necessary that the US enter the War on Terror.
Rat	Left-wing	Yes	Women's rights, environmentalism	Probably yes	The US was not justified in invading Iraq.	The US was not justified in invading Afghanistan.	It was not necessary that the US enter the War on Terror.
Gilbert	Left-wing, Liberal, Leftist, Socialist, Democratic Socialist	Yes	Women's rights, racism, capitalism, LGBTQ+ rights, environmentalism	Probably yes	The US was not justified in invading Iraq.	The US was not justified in invading Afghanistan.	It was not necessary that the US enter the War on Terror.

Survey Results, *Call of Duty (CoD)* **Behaviors**

Name	*CoD* Play Time	*CoD* Console(s)	Favorite *CoD* game(s)	Favorite *CoD* modes
Nate	0-5 hours per week	XBox, Personal Computer	*Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007), *Call of Duty: World at War* (2008), *Call of Duty: Black Ops III* (2015), *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019)	Multiplayer, Campaign
Ghost	6-10 hours per week	Personal Computer	*Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019), *Call of Duty: Warzone* (2020)	Multiplayer, Warzone, Campaign
Price	0-5 hours per week	XBox, Personal Computer, Mobile Phone	*Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (2009), *Call of Duty: Black Ops II* (2012), *Call of Duty: Black Ops III* (2015), *Call of Duty: WWII* (2017), *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019)	Multiplayer, Campaign
Bob	0-5 hours per week	Personal Computer, Mobile Phone	*Call of Duty: Black Ops II* (2012), *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019)	Multiplayer, Campaign
Carl	0-5 hours per week	XBox	*Call of Duty: Black Ops II* (2012)	Multiplayer, Zombie
Rat	0-5 hours per week	Personal Computer	*Call of Duty: Black Ops* (2010)	Multiplayer
Gilbert	6-10 hours per week	XBox	*Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007), *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (2009), *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (2010), *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (2011), *Call of Duty: Black Ops II* (2012), *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019), *Call of Duty: Warzone* (2020), *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II* (2022)	Multiplayer, Warzone