

SOME BRIEF THOUGHTS ON *WARZONE* AND THE WAR IN DONBAS

Sam Malabre

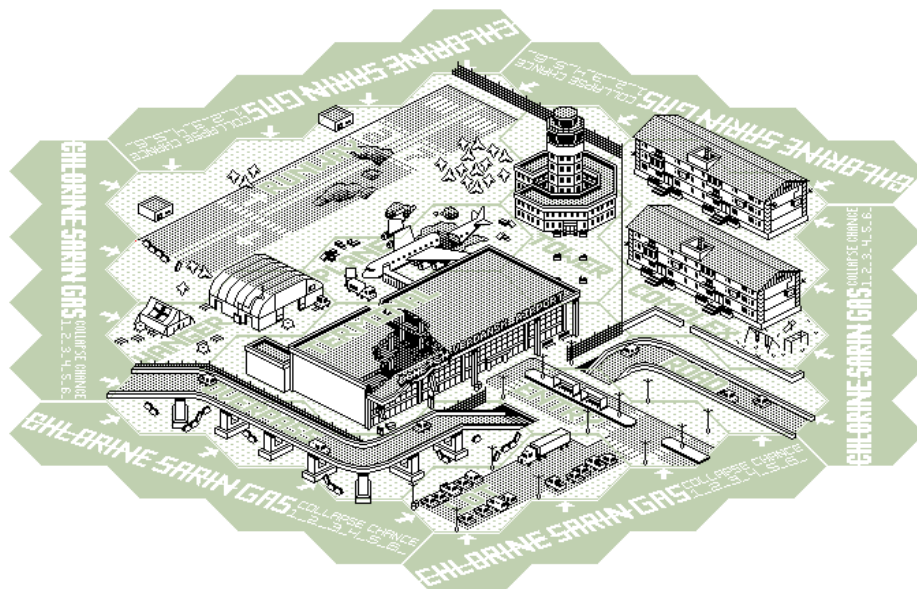
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Sam Malabre (they/them) is a UCLA Game Lab Staff Member and Lecturer within the Design Media Arts program whose work contends with United States imperialism, escapist fantasy and points in which they intersect. “Some Brief Thoughts on *Warzone* and the War in Donbas” (2021) is an essay written prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine that explores the commodification and rewriting of war histories, contemporary wars and warzones within U.S. AAA video games, specifically *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019) and its multiplayer mode *Warzone* (2020). Beyond slight edits, additional footnotes and a brief afterword, the content of this piece has not since been altered.

This essay was submitted as part of their MFA graduate thesis *Modern Wargames* (2022), which contextualizes their game *A Modern Wargame* as an anti-imperialist interrogation of U.S. military action and the warmongering narratives inherent in the text and paratext of contemporary wargames, most notably the *Call of Duty* franchise. As the war in Ukraine rages on and the violence of U.S. imperialism is felt with fresh wounds, Malabre’s dissection of popular war video games that regurgitate real war atrocities in the guise of fun becomes more relevant than ever.

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1 On *Warzone*

When I started making *A Modern Wargame*, a role-playing game that recreates the *Warzone* battle royale mode of *Call of Duty (CoD): Modern Warfare*, I under-estimated the capacity for revisionism and atrocity exhibitionism a bunch of Los Angeles headquartered war nerds¹ hopped up on Game Fuel, Vice News video dispatches, and a healthy dose of U.S. Marine Corps support could accomplish. While the developers' claim that the game is a serious meditation on modern warfare is dubious enough with its campaign mode featuring Russian Colonel Kurtz-s, a fictional Middle Eastern country called "Urzikstan," friendly CIA hunks, and no-knock raids where you only get to kill the "right" civilians.² Any pretense completely falls away in *Warzone* where these game elements are repurposed as fun, game-gimmicks in a multiplayer mode meant to cash in on a battle-royale trend and fuel an absurdly profitable micro-transaction market. It is hard to retain any semblance of serious when your game uses encroaching green chemical weapon cloud to incentivize players to shoot each other in tighter and tighter quarters and the Tier-one operators³ are flinging themselves around a sandbox map with infinite parachutes, gathering shiny loot drops and performing bouncy sniper rifle trick shots.

Warzone is set in the capital city of the fictional, formerly Soviet nation of Kastovia, Verdansk, that is invaded by the terrorist group Al-Qatala, with the

¹The "war nerd" descriptor is credited to poet John Dolan, who for a time wrote 'war reviews' for the *eXile Magazine* as Gary Brecher the war nerd, a fictional data entry clerk from Fresno, California.

²the terrorists deviously pretending to be civilians

³whose professionalism the game hopes to represent

backing of a rogue, Russian nationalist arms dealer. A shaky alliance of NATO,⁴ Russian special forces, and private military contractors counterinvade Verdansk, evacuating civilians. However, when Al-Qatala uses chemical weapons in response, the operators of the various factions within this alliance are forced against each other. The supposed story of this game mode contains all of *CoD*'s classic problematics: the obsession setting its battlefield in former Soviet nations, the off-camera atrocities against Russian civilians,⁵ the assertion that an actor with ties to the Russian military is working with an Al-Qaeda analogue.⁶ These problematics are worsened by the fact that they are being used to facilitate a purely escapist game-type recently incorporated in a zombie-mode. While worthy of critique, these elements are not unique to this installment of *CoD*, nor to this first-person shooter (FPS) franchise specifically. That being said, all is recontextualized by the additional fact that Verdansk is not a fictional place but is alternatively named in the game files as Donetsk [Ger20].

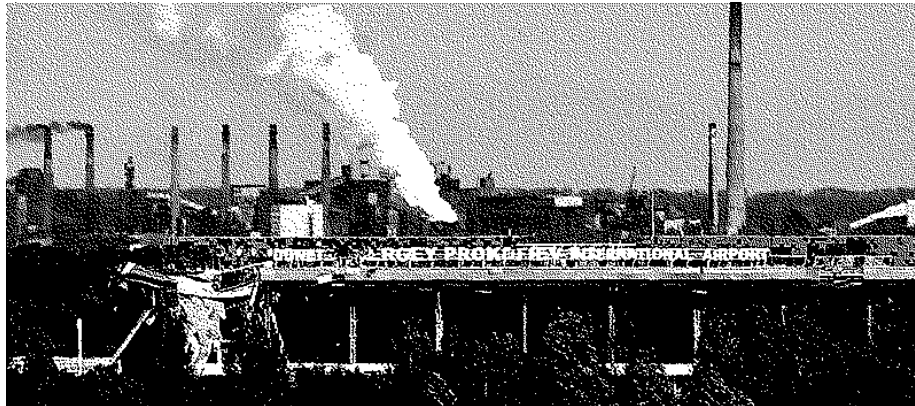


Figure 1: Donetsk Sergei Prokofiev International Airport from a Voice of America newsarticle.

⁴with the serial numbers filed off

⁵the Verdansk multiplayer maps were listed as being in Russia in the game's alpha release

⁶when the reality is quite the opposite



Figure 2: Verdansk International Airport from a *Warzone* loading screen.

Since 2014, Donetsk has been on the frontlines of the War in Donbas as the U.S. backed Ukraine has fought to retake control of the city and self-declared Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) from separatists. Now, I write this as in no way an expert on the War, but I also did not make a game that earned me almost \$20 billion (USD) in revenue set in Donetsk. What I can say is that the War in Donbas has killed thirteen thousand (13,000) people, over three thousand (3,000) of them civilians — the vast majority of those in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The U.S.,⁷ where both the *CoD* developers and I reside, has supported and prolonged this war, giving both lethal and non-lethal aid to Ukraine. This support has been used against the people living in Donetsk, shelling homes and hospitals. I can also say with confidence that what the U.S. and NATO decidedly did not do was rush into Donetsk with helicopters to evacuate everyone at the first sign of trouble so both sides could have a fun battle royale in the depopulated city. Additionally, I can say with confidence that the people of Donetsk and the DNR itself, while called terrorists by the Ukrainian government, are not affiliated with Al-Qaeda in any way, shape or form.

Historical revisionism in *Warzone*’s Verdansk⁸ is bad enough, but it is the process of this revisionism that I wish to examine here. The Donetsk of *Warzone* is not just the name of the map in the game’s files but is the visual inspiration for the map itself. Key landmarks of Donetsk are painstakingly recreated for the *Warzone* map. Donetsk Seri Prokofiev International Airport, demolished by some of the most brutal fighting during the war. The Donbas Arena, though in the game, its open roof is enclosed.⁹ Superstores, small banks and who knows how many apartment buildings and homes¹⁰ all ripped from the streets of Donetsk. Oddly, the Verkhovna Rada building of Ukraine’s Parliament is

⁷with NATO allies

⁸can it be called historical revisionism when the war and US support for it is still ongoing?

⁹so, it could be opened during a later-season game event

¹⁰whose slight alterations would make it hard to identify particular analogues

transplanted from Kyiv into Donesk and turned into a bank. Largely, none of these buildings bear the marks of destruction from the on-going War in Donbas nor the millions of battle royale matches that will virtually take place. The most obvious of these is the Donetsk Airport where the *Warzone* version, though damaged by a crash plane, pales in comparison to the state of the real airport, which was reduced to a pile of concrete and steel beams due to the near constant fighting.

In the making of *A Modern Wargame*, I attempt to recreate *Warzone* and its development process. Because the developers chose to set their game in Donetsk, I felt it necessary to research the current War in Donbas. I found myself watching five hours of *Vice* dispatches on the Ukrainian Revolution and the War in Donbas [Vic18], a documentary on the battle for the Donetsk Airport with support from the commander of Ukraine’s 93rd brigade [Guz20], and footage shot by fighters on both sides of the conflict cut together by various Youtube war nerds.¹¹ I had the realization that the developers of *Warzone*, sitting at their desks in Encino, probably watched all the same footage, too, likely farm more of it than I did.

2 The Cost of “Realism”

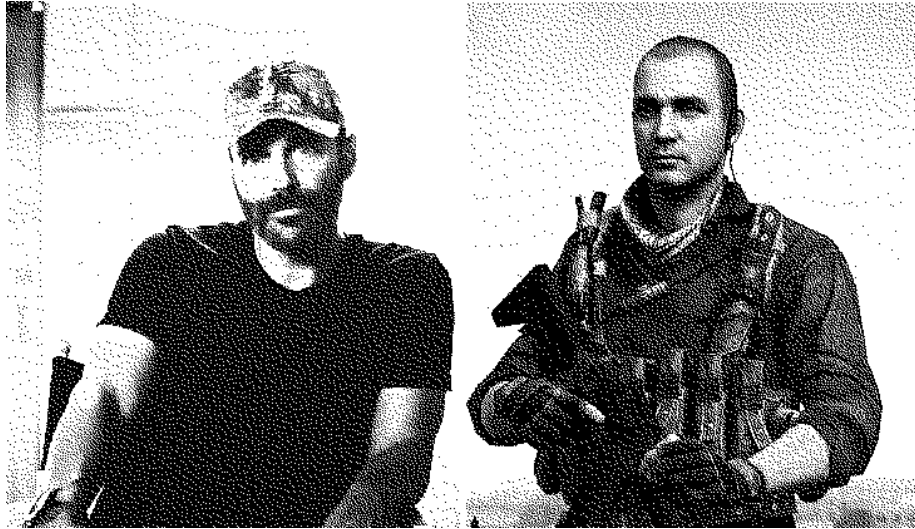


Figure 3: Left: Brian Bloom, a writer for *Modern Warfare* who also worked as a voice and motion capture actor in previous series installments. He also works as a use of force trainer for the police, military and private security personnel. Right: Yuri, from *Modern Warfare 3*, a character played by Bloom.

¹¹For an example of these footage compilations, see [Vei17].

As big budget AAA games strive towards greater levels of realism, developers draw from real photo and video references to produce assets with higher fidelity and accuracy. Artists and animators working on violent games such as *Call of Duty* need to watch videos of real killings, dismemberments, hangings, etcetera repeatedly to ensure that they have gotten whatever gruesome animation or model just right [Waw15, Ste20]. Developers have reported the serious toll it takes on their mental health.

The producers for a model used in an award-winning advertisement campaign for *Halo 3*, said they drew from images of Afghanistan to make the model accurate [Adi07]. This is after the lead writer on *Halo 2* came under fire for saying that the last installment of the series could be interpreted as allegorically about the War on Iraq, rolling back these statements amid backlash [Voo14]. It appears that to AAA game companies, video games can draw visual reference and promote themselves on the back of U.S. led wars, but they certainly are not about them.

Though I do not know whether the *CoD* developers found themselves watching the same videos I did, I do not think it is unlikely. By any developers' accounts, the painstaking re-creation of in-game environments is no easy task, and huge amounts of visual references are needed. If they did watch the Vice coverage,¹² all they took from it is the aesthetics of the environment. Families torn apart by war and returning to their destroyed apartments; skeleton crew fire fighters, waiting for the inevitable call after that afternoon's artillery barrage; the Director of Donetsk Morgue and his volunteer staff and the twelve hundred (1,200) bodies they are working to identify are all not present in *CoD*'s virtual Donetsk and the realism they proport.

The point is not that the game ought to be more accurate, but to understand what would likely be part of the development process. In representing what ends up in-game, many people involved might have viewed, many times, all the realities that are left out of *Warzone*'s Verdansk. What is left in, conforms to a particular understanding of a place that the U.S. has a colonial interest in retaining in its sphere of influence. What remains in the game is not only what is useful for a FPS battle royale: the buildings and infrastructure with their varied heights, their cover and the shooting galleries between them. But that is also what the U.S. wants for Donetsk, the best city for business in Ukraine, as determined by *Forbes* in 2012. The developers also seem to retain what they find cool or aesthetically pleasing. In another revision, the Chimera Faction¹³ features the logo of the Azov Battalion [Par21], a Ukrainian Neo-Nazi battalion, now officially part of the National Guard of Ukraine, and supported by U.S. arms and training.

Though this kind of revisionism is important, it is this process whereby the images of U.S. supported war are revised and repackaged as an entertainment product, that I am trying to address in my work. There exists a feedback loop where-in a U.S. company can make obscene amounts of money repackaging a

¹²itself with its own problematics

¹³a private military contractor on the fictional Russian side

real place devoid of its real people for a shooting game. That process is not some vague process of militarism, ignorance, and war mongering. It is made up of particular people, particular companies, and particular states with particular interests. By reverse engineering Warzone, I am attempting to place myself within that process to create a speculative map of what takes place between a U.S. backed war, a U.S. military supported game, and the interests of those involved. What takes place between brutal war¹⁴ and a game that the U.S. military wants its E-Sports team to stream as part of a recruitment campaign.

This exploitation of the image of Donetsk shows that first person shooters are not just producing unrealistic visions of war, or even unrealistic promotions of U.S. war generally, but that these processes are shaped by specific interests. The sites of that revisionism are not random but intimately tied into broader processes of U.S. colonialism and capital expansion. Though Warzone offers an unrealistic depiction of U.S. backed war, Warzone itself,¹⁵ which is used as a platform for U.S. military recruitment, offers a pretty realistic image of how U.S. imperialism functions and how U.S. war works.

3 Afterword

Any media about war risks diminishing it, risks trivializing it. The war game especially risks turning it into fun, into play, into entertainment. This concern is as old as lead soldiers. Likewise, any media about war risks propagandizing it, risks promoting the narrative of one side to such a degree that it helps to produce more war in the future. The disturbing uniqueness of the modern military first person shooter is that the aesthetic goal of the photo realistic 4k textured war game, requires collaboration with the military and on-going war itself. To produce the fully accurate 4k model of a US military tank, you must get permission to bring your photogrammetry rig onto the base. You must maintain military approval to continue to use its likeness. The production of the digital asset requires the production of the physical tank and requires permission, relationship, and oversight necessary to access it. To create the photorealistic virtual warzone, the US military must be actively turning real places into real warzones, and US media must be photographing them from all angles. The aesthetic goals of *Modern Warfare*, means that in order to render a fictional building burned out by a fictional shell, a real building has to have been hit by a real shell. This is the defining quality of the modern military shooter, that real war must be being made to produce its fictions.

¹⁴that the U.S. wants to on some level hide its involvement in

¹⁵a product representing a site of U.S. backed war, made by developers watching footage from U.S. media, and generating immense profits for a U.S. based company

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