

CALL OF DUTY: HOW TOXICITY CONTINUOUSLY POISONS THE MINDS OF ITS PLAYERS

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ABSTRACT

New multiplayer video games have risen in popularity with many features increasing the accessibility of communication in its diverse community. However, the structure of these games creates a platform for the cycle of discrimination by providing an inconsequential space for the dominant player group: straight white men. We look at examples of minimally moderated communication, character design, game layout, and marketing campaigns in *Call of Duty* (CoD) to argue how discriminatory behavior is reinforced in a developed subculture. In this paper, we use the feminist and critical race theories, focusing on Johan Huizinga's theory of the magic circle: a social contract between players with rules in a subspace that is separate from reality. Within the game, an insult is not offensive and instead becomes normalized vocabulary. Through this, CoD problematically reinforces prejudice against people of color and women in the real world, revealing the underlying assumptions and biases of the developers and players towards certain notions of gender and race. We argue that online multiplayer game spaces blur the lines of the magic circle and the players' view of gender and race is shaped, not from a modern or open-minded perspective, but instead from the rules of a videogame's subculture.

Keywords: Magic Circle Theory, Feminist Theory, Critical Race Theory, Video Games, Discrimination, Call of Duty, Slang

I. Introduction

Yelling, slurs, and insults. Those are some things you might encounter in some video game lobbies. But in a Call of Duty lobby, you might experience this hate even more if you are a minority. First-person shooter games like CoD have risen in popularity dramatically in the past

two decades, providing places for new methods of communication for a wider audience. However, this genre has stirred up a controversy with the popularization of discrimination and the normalization of targeted hate. Through the close examination of a popular video game of the twenty-first century, CoD has garnered much public attention from a teenage demographic. Through the game's inherent need to play in a team-based environment, toxic interactions between players are a common problem that much of the community has been hurt by. In this paper, we determine how CoD has been used as a platform that normalizes the oppression of minority player groups through its marketing campaigns and game design/layout. We analyze multiple case studies of the CoD online community through in-game chat, voice channels, and a lawsuit revolving around Blizzard Entertainment. With these examples, we investigate players' identities online which are cultivated through their interaction with other players leading to a glorified discriminatory culture. This virtual animosity causes one's actions to lack consequences, as insults are carelessly used and behavior is poorly moderated. In turn, this allows us to dissect these practices through the magic circle theory and its concepts of a new reality with new rules and expectations. Additionally, we pull from many authors who discuss feminist and critical race theories to understand the behaviors of CoD toxic players displayed in our chosen examples. Women, people of color, and any other category not of the white, heterosexual, able-bodied male group are marginalized evidently in the language, trends, and game mechanics. Many studies have previously focused on the violent actions that are a result of video game graphics and playstyles. However, we seek to determine the larger cultural significance of the problematic assumptions held by developers and players which perpetuate the perspective of the dominant player class. So, we specifically examine verbal and mechanistic examples of discrimination that can unconsciously contribute to this power dynamic. While playing these new exciting games, players may not take time to consider the larger frameworks of biases that they unintentionally normalize. Unfortunately, video games have become popularized in younger generations which exposes them to this subculture created by games like CoD. First-person shooter games that often include toxicity may trigger the use of language appropriated by more extreme gamers. From CoD to Fortnite and other online multiplayer games, the culture of many shooter-oriented games continues to spread this mindset further than ever before.

II. Literature Review

In hopes of deepening our understanding in our topic and research question, we use sources related to our case study as well as sources that further our knowledge in cultural analysis. Due to this, we split our sections into sources revolving around the theoretical lenses that we analyze our case study through, such as the magic circle theory, feminist theory, and critical race theory. Then, we group our other section as they help us understand more about video games and

discrimination prevalent in them. They tie together because this connection reveals the continuation of discrimination within the framework of society.

A. Theoretical lenses

Our paper specifically focuses on the videogame *CoD*, however, we first must explore previous texts which help conceptualize video games in a cultural context and explain systems of oppression. The origins of our current analyses of video games comes from a book written by Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*¹, where the concept of the magic circle was first created. However, the book was not written in a time period where video games existed, meaning the case study and objects that Huizinga wrote about were games that children played at the time such as tag or hide and seek. In the book, Huizinga highlights the importance of play within life and within human behavior as a whole. He divides the book into how play can shape certain aspects of society which strengthens our foundational knowledge on the subject. By understanding how the magic circle concept has either stabilized or changed throughout the years or through different mediums, we further our insight on how the concept connects to encouragement of discrimination seen in our case study.

Additionally to increase our understanding of discrimination, we utilized feminist theory sources by finding prior schools of thought. The first being a chapter written by Laura Mulvey *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*² where she discusses the representation of gender and power dynamics in classical Hollywood cinema. Although she focuses on a psychoanalytic lens, the power structures she reveals critique the patriarchy and its domination over women which can be used for a feminist argument. One of her main points outlines the place of women in film when they are objectified as the audience may engage with scopophilic or narcissistic pleasures. Through voyeurism and the fantasy of watching a woman in her private moments, it depicts her as the object of a male viewer's desires and a performer for their needs. This all contributes to the "male gaze" which reinforces the superiority of male viewers over the objectified female figures. This concept applies to our research as the design of these female avatars and characters in video games are marketed to a male audience, often resulting in the sexual objectification of women. Whether in character design, game mechanics, or in advertisements, this theory helps us expose underlying assumptions that create a platform of discrimination within *CoD*.

We also used sources discussing critical race theory. One such source was a journal published by

¹ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949).

²Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (October 1, 1975): 804, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-14428-0_27.

Paula Braveman, Elaine Arkin, Dwayne Proctor, Tina Kauh, and Nicole Holm, named *Systemic And Structural Racism: Definitions, Examples, Health Damages, And Approaches To Dismantling*³. In this article, systemic racism is described as a hidden force that perpetuates discriminatory values. Rather than being limited to individual hatred, systemic racism is rooted into the framework of our society, causing discrimination to be accepted as the norm. This was used to outline the connection between the “ok” trend and the critical race theory, in which systemic racism is related to. It describes how the racism hidden in the “ok” trend is an example of systemic racism, since it reinforces discriminatory behavior in the CoD community. But at the same time, that toxicity is disguised within the lighthearted nature of the trend, being normalized as a non-offensive joke.

B. Discrimination within video games

Along with the sources helping our understanding of our theoretical lenses, we also utilize sources that relate to our case study and topic itself. Specifically we look at a book written by Jennifer deWinter and Carly A. Kocurek, called *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*⁴. This book examines the intersectionality of certain representations in gender, race, or sexuality as seen in video games and how those aspects can provide understanding for the role that video games play in identity. Although this book does dive into those social categories, we mainly focus on the gender discrimination experience with this book. This section revolves around the experiences of women players and the lack or incorrect representation of them in game. In one particular instance, there is a mention of an experience of a female player in *CoD* in which we use as evidence of discrimination against minorities in player interactions. We use this specific example to connect the experiences of women players to the video game’s lack of support for women as the community instead objectifies and sexualizes them.

Changing our focus to the subculture that has arisen within the online community of *CoD* itself, we turn to Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz and Dana Mastro’s research journal: *The Effects of the Sexualization of Female Video Game Characters on Gender Stereotyping and Female Self-*

³Paula A. Braveman, Elaine Arkin, Dwayne Proctor, Tina Kauh, and Nicole Holm, “Systemic and Structural Racism: Definitions, Examples, Health Damages, and Approaches to Dismantling,” *Health Affairs* 41, no. 2(2022): 1 <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2021.01394>.

⁴Jennifer deWinter, Carly A. Kocurek, Treaandrea M. Russworm, and Jennifer Malkowski, “Aw Fuck, I Got A Bitch On My Team,” in *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games* (Bloomington, IN, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2017), 61–62.

*Concept*⁵. This source helps us to examine how misogyny has been integrated into the attitudes of the players. It discusses how in video games, men are more likely to condone the sexualization and objectification of female characters. In relation to our study of *CoD*'s community, it relates to the stereotypical views male players hold when it comes to the treatment of women. For instance, many players were discontent over the sexualization of a male character, "Ghost", by female players.

However, the same male players are often shown to accept sexualized designs in female characters, not batting an eye to the revealing portrayal of women in games. This speaks to the misogynistic culture within *CoD*'s community, as shown through their hypocritical criticisms of male sexualization in the game.

III. Methods

Our research observes sexist, racist, and homophobic behavior within *COD*'s open communication systems, and how it reflects underlying discriminatory assumptions about minority groups. To approach this subject, we use procedures framed around the magic circle theory, a term coined by Johan Huizinga in his 1944 study of play in society regarding the creation of a new subspace. He frames the magic circle as a new subspace with new rules and expectations that everyone follows for a shared experience. In our case, this magic circle space provides a distorted sense of reality for players where discriminatory phrases are normalized. Additionally, using the reasoning of feminist and critical race theories, we investigate the extent of discrimination specific to these groups. We examine the underlying biases of *COD*'s player base and how they may manifest due to the safety of anonymity and the lack of consequences within the game's communication system. By observing online hate through this lens, we can better understand how discriminatory behavior is reflected in the game and how that perpetuates larger prejudice in our society.

While many modern video games share commonalities in these toxic trends, we chose to examine *COD* in particular due to two major reasons. For one, the community fostered by *COD*'s player base has built a well-known reputation for toxicity. This is evident through trends, like the "slur speedrun challenge", which became popular on TikTok before moving to YouTube shorts. This trend revolved around testing how fast another player in a *CoD* lobby would insult or say a slur to someone based on their identity. Those testing out this trend not only exposed this discrimination but also capitalized off of the predictable toxicity of *CoD* for content. This

⁵Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz and Dana Mastro, "The Effects of the Sexualization of Female Video Game Characters on Gender Stereotyping and Female Self-Concept," *Sex Roles* 61, no. 11-12 (2009): 811 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-009-9683-8>.

automatic and normalized discrimination is further supported and spread by CoD's popularity. Not only does this encourage discrimination, but it also attracts many players who actively display this behavior to play the game. Unlike its more modern counterparts, COD was developed in 2003, a time when society was less considerate of diverse representation. The societal norms that are reflected in this original player base's values have solidified an online culture that encourages discrimination. Thus, even though the game has stood the test of time for 20 years, the online community's traditional biases against minority groups have not improved.

In particular, we examine the content of game chats, character design, game layout, marketing campaigns, and the lawsuit against Blizzard Entertainment: COD's parent company. By looking at each of these examples, we can identify discriminatory behaviors in player interactions, as well as the player base to which COD markets. Specifically, we examine hateful actions popularized by the community, such as hypocritical criticisms of character sexualization by the male CoD community as well as the "ok" trend. This trend is a hand gesture spread around the CoD community as a symbol of white power. We also identify the game developers' underlying assumptions in order to understand the role they may play in the reinforcement of discrimination manifesting in the principles and rules of COD's distinct culture. Additionally, the lawsuit and controversies with Blizzard Entertainment culminated in the July 28th walkout of many female employees on the basis of sexual harassment. Using this event, and the lawsuits that led to it, we develop a deeper understanding of not only the online community's hateful practices but the prejudiced nature of its creators who designed the game.

IV. Findings / Analysis

In proving that Call of Duty is a platform created and used for the systematic oppression of minority groups we separate our findings and analysis into 3 distinct sections. The first proves the bias of developers and their influence on players through the rules and layout they create. The second defines the player base to which the game appeals. The last section outlines the aspects of CoD's online community that reflect society's values and why they perpetuate problematic behavior.

A. Game layout and developer bias

To be able to fully understand *CoD*'s cultural significance, the role of Blizzard Entertainment and the game itself must first be examined. To start, *CoD* is an online first-person shooter game. It has had many variations, including Co-op survival, battle royale, and multiplayer game modes. Each developed in popularity with standouts in *Call of Duty Warzone Battle Royale* and *Modern Warfare*. Both of these games include similar goals with differing designs and game layouts. The general skill set required for these games is aiming ability, movement skills, and game IQ. More

importantly, when closely examining the layout and structure of these games, its design seems to cater to a specific type of player. The game mechanics and extent of behavior that the rules allow for seem to encourage adoption of prejudiced mindsets. This can be seen in various forms of open communication with hot mics, for example, which allow players to hear the person they've eliminated for a few seconds. *CoD* players could use this time to say encouraging and supportive phrases like "good game" or "nice shot", but they choose to demean their teammates instead. The fact that it is one-sided communication and that one will likely never interact with that person again, gives the person the confidence to be hateful to their fellow players. The duration of this communication also influences game behavior as it only allows for a few words. Words often only have an impact when they are shocking and so players resort to screaming slurs and curse words to get their frustration across. Players are guided to act in discriminatory ways as the game mechanics seem to imply/require the usage of offensive language. Additionally, in *CoD* there is little to no moderation in voice and game chats as consequences are mostly dependent on the reports of fellow players. And even when players report each other there are no lasting consequences impacting the perpetrator's behavior.

Gameplay is guided by the rules and restrictions created by developers and works to lay the foundation for the area separate from reality. When *CoD* is viewed as a magic circle it is clear that its subculture has formed in alignment with *CoD*'s fundamental underlying assumptions towards gender, race, and sexuality. Huizinga understands play as only available when "[t]he rules of a game are absolutely binding and allow no doubt", and when "the rules are transgressed the whole play-world collapses"⁶. The space inside the circle is created when players agree on rules to experience the pleasure of the game. Unfortunately, the rules that are set in place by *CoD* developers manipulate and influence the players' biases which are side effects of engaging in play. Whether through rules set by the choice of voice channel mechanics or even the avatars with the first female playable character being available a decade after *CoD*'s initial release date.⁷ Since this is a virtual game the laws are heavily enforced as they completely take away a player's agency, requiring the act of playing or of complete rejection. To deal with toxicity a player can only scream profanities and insults back, or they may mute the chat altogether. However, this only creates a toxic culture where players are only reinforced by their own viewpoints because they face no in-game or social consequences. Players choosing to engage in the rules set by developers will assume that this hateful culture is normal and even find encouragement and validation from other enablers.

⁶Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949): 11.

⁷Cate Sevilla, "'Call of Duty' Gets Its First Female Soldiers," BuzzFeed, August 15, 2013, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/catesevilla/call-of-duty-gets-its-first-female-soldiers-an>.

The values held by the creator of CoD's circle influence its community and can be seen reflected in its actions.

Blizzard Entertainment has undergone a multitude of sexual harassment lawsuits and on July 28th hundreds of workers protested the poor working conditions and discriminatory treatment of marginalized employees. According to a Guardian article, only 20% of Activision Blizzard's workers were female identifying out of 9,500, and at this protest, they specifically criticized the "frat boy" culture of the company.⁸ In response to allegations company leadership initially denied all claims and eventually had to apologize for their behavior after public pressure forced them to. The creators of *CoD* exhibited unacceptable behavior and this translated their assumptions about gender to the structure of *CoD*. *CoD* provided the platform for players to form communities, however, the rules and assumptions that influence their prejudiced ideologies are coded into the very framework of the game. While this influence may be conscious or unconscious, the biased nature of developers continues to perpetuate a cycle of discrimination made possible through the rules in *CoD*'s magic circle.

B. The players that CoD caters to

However, to better grasp how this toxic cycle continues, it is vital to examine the online community and how the demographic of the player base is shaped by *CoD* itself. The game shares striking similarities with many other first-person shooter(FPS) counterparts, but despite their commonalities, *CoD* in particular, has an infamous reputation for its toxicity. A possible explanation for this phenomenon is the audience that *CoD* targets. After sifting through a handful of advertisements, we found that the vast majority of the casting is played by white actors. In one such ad, called "Surprise", famous celebrities are cast to model players fighting amongst one another in the game. However, out of the assortment of actors brought in, only one is colored while the rest are white men⁹. This marginalized casting choice reflects the well-known culture of discrimination that *CoD* creates. Because the community is constantly fed promotional marketing in which the advertised player base is predominantly white males, it forms the assumption that the people playing the game should fit that category as well. As the dominant class of players does not see any other representation and is rather surrounded by an environment

⁸Dani Anguiano, "Activision Blizzard Employees Walk out over Harassment and 'frat Boy' Culture Allegations,"*The Guardian*, July 28, 2021,<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jul/28/activision-blizzard-walkout-allegations-harassment-frat-boy-cult>
ure#:~:text=Employees%20of%20Activision%20Blizzard%2C%20the,and%20discrimination%20against%20female%20workers.

⁹ "Surprise," October 29, 2012, trailer, 1:08, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pyjicUdj59w>.

of people that are just like them, it gives in to their belief that their behavior is right. Furthermore, another ad called “Discover Your Power” presents the game through the player’s perspective in battle, but there is a random depiction of an unnecessarily sexualized woman in the middle of the advertisement. She does not provide any substantial content to the advertisement and yet the cover image for the video on YouTube is a screenshot of the woman¹⁰. This representation gives the players the belief that sexualizing a woman is acceptable and leads to their sexist comments to other players as it reinforces representation based on the male gaze. This is defined as the male objectification of women that defines them as a means to satisfy the heterosexual male viewer. This power dynamic where women are “the bearer of meaning and not the maker of meaning”, as described by Laura Mulvey in her book “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” continues to perpetuate the oppression of women¹¹. Despite this, the advertisement mentioned before still received almost one million views showing how the ideals encouraged by the advertisement are supported and widely distributed by its demand. With this reputation, players know that *CoD* lobbies are quick to insult or use hateful words, specifically slurs, due to this assumed dominant class of players that compose *CoD*’s demographic: straight white men.

Supporting this assumption, in a 2021 study of different FPS video games, 69% of *CoD*’s player base consisted of male players¹², putting them as the majority. This carries problematic consequences as it reinforces the notion that people of color and non-male genders don’t belong in the *CoD* community, ultimately normalizing the discriminatory language and behavior so commonly seen within the game. Along with that, this video game’s community was originally composed of older players since the first installment of *CoD* was created in 2003 which also explains why a demographic report from 2021 stated that the most popular age group for the video game is 21 - 35 years old¹³. This age group in particular has been known to be involved with older, more conservative ideas, preserving and normalizing that culture within the game. In turn, they create an environment where the new players must adhere to *CoD*’s oppressive

¹⁰ “Official Call of Duty®: Advanced Warfare Live Action Trailer - “Discover Your Power” [ARA-EN],” October 20, 2017, trailer, 1:42, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jm52Q_3i5Fw.

¹¹Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (October 1, 1975): 804, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-14428-0_27.

¹²*Halo Has a Higher Share of Female Players Than CoD and Battlefield*, graph, *Newzoo*, October 14, 2021, https://newzoo.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Newzoo_Overlap_Call_of_Duty_Battlefield_Halo_Players-2048x1152.png.

¹³ Newzoo, Higher Share of Female Players.

community norms. Due to this, *CoD* provides a platform that allows the original player base's values to pass down to this new generation of players. This can be supported by a report from 2023 where there has been a rise in youth generally playing more video games, with the percentage being higher than the percentage of adults playing¹⁴. This increase also ties in with how the second most popular age group playing *CoD* is 10-20 years old¹⁵. The growing target age group supports the idea of a younger generation beginning to adopt the ideals and values of the original player base that fostered a discriminatory culture with hateful speech and slurs. With the normalization, and almost the glorification, of prejudiced practices, the consistent cycle of toxicity continues to the next generation.

C. The online community's behavior

In order to more closely observe the unique culture created by *CoD*, the game community, and their behavior must be given close examination. Across a multitude of communications and player interactions in Call of Duty, the game's community has been known to construct a culture of discriminatory speech, slurs, and actions. One prime example of this was the recently banned hate symbol often used by a wide range of the *CoD* player base. This gesture was an "ok" hand sign used by a player's avatar, mainly used as a way to taunt players after winning games. However, when making the hand sign, the fingers of the avatar would spell out "wp", or "White power", in other words. Aware of the racist connotation, players popularized the symbol and signaled it as a form of tradition after every victory. On top of this, when the game banned the emote, players started the trend, "RIP to the 'okay' gesture", paying their homage to its ban to subtly express support for white power¹⁶. While many players gave momentum to this trend in a lighthearted manner, the insensitivity and racism inherent in its meaning are illustrative in showing the continuation of the systematic oppression within *CoD*'s culture. This gesture is reflective of the Critical Race Theory, which theorizes that racism isn't limited to individual hatred, but is rather intertwined with the social, economic, and political framework of our society. Researchers Gilbert Gee and Annie Ro describe the systemic prejudice inherent in this theory as the base of an iceberg, "[consisting] of the societal systems and structures that expose people of color to health-harming conditions and that impose and sustain barriers to opportunities

¹⁴ "Essential Facts." *Entertainment Software Association*, July 10, 2023, <https://www.theesa.com/2023-essential-facts/>.

¹⁵ Newzoo, Higher Share of Female Players.

¹⁶ Ewan Palmer, "White Supremacist' Ok Hand Gesture Removed from 'call of Duty' Games," *Newsweek*, July 8, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/call-duty-ok-hand-gesture-white-supremacy-1516305>.

that promote good health and well-being”¹⁷. From this perspective, we can observe the prejudiced biases in *CoD*'s player base as an invisible and impactful presence. In the community of *CoD*, the “ok” trend and other toxic behaviors perpetuate discrimination towards minorities, reinforcing a culture of hate.

Through the lens of the magic circle theory, another layer of ideas can be added to this trend to make sense of the racial discrimination it promotes. Using the concept of a new, unrestricted, sense of reality being created within the game, it can be assumed that the distortion may have a link to the overly racist behavior observed. For instance, many players endorsing the “ok” trend would likely deny the fact that they are white supremacists, let alone express that fact in real life. However, that mannerism has become habitual within the game because the magic circle is separate from reality. According to studies conducted by researchers Bernd Remmele and Nicola Whitton, discriminatory behavior in a game is not thought of negatively because it falls within the realm of the principle: “Although it may have negative consequences for the other players it does not threaten to break the magic circle”, and thus, it is commonly condoned¹⁸. In this space, the actions of the players are only pretend, so racist behaviors like the support of white power are naturally accepted as commonplace. This normalization of racist behavior points towards discrimination being integrated into *CoD*'s online community. Because prejudice comes so easily to players within the boundaries of the game, the culture they create ends up incorporating discriminatory bias as a core value within the players. From this incorporation, and many other discriminatory acts, *CoD* has become a place where the systematic oppression of race is accepted, serving as a reflection of our society's tendency to assign and create racial categories.

Although discriminatory values are quite prominent in the behaviors displayed by the *CoD*'s online community in the game, these practices are also evident and exposed outside of the game. These behaviors are glorified and reinforced which ties into how the youth play a part in the values prominent in society as well as their behavior in their everyday life. This can be shown through different mediums that some players have utilized in order to expose the discrimination within the game. One popular trend that showcases this very method would be the “slur speed-runs”, a trend that originated from TikTok but has recently moved to YouTube shorts. This trend revolves around testing how fast a player can receive hate messages on text channels or voice channels based on their race, gender, or sexuality. There are many videos of these time

¹⁷Paula A. Braveman, Elaine Arkin, Dwayne Proctor, Tina Kauh, and Nicole Holm, “Systemic and Structural Racism: Definitions, Examples, Health Damages, and Approaches to Dismantling,” *Health Affairs* 41, no. 2 (2022): 1 <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2021.01394>.

¹⁸ Bernd Remmele and Nicola Whitton, “Disrupting the Magic Circle,” *Psychology, Pedagogy, and Assessment in Serious Games*, January 2013, 4, <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-4666-4773-2.ch006>

challenges with all the hate phrases coming at relatively fast speeds though they all have different results. In one instance specific to a racially motivated remark, the insult is said almost automatically after the tester reveals their identity¹⁹, the time in between most likely being attributed solely to the delay in voice channels. This immediate response to minority players prompts the idea of multiple assumptions and biases that both sides of the exchange may have. The discriminatory intention and words that are involved in the responses seem to be normalized within the community in *CoD* which in turn gives reason as to why the players who test the slur speedrun challenge chose this video game in particular. This trend has not only exposed the biases present in the community but also reinforces the discriminatory and toxic reputation that *CoD* retains.

When discussing discrimination in *CoD*, the topic of gender inequality can't go without mention as well.

Many first-person shooter games, with *CoD* being among the most notorious, are known to have little supervision over the toxicity affecting female players. For instance, one well-loved character in the *CoD* franchise, Ghost, has recently been appealing to the female side of the game community. Across social media platforms like Instagram, Tiktok, and Youtube, edits of Ghost were being posted in a sexualized way, highlighting the "vaguely sexual remarks" female *CoD* players have made of him²⁰. However, what caused controversy was the reaction male players had towards this trend. Immediately after the surge of edits gained popularity, the male side of the community responded in backlash, claiming that Ghost has no place in being sexualized. The problem with this claim doesn't lie in its validity, but rather, in its hypocrisy. Female characters in *CoD*, such as Valeria Garza, and many others in the same game genre (i.e. D.VA, Kai'sa, Viper, Morgana, Jinx, etc.), are blatantly oversexualized to appeal to the male gaze, essentially the downplaying of women as objects to be desired, and receive no such criticism in design. This one-sided denunciation of character sexualization can be troublesome because it normalizes the objectification of women in *CoD*. A study conducted by Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz and Dana Mastro on gender stereotyping in video games reveals that "men are more likely to report greater adherence to gender stereotypes and to condone the stereotype-consistent treatment of women"²¹.

¹⁹ Silksheets. "CoD Slur Speedrun World Record! (Sub 0.5 Secs!) | Original Creator #Shorts," March 19, 2021, 0:11, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJuZV6HzwIc>.

²⁰ Nadia Talanker, "Op-Ed: Playing Call of Duty and Reveling in Sexism," *Upstream News*, December 13, 2022, <https://cvhsnews.org/12062/opinion/call-of-duty-a-shameless-display-of-sexism/>.

²¹ Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz and Dana Mastro, "The Effects of the Sexualization of Female Video Game Characters on Gender Stereotyping and Female Self-Concept," *Sex Roles* 61, no. 11–12 (2009): 811 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-009-9683-8>.

Clearly, this reveals the discriminatory notions of *CoD*'s male demographic. They shun women for sexualizing a beloved male character, while many of them are simultaneously accepting of female sexualization among women avatars. This inequality can be better understood through Feminist Theory, which uses theoretical concepts to investigate the nature of gender disparity. A 5-stage model of this theory states that systematic oppression works against differences in gender, ultimately creating discrimination²². Through this outlook, we can infer that the hypocritical take that male gamers hold is reflective of their inner discriminatory desires. These desires have worked into the framework of *CoD*'s culture, perpetuating prejudiced practices, like the objectification of female characters, to persist. By showing how they are completely accepting of the objectification of female characters, we can theorize that the culture of the *CoD* player base is advocative of this misogyny to an extent.

With the advancements in communication and technology, these discriminatory values can spread to a larger audience. *CoD* may be played for leisure but gameplay can also be displayed through streams on multiple platforms such as Twitch or YouTube and other social media platforms referencing back to the slur speedrun trend explained earlier. Considering the vast influence that these platforms have on the new generation, the discrimination depicted becomes not only normalized for the online community but also becomes a cultural norm. This could be attributed to the popularity of *CoD* as a video game despite its toxic reputation. In almost every new installment of the game, sales skyrocket with the parent company making a large sum of money on the first few days. In 2011, Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 set sales records by selling 6.5 million copies on the first day²³.

Similarly, within 24 hours of its launch, Call Of Duty: Black Ops II earned 500 million dollars²⁴. The popularity of *CoD* enables discrimination to spread to society in and outside of the game. Within the game, the cycle of toxicity encouraged by the online community and the game layout creates players who believe that discriminatory phrases and hateful speech are acceptable practices to adopt. This leads to dehumanizing minority player experiences where they have to endure prejudiced words and targeted hate. In some instances of gender discrimination, there are cases where women will receive comments based on stereotypes, assumptions about their looks,

²² Joy Egbert and Mary Roe, "Feminist Theory," in Theoretical models for teaching and research, (Pressbooks)

²³ Eyder Peralta, "The Video Game 'Call of Duty' Sets Sales Record," NPR, November 11, 2011, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2011/11/11/142257157/the-video-game-call-of-duty-sets-sales-record>.

²⁴ Eyder Peralta, "'Call of Duty: Black Ops II' Sells \$500 Million in First 24 Hours," NPR, November 16, 2012, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2012/11/16/165295836/call-of-duty-sells-500-million-in-first-24-hours>.

weight, and age, as well as sexual remarks²⁵. Generally in video games, there don't seem to have many instances of women or minority ethnicities as characters except for in very stereotypical views. With the lack of representation, players aren't exposed to characters that may be different from them, leaving them with a narrow view of the world. *CoD* itself serves as a platform of hate, both with the online community and with the game itself, as it reinforces discriminatory beliefs and values to other players leading to its spread to society with its popularity.

V. Conclusion

From conducting our study on *CoD*, we argue that the discriminatory behaviors exemplified by its players are ingrained within the culture of their community, creating a normalization of suppressing minorities. We analyze this behavior through the lenses of the Feminist Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Magic Circle Theory. Looking at the actions of the *CoD*'s player base through these theoretical lenses solidifies our understanding of the process in which minorities are oppressed by the dominant player group. This group, composed of straight white men, perpetuates prejudiced values as they accept the inferiority of women and people of color.

In our research, we looked to answer the question of how *CoD*'s online community mirrored discriminatory underlying assumptions within society. Past theoretical studies have supported our initial claim that video games provide an online subspace enabling toxic player interactions. However, the theoretical lenses we utilized expanded our knowledge, bringing us to the conclusion that the toxic biases in *CoD*'s community run deeper than the reinforcement of behavioral patterns. For instance, the slur speedruns and "ok" trend popularized by the player base were both normalized despite the blatantly prejudiced undertone they carried. On top of that, marketing campaigns released by *CoD*, such as the ads "Surprise" and "Discover your Power", framed the playerbase as being primarily made up of white males, while also depicting female characters in a particularly sexualized light. These perpetuated ideas of white supremacy and female objectification, playing into the expansion of discriminatory biases held by the community.

Ultimately, the larger implications illustrated by this new understanding reveals how hateful behavior may have a deeper and more complex influence than initially perceived. For example, the toxicity seen in *CoD* isn't just surface-level discrimination, but rather evidence of a larger community norm, cementing a pro-prejudice culture brought about by the players. But what should be brought to attention is the expansion of this oppressive culture beyond just *CoD*'s

²⁵ deWinter, Jennifer, and Carly A. Kocurek. "'Aw Fuck, I Got A Bitch On My Team!': Women and the Exclusionary Cultures of the Computer Game Complex." In *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*, edited by Jennifer Malkowski and Treaandrea M. Russworm, 57–73. Indiana University Press, 2017.

community. Without careful attention, this culture may form an influence strong enough to spawn more communities like *CoD's* that are supportive of racism and misogyny. Thus, it is important to bring awareness to the powerful impact online hate can have, not just within the restricted space of the game, but in the wider realm of society as well. Whether it be through closer moderation of player communication, or the promotion of an inclusive culture and workspace, the acknowledgment of racist values ingrained within *CoD's* community can open opportunities towards future areas of research, in which we can better understand the perpetuation of discrimination in video games and disrupt the cycle of hate.

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All of the group members contributed to the paper equally (M.L., S.L., J.L) as they worked together collectively and succinctly. Not one sole person completed an entire section of the paper by themselves.

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