The Developing World's Depiction in the *Battlefield* and *Call of Duty* Video Game Series. Does It Replicate the Stereotypical Image?

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyze how the Third World is presented in the highly popular Battlefield *and* Call of Duty *video game series and whether the games replicate the Global South's stereotypical image. In the introduction, the term "stereotype" is defined, countries or regions to be considered "developing" are distiguished, and the choice of video games to be examined in the study is made. Then, the content of the chosen games is analyzed in order to find elements of the environment that are represented, the sides of the depicted conflicts, their place and background, as well as playable characters and enemies. In the conclusion, the developing world's depiction is compared to the already existing sterotypes in order to decide to what extent and in what aspects video games repeat them.*

Keywords: developing world, stereotype, video game, call of duty, battlefield

Introduction

In recent years, video games have become one of the most important and fastest developing media in the world, even though the video game market is difficult to estimate due to its decentralised character. Nonetheless, the wide and still growing popularity of video games is an undeniable fact, and the *Battlefield* and *Call of Duty* series are among the best known of them. The rising importance of virtual entertainment raises interest of scientists within different disciplines, although game studies are the discipline that focuses primarily on games. Research at first concentrated on the ethnographic aspect of games. In the mid-20th century it began to focus more on differences of forms of games and play. Recently, video games became the main object of study for game studies, and it's only at the end of the last century that this field of research has become a part of a fully autonomous science (Juul 2005, 9–11).

Geography and video games

The author is interested in a geographical approach to the content of video games. There is a vast range of topics concerning games interesting for geographers. In the article about research on video games in human geography, James Ash and Leslie Ann Gallacher divided them into three main categories. The first, geographies in video games, studies "the ways in which videogames represent people, places and concepts," the second, geographies of videogames, concentrates on "aspects of production and consumption," and the last, videogames as cultural geographies, takes into account the interactions between the "real" and the "virtual" world and different experiences in both of them (Ash and Gallacher 2011, 355–362).

The present article fits squarely into the first category by concentrating on the geographic environment in video games and the stereotypical images in them, while at the same time being a part of the broader research on stereotypes in digital entertainment. Geographers, as well as other researchers interested in this subject, study different manifestations of stereotyped depictions of

gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, nationality or ethnicity (e.g., al-Rawi 2008; Saleem and Anderson 2013; Wohn 2011). However, research on images of the developing world as a whole is almost non-existent.

The "developing world"

The notion "developing world" is used, alongside others such as "developing countries" or "Third World countries," to describe the poorest countries or regions in the world, where the standard of living is relatively low. In the case of this study, using the general term "developing world" seems more appropriate than speaking about specific countries, as it is sometimes impossible to locate exactly the place where the game's action takes place or because the geographical names are fictional.

Without entering too deeply into differences between these notions,[1] for the purposes of this paper the term "developing world" will indicate the regions that are considered "Emerging Markets and Developing Economies" by the International Monetary Fund. In total, there are six such regions: the Commonwealth of Independent States; Emerging and Developing Asia; Emerging and Developing Europe; Latin America and the Carribean; Middle East, North Africa, Afghanistan and Pakistan; and Sub-Saharan Africa (World Economic Outlook. April 2014. Recovery Strengthens, Remains Uneven 2014, 161–163).

Defining stereotypes

The term "stereotype" has numerous definitions that put emphasis on the inflexible and possibly erroneous character of stereotypes, but McGarty, Yzerbyt and Spears propose a more complex point of view by pointing out three main principles that help to understand them: they help people to categorize concepts, make this categorizing easier for the limited capacities of the human mind, and are shared by a group of people (McGarty, Yzerbyt, and Spears 2002, 2–6). That allows us to see stereotypes as something more than just negative and simplified mental images: they are, in fact, a natural human reaction to the complexity of the world.

Stereotypes form a part of popular perception and as such are neither systematized, nor necessarily rational or consistent. Therefore, they require a specific approach. There are two complementary ways to study stereotypes: the first concentrates on the point of view of an individual person, whereas the second takes into account the collective perspective shared by a part of a certain society. In the case of mass media, like video games, it is mainly the second perspective that applies, as they can be considered one of the main sources of transmitting stereotypes to large groups of people (Stangor and Schaller 1996).

Battlefield and *Call of Duty* series: selection of games for the study

Battlefield and *Call of Duty* are two highly successful series of games that belong to the First-Person Shooter genre. Both series are among the best known franchises in the video games industry. The *Battlefield* series is developed by the Swedish company EA Digital Illusions Creative Entertainment AB, whereas *Call of Duty* is co-developed mainly by American developers Infinity Ward, Treyarch and Sledgehammer Games.

There are several criteria of selection of titles suitable for the analysis. Regarding the content of the games, first of all they have to depict the geographic environment of a part of the developed world. In the second place, the game has to present a plausible image of the reality, one that can be associated with what the world may look like in the present or in the near future. For this reason the games that are set in the past, in the distant future or in a setting too different from reality will not be taken into account. The analyzed games may, however, be set in an alternate timeline.

In addition to the above criteria, only the single player campaign mode in primary installments of the games (i.e., the base versions without the expansion packs) are analyzed, and only these that have been released for personal computers or home consoles, which means that handheld consoles or mobile phone versions are not taken into account.

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1. For more information about the different terms used to describe the poorest parts of the world, see for example Solarz (2009) or Escobar (2012).

Methodology

The main method used in the research described in this paper is content analysis. According to its classical definition, it is a "research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication" (Berelson 1952, 18). Broadly speaking, it consists in choosing elements of the content that are interesting for the research and analyzing them. Although the method has been modified in many ways since its appearance and several aspects of the original concepts have been enriched (Riffe, Lacy, and Fico 2014, 18–19), the basic rules formulated by Berelson are still valid: the research must be conducted without influence of the researcher's biases, follow clearly defined procedures and give results that can be expressed as a numerical value. In practice, however, it is virtually impossible for the researcher to achieve complete objectivity (especially in qualitative content analysis), and the purpose of quantitative description is not to substitute other methods of analysis, such as observation, but to complement them by providing objective and measurable values (Wimmer and Dominick 2008, 211–212). Still, despite its limitations, the method allows us to analyze in a systematic way elements of the content of selected video games and subsequently find a solution to the problem addressed in this paper.

Analysis of content of selected *Battlefield* and *Call of Duty* games

Elements of content are grouped in the following three tables. The first one contains brief descriptions of main features of locations in the developing world that appear in the games, with countries in bold and descriptions of different locations separated by semicolons. Backgrounds of conflicts and collective enemies are described in table 2, and table 3 summarizes characteristics of playable characters and the main antagonists.

The locations set in the Middle East, Afghanistan and Pakistan appear as the setting in seven games and their images are diverse, from wealthy cities and well-maintained historical sights, through different natural landscapes to poor, dilapidated towns and villages, and oil-mining facilities are a recurring feature. In the depiction of the Commonwealth of Independent States there is a clear domination of Russia that acts as a setting in five games. Among other countries, Azerbaijan is presented three times, Kazakhstan twice and Georgia once, but they are generally depicted in a more positive way than Russia: especially the Russian countryside is presented as poor, compared with Kazakhstan or the Caucasus region. Exactly like Russia in the CIS, China plays a clearly dominant role within the representations of Emerging and Developing Asia. Its image is diversified, ranging from modern metropolis and industrialized zones to rural areas and natural landscapes, although it is much less present in the games than Russia. The only other countries from the region that appear in the analyzed games are India and Myanmar. The Sub-Saharan Africa is present only in one of the games, but there is a strong contrast between the map set in Sierra Leone, where the area is in a decrepit state, and the relatively well-maintained city of Basoso. Latin America and the Carribean region's role is also rather limited, albeit South America is the setting of most of *Battlefield: Bad Company 2*. Brazil appears in the series only once and only the favelas are shown, while Haiti is set as the location of a modern military facility. At the same time, the Emerging and Developing Europe region is virtually non-existent in the games, with the exception of Pripyat, which is a case apart due to its history.

In conflicts depicted in the analyzed games one of the sides is always the developed world, represented mainly by the USA. The other sides are more diverse: in as many as eight games Russia is one of them (in seven cases at least partly as enemy), six times it is a military force from Middle East, Afghanistan or Pakistan, and twice from China. What draws attention is the violence of African militia in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*, with visible executions of civilians that are supposedly a part of a larger genocide plan, as well as the presence of Western units as enemies: American soldiers who betrayed their country, but also CIA agents and French Gendarmerie in *Battlefield 3* that were unaware of the main characters' undercover mission and saw them as enemies.

From the 27 playable characters that can be identified by distinctive characteristics, 15 are Americans, 7 are British and 3 are Russians. The main antagonists are mainly Russians (in 4 cases), but there is more diversity and among them are also representatives of the West. Among

Tab. 1. Locations in the developing world

Game	Locations in the developing Word
Battlefield 2	• Middle East (3 towns in the desert; wetlands with oil mining infrastructure; industrialized part of Kuwait City; dam in the desert; desert islands) • China (nuclear plant; industrialized area in the mountains; oil fields near a city; river valley in rural area; lowland rural region) • Afganistan/Pakistan (small city in the desert)
Battlefield 2: Modern Combat	• Kazakhstan (industrial, densely built-up city; fortified port; oil platform, island with a military base; mountainous, woodland area, military bases, oil mining infrastructure; coastal zone, fortifications, oil refinery; hilly grassland area, towns with Islamic and socialist architecture)
Battlefield 3	• Iraq (Sulaymaniyah, heavily damaged, modern part: large residential blocks, older part: souks and narrow streets) • Iran (Tehran, mostly modern and well kept, parts run-down and damaged; desert, military base, highway) • Iran/Azerbaijan (river valley, fields, oil extraction infrastructure, hills, mansion)
Battlefield 4	• Azerbaijan (Baku, poor district, derelict school, sea coast, skyscrapers under construction, oil fields, industrial zone, luxurious housing estates) • China (modern tower in Shanghai downtown, skyscrapers, in places neglected alleys, signs of unrest; mountains, heavily fortified prison; Kashgar, run-down, badly damaged buildings, Old Town with Islamic character)
Battlefield: Bad Company	• Caucasus (fictional country of Serdaristan)/Russia (hilly, woodland rural area, military infrastructure; well maintained town, military facilities; oil refinery; cargo port; dictator's palace; stone monastery in the mountains) • Middle East (sandy coastal zone, abandoned resort)
Battlefield: Bad Company 2	• Russia (snow covered mountain valley, military base, abandoned village) • Bolivia (rainforest, river valley, run-down settlements, military base, colonial house) • Argentina (Andes, satellite station; abandoned village; vast mountain valley, grassland, wind turbines) • Chile (Atacama desert, stone fortress, wrecks of ships) • Colombia (rainforest, fields, prison camp; Medellín, slums, destroyed city center)
Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare	• Middle East (small, neglected towns, low brick buildings, military infrastructure) • Azerbaijan (mountains, well-maintained villages, woodlands) • Russia (rural areas, mostly neglected wooden houses, woodlands, fields, mountainous terrain) • Ukraine (the abandoned city of Pripyat)
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2	• Afghanistan (densely built-up city; American aircraft graveyard; American military bases) • Kazakhstan (snow-covered mountains, Russian military base) • Brazil (favela on a hillside) • Russia (airport in Moscow; oil platform; prison in a stone fortress, mountains, taiga; naval base) • Georgia (forest, wooden mansion, military complex)
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3	• India (city in the mountains, Buddhist temples) • Sierra Leone (town in a tropical dry forest, run-down huts, church complex) • Somalia (Bosaso, sandstorm, well-maintained buildings, Islamic architecture) • Russia (diamond mine) • UAE (exclusive hotel)
Call of Duty: Black Ops 2	• Myanmar (temple in the mountains, modern military base) • Pakistan (Lahore, partly flooded, run-down commercial street, stronghold) • Yemen (small, well-maintained city, Islamic architecture, rich palace complex) • Haiti (futuristic military base)

Tab. 2. Background of the conflicts and collective enemies

Game	Background of the conflict	Collective enemies
Battlefield 2	Conflict between China, the Middle East Coalition and a coalition formed by USA, EU and Russia, possibly for natural resources	USA, EU and Russia/China/ the Middle East Coalition
Battlefield 2: Modern Combat	War between NATO and China after mutual accusations of war crimes provoked by an international terrorist organisation	Terrorist organization of unknown origin
Battlefield 3	2014, coup in Iran provoked by a Lebanese agent, successful American invasion in the Middle East, plans of terrorist attacks in Paris and New York to trigger a war between USA and Russia	Iranian insurgents, Russia, French Gendarmerie, CIA agents
Battlefield 4	2020, tension between USA and Russia, coup in China, coalition between Russia and China against USA	Chinese subverters, Russia
Battlefield: Bad Company	Conflict between USA and Russia, a group of soldiers trying to steal gold that belongs to mercenaries	Russia, international mercenaries, Middle Eastern Coalition
Battlefield: Bad Company 2	Continuation of war between USA and Russia, search for a new weapon of mass destruction by both sides, Russian invasion on USA	Russia
Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare	2011, ultranationalists' coup in Russia resulting in a civil war, separatist coup in the Middle East	Middle East insurgents, Russian ultranationalists
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2	2016, ultranationalists rule in Russia, tensions between Russia and the West, an attack in Moscow blamed on USA, Russian invasion on USA	Russian ultranationalists, Islamic militia, Brazilian favela gangs, American defectors
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3	Europe invaded by Russia, the war ends with a truce	Russian ultranationalists, African militia
Call of Duty: Black Ops 2	Tensions between USA and China stirred up by a global populist organization	Militia of an international populist organization, Afghan Mujahideen, Pakistani and Yemeni forces

Tab. 3. Playable characters and main antagonists

Game	Playable characters	Main antagonists
Battlefield 2	Anonymous soldiers from the three sides of the conflict	None
Battlefield 2: Modern Combat	Anonymous NATO and Chinese soldiers	Leader of a terrorist organization
Battlefield 3	3 Americans, 1 Russian	Lebanese agent
Battlefield 4	American	Chinese general
Battlefield: Bad Company	American	Leader of mercenaries
Battlefield: Bad Company 2	American	Russian scientist
Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare	2 British, 1 American	Russian ultranationalists' leader, Middle Eastern general
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2	2 British, 2 Americans	Russian ultranationalists' leader, American general
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3	3 British, 2 Americans, 2 Russians	Russian ultranationalists' leader, Somali leader of militia
Call of Duty: Black Ops 2	4 Americans, 1 Yemeni, 1 Nicaraguan	Nicaraguan narco-terrorist, British commander of mercenaries, Afghan leader of Mujahideen

the playable characters, 25 are men and 2 are women. In all cases when it is possible to recognize the race, it is Caucasian.

Conclusion

In the ten analyzed games, different parts of the developing world appeared both as settings of the story and origin of active participants of the events. In total, in some parts the environment of the developing world is represented in a stereotypical way, like favelas in Brazil, desert in the Middle East or dilapidated huts in an African tropical forest. Nevertheless, the game developers are visibly trying to diversify the landscape, which helps to avoid stereotyped images. It is worth mentioning that such places as military bases, airports, hotels or mines, that lack distinctive features and are similar in the developing and the developed world, representing thus what Marc Augé called "non-places," are a recurrent element of space present in the games.

What is clearly visible, though, is that locations, and especially cities situated in the developed world are depicted in a way that is much more faithful to reality: in New York, Paris or London large parts of the metropolis are based on their real-life counterparts, whereas in Medellín, Lahore or Tehran there is hardly any recognizable element of the city. Such difference is by no means surprising, as players from the developed world are in a vast majority and while many of them may recognize the former locations, in most cases they may not know much about the latter. Arguably, realistic depictions of the developing world may contain an educational factor, but would also be time-consuming, expensive and economically unjustified for developers. Still, with the possibilities given by satellite imaging and the increasingly complex GIS tools, it seems likely that in the future different parts of the world will be rendered in a similarly detailed way.

However, examining stereotypes about the developing world in games cannot be limited to its spatial representation, as the conventionalized ideas are perhaps even more prevalent in the way its inhabitants are shown. The fact that almost all of the individual playable characters are white males from either the USA, Great Britain or Russia—only in the recent *Call of Duty: Black Ops 2* this pattern is more visibly modified—sets a perspective which makes a clear distinction between "us" (the subjects, the West, the "good guys") and "them" (the objects, the rest of the world, the "bad guys"). With the exception of Russia and China, which are important military and economic powers, the developing world is reduced to being either the enemy or, more often, a passive locale where the active geopolitical powers fight their wars.

At the same time, the Western world is shown mostly as the side that is attacked by outsiders or the one that attacks for justified reasons. This makes the depiction of conflicts in games similar to the one present in other Western media, especially after the September 11 attacks. It is noteworthy that after the year 2001 games about present-day conflicts, and among them the two analyzed series, became very popular. In these games, stereotypes appear in the context of dichotomy between "us" and "them" and may have an important impact on the players' perception, as the interactivity of games gives a feeling of immersion and there is a strong element of player identification with the main playable characters (Hefner, Klimmt, and Vorderer 2007). It would be interesting to continue the research by studying directly users' impressions of the developing world presented in the games.

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