

Playfully Anachronistic and Historically Inauthentic: Understanding Resistance to Diverse Representation in *Call of Duty: Vanguard*

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Abstract

This article examines backlash against marginalized identity representation in *Call of Duty: Vanguard* (Sledgehammer Games, 2021), with a focus on the r/CODVanguard community. An inductive thematic analysis of history-oriented posts shows that many players criticize *Vanguard*'s characters for perceived inauthenticity or historical inaccuracies. However, discussions range from criticism over the game's narrative, weaponry, and other historical gadgets to disparaging comments on the characters' sexualities, physical appearances, or racial backgrounds, implying that identity, not just history, is a crucial component of player critiques. With that in mind, this paper examines the construction of exclusionary discourse, drawing on contemporary debates about identity politics in gaming culture. The findings show that the r/CODVanguard authenticity discourse, which claims its historical setting is mostly inaccurate, delegitimizes the contributions of marginalized communities during World War II (WWII), and reinforces hegemonic expectations as the standard by which successful WWII games should be judged. This article contributes to existing literature by highlighting how some gamers' discursive fixation on historical accuracy perpetuates an exclusionary status quo within gaming culture.

Keywords

Call of Duty: Vanguard; history; authenticity; marginalized identity representation; culture; Reddit; inductive thematic analysis.



Introduction

The Call of Duty series (Infinity Ward et al., 2003-present) regularly draws inspiration from historical events such as World War II (WWII), the Cold War, and Western intervention in the Middle East (Gagnon, 2010; Lane, 2021; Park, 2023; Pötzsch & Šisler, 2019). Focusing mainly on first-person shooter (FPS) gameplay, Call of Duty games have increasingly emphasized realism and authenticity by collaborating with military advisors and incorporating real troop units, scenarios, tactics, and weapons (Gagnon, 2010). Even entries like *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare* (Sledgehammer Games & High Moon Studios, 2014), which depict near-future events, have consulted with advisors from the United States Department of Defense to maintain a level of realism, despite portraying hypothetical military actions and technology of the 2060s (Stuart, 2014). Beyond gameplay features and commercial success, Call of Duty is often examined for its cultural impact. Discussions range from debates over media effects and notorious in-game events involving terrorist attacks (Bowman et al., 2024) to the series' role in legitimizing militarism and sanitizing the human cost of warfare (Gagnon, 2010; Gish, 2010).

Activision-Blizzard released *Call of Duty: Vanguard* (Sledgehammer Games, 2021), abbreviated as *Vanguard* hereafter, as the franchise's seventh WWII game (Park, 2021). *Vanguard* thrusts players into a fictitious special operations unit assembled during the waning moments of WWII. While some journalistic coverage praised its high-fidelity graphics and smooth gameplay, several voices critiqued the inclusion of its diverse characters—women and people of color—as tokenistic pandering (Cole, 2021; Kain, 2021) or “wokewashing” (Walker, 2021). These complaints were compounded by *Vanguard*'s omission of playable Axis forces, prompting further online backlash (Highton, 2021). At the time of writing, keyword searches for “diversity in Vanguard” reveal a range of content on YouTube and Reddit, for example, including critiques and debates about its diverse characters. This paper argues that a discursive emphasis on historical accuracy fosters both subtle and overt exclusion, dismissing diversity in history-based FPS games as an insidious liberal plot aimed at destabilizing the hegemonic status quo of gaming culture.

Because *Vanguard* discussion occurs across numerous areas (e.g., in-game and on game-adjacent social media), I chose to examine Reddit as an example of game-adjacent mediated communication. Reddit is relevant for this work because it involves textual, sometimes lengthy, forum-style debates (Bergstrom & Poor, 2021). As Activision's most recent WWII-themed FPS, *Vanguard* continues to receive attention in online spaces. Analysis of community discourse can reveal experiential expectations within the contemporary FPS genre, particularly in games based on world history. Therefore, I combine research on how games relate to historicity, cultural hegemony, and fan communities to better unpack how player critiques that pair history and identity—especially

those traded in game-adjacent spaces—attempt to maintain the status quo of contemporary gaming culture.

This article also expands critical interventions in game studies by providing further understanding of how gamers reinforce culturally hegemonic ideas in game-adjacent contexts. I apply Michel Foucault's (1969/2013) theory of discursive formations to analyze *Vanguard* players' history-based debates, especially some players' use of historical accuracy and period authenticity as benchmarks of success, despite both qualifications existing as sites of popular and academic contestation. Because Foucauldian discourse analysis involves assessing organizing bodies of knowledge and questioning the relationship between language and power, I ask: How do *Vanguard* players frame and discuss history, and what do these discussions reveal about their expectations for historical war games? Further, how do discourses around historical accuracy and authenticity in *Vanguard* connect to some players' attitudes towards keeping political correctness and identity politics out of games and, by extension, gaming culture itself? In other words, if one recognizes the fiction inherent to playable histories—acknowledging that they reflect normalized historical narratives—how might *Vanguard* player discourses compound the status quo? I employ inductive thematic analysis to investigate how these discussions relate to broader trends of diversification and resistance in gaming culture, particularly in terms of identity representations such as gender and race.

Literature Review

Playing Through the Past: Constructing Histories and Identities in War Games

Recent scholarship in game studies highlights how playable histories both construct player identities and mediate tensions between representation and authenticity (Belmonte-Ávila, 2023; Ramsay, 2020; Schwarz & Weber, 2023; Van den Heede, 2023). History-forward games, from *Battlefield 1*'s (DICE, 2016) recreation of the First World War to *The Oregon Trail*'s (Gameloft, 2021; MECC, 1971) simulation of traversing the American Western frontier, offer liminal spaces that introduce opportunities for historical immersion but often sanitize or omit serious realities, for example, the omission of the Holocaust in older WWII games (Salvati & Bullinger, 2013; Van den Heede, 2023). Similar titles, such as *Call of Duty: WWII* (Sledgehammer Games, 2017), have elicited varied critical reception, highlighting the impact of playable histories on shaping cultural perceptions of the past. Moreover, games like *War of Rights* (Campfire Games, 2018) may tout historical accuracy while hinting at Lost Cause revisionism, further suggesting that institutional influences (e.g., the military-industrial complex) can reframe warfare as justified (Andersen & Kurti, 2009; Quiroga, 2018; Ramsay, 2020). How players receive these playable histories thus becomes an ongoing question of framing, prompting doubts about

whether industry profit motives take precedence over accuracy and cultural significance.

The literature on identity construction and representation in war games indicates that hegemonic histories are perpetuated by focusing on military themes and minimizing or removing actual events. For example, omitting war crimes may perpetuate the notion that a military action was justified or that conflicts can be reduced to moral good-versus-evil binaries, rather than the myriad shades of gray that underpin actual geopolitics (Fisher, 2011; Gish, 2010; Pötzsch & Šisler, 2019).

Moreover, though real-time strategy games such as *Company of Heroes* (Relic Games, 2006), *Age of Empires* (Ensemble Studios, 1997), and their sequels provide players with immersive, history-based environments, the accuracy and logic embedded in their gameplay may not accurately reflect the actual realities of squad-based tactics or feudal economics due to technological limitations. This prompts broader questions about how playable histories shape understandings of identity in contemporary gaming culture. At what point does creative license cease to be simply a part of gameplay and begin to compound cultural hegemony?

Historical war games typically focus on straight, White, cisgender men as both protagonists and the supposed norm, reinforcing a “white mythic space” (Quiroga, 2018, p. 188) that excludes marginalized contributions to history (Kukshinov & Shaw, 2022; Salvati & Bullinger, 2013; Williams et al., 2009). These dominant narratives not only distort cultural memory through a domineering lens of White male heroism but also trigger backlash whenever diversity is introduced. This is evident in debates over *Vanguard*’s inclusion of women and people of color, which are perceived as tokenistic ploys (Cole, 2021; Condis, 2018; Cote, 2020; Kain, 2021). Scholars applying feminist and critical/cultural approaches in game studies challenge these norms (Braithwaite, 2014, 2016; Condis, 2015, 2018; Consalvo, 2012; Cote, 2020; Jenson & de Castell, 2021; Shaw, 2014), revealing how the power structures and heteronormative biases of the industry influence both games and their communities. For instance, cultural zeitgeists like the 2014 Gamergate harassment campaign showcase violent backlash against a perceived liberal agenda in gaming (Bonenfant & Trépanier-Jobin, 2017; Braithwaite, 2016). A critical analysis of playable histories must therefore consider how community policing upholds hegemonic historical frames as the rubrics by which war games are judged, and why claims of authenticity often serve as tools of exclusion rather than rigorous historical engagement.

The industry’s corporate influence further exacerbates these challenges, as many large development studios often view products featuring marginalized identities as (at best) financial risks or (at worst) an utter waste of resources (Srauy, 2019). Despite an increasingly diversifying gaming culture, developers continue to privilege young, straight, White,

cisgender male players (hereafter referred to as the “stereotypical gamer”), reinforcing hegemonic understandings of gaming audiences (Anderson, 2015; Entertainment Software Association, 2025; Jenson & de Castell, 2021). Limited representation in games can affect players’ willingness to invest in said games and their communities. This influence extends to gaming culture more broadly, with potential outcomes including hesitation or even complete disengagement, which can exacerbate existing representational disparities (Bergstrom et al., 2016; Ortiz, 2020).

Reddit Fan Communities

In communication and media studies, Reddit is viewed as a participatory culture platform that encourages users to share media related to their niche interests through subreddits, or specialized forum communities, which act as topical hubs within the broader sitewide network. As game-adjacent spaces, these communities offer players numerous opportunities to discuss topics such as in-game mechanics, narrative storylines, game development, current events, fan theories, and conjectures related to upcoming releases (Caplan & Purser, 2019; Massanari, 2013). The content disseminated in these communities includes, but is not limited to, text threads (a forum-style comment chain that grows in response to an original post), embedded videos and GIFs, memes, and hyperlinks to external sources (Cauteruccio et al., 2020).

Reddit cultivates participatory culture via its gamified awards and interaction systems, i.e., karma and flairs, which allow users to personalize their site identity and further integrate in-game communication into site-mediated interactions (Davis & Graham, 2021; Graham & Rodriguez, 2021; Jenkins, 2018; Massanari, 2013). Like video game mechanics—which Stenros and Montola (2024) define as a set of rules shaping how players engage with (and receive responses from) games—Reddit’s gamified interaction systems serve as site-specific rules that direct user interaction. These features enable Redditors (users of Reddit) to showcase their experiences with a subreddit’s focal media, thereby increasing a user’s social capital while promoting a visible association between the user, focal media, community, and the platform. These same systems also allow Redditors to antagonize and censure others, creating visible indications through downvoting or ratioing—a phrase describing a comment response that receives more likes than an original post—when marginal expressions, viewpoints, or textual readings challenge the established discourse (Graham & Rodriguez, 2021; Jenkins, 2018; Peeters et al., 2021). Reddit thus provides this study access to community insights on *Vanguard* discussions, covering topics from debates about its historical portrayal to comments on in-game narratives, characters, maps, and more.

Conceptual Framework

My investigation constitutes a critical intervention into a game-adjacent space, recognizing discourse as an assemblage of knowledge and power (Consalvo, 2012; Foucault, 1969/2013). Discourses, or discursive formations, are rule systems and conventions that influence knowledge production, dissemination, and regulation within various social structures and spatiotemporal contexts. Importantly, discursive formations are not strictly relegated to language (oral or textual) but also encompass aspects such as science, culture, and institutionalized norms. As Foucault (1969/2013) articulated in his pioneering work *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, there are implicit rule systems that encircle what and how things are said and who has the authority to speak them. As such, within any discursive field, certain discourses carry a privileged weight while others are disadvantaged, marginalized, or silenced altogether.

In gaming culture, particularly in war games like history-forward FPS, pushback against marginalized identity representation highlights the aforementioned tensions surrounding language, history, and power. Dominant groups, such as stereotypical gamers, can use discourse to leverage and legitimize certain historical narratives—for example, cisheteronormative White masculinity—while disparaging and delegitimizing others (Achugar, 2017). Furthermore, the value-laden language choices used to discuss history within war games, such as “inaccurate,” “inauthentic,” “anachronistic,” “bad,” and “woke,” can shape the judgments made by both in-group and out-group members, complicating the already complex flow of debates and the broader understanding of history by everyone involved. Thus, discursive formations, as conveyed through immersive media such as historical war games, illuminate how power scaffolds and undergirds the societal conditions in which those media are produced and consumed (Foucault, 1969/2013).

I echo Foucault’s (1969/2013) argument that history-as-discourse, mediated through war games, should not be taken at face value; instead, it should be viewed as shaped by the social, cultural, and political contexts in which it is placed. As such, I work to identify, deconstruct, and challenge hegemonic critiques of historical (in)accuracy and period (in)authenticity as attempts to homogenize and dismiss the experiences of diverse groups within *Vanguard* Reddit discussion spaces and the broader media environment. Additionally, I incorporate Salvati and Bullinger’s (2013) concept of “selective authenticity,” in which historical FPS series like *Call of Duty* utilize technological fetishism—such as emphasized weapon design and modeling—and cinematic storytelling conventions to craft an illusory sense of authenticity that prioritizes enjoyment over strict factual accuracy. I focus this idea on the player discourses themselves, exploring how accusations about (in)accuracy and period (in)authenticity might serve as a shield for exclusionary sentiments. The following research questions guide my investigation:

RQ1: In what ways do players discuss how history is portrayed in *Vanguard*, and what do these discussions reveal about their expectations for historical war games?

RQ2: In the context of Foucault's (1969/2013) rules of formation, how do players discuss historical accuracy and authenticity in *Vanguard*, especially regarding marginalized identities?

RQ3: How do player discourses around *Vanguard* connect to broader trends of diversification and resistance in gaming culture?

Methods

I conducted an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) of *Vanguard* Reddit threads, extracting qualitative trends and tracing connections to power dynamics within gaming culture. Besides a predetermined focus on the term "history," all coding was inductive, unfolding through iterative codebook refinement, starting with an initial thread to generate primary codes. Later passes created secondary and tertiary code branches. Framing history as a discursive field (Foucault, 1969/2013), this analysis addresses calls and advocates for social justice within game-related spaces (Bonenfant & Trépanier-Jobin, 2017; Consalvo, 2012).

Subreddit Selection: r/CODVanguard

I chose the subreddit r/CODVanguard (Reddit, 2023a) as an example of *Vanguard* discussion in a game-adjacent space. The r/CODVanguard subreddit was founded in January 2021 and, at the time of writing, has over 105,000 members. It is an official, developer-recognized community hub dedicated to *Vanguard*, serving as a key source for insights into the game's community reception and overall health. The subreddit r/CODVanguard offers numerous opportunities for relevant data collection on the above RQs, unlike other subreddits that cover multiple games within the broader Call of Duty franchise. In other words, the backlash against *Vanguard*'s diverse characters within this developer-endorsed community hub indicates that opposition to marginalized identities is not limited to fringe communities—such as r/KotakuInAction, the "main hub for GamerGate on Reddit" (Reddit, 2014)—but also exists in mainstream subreddits. Although demographic data for this subreddit are unavailable, it can be reasonably assumed that they align with findings from other studies (see Massanari, 2024; Proferes et al., 2021), which indicate that most users are college-aged White men, thereby overlapping with the identity categories of the stereotypical gamer described above.

Data Collection and Analysis

My analysis is structured around entire threads instead of standalone comments because (1) longer posts would yield more opportunities for rich data collection, and (2) it is the threads themselves that pull people

into Reddit browsing. Redditors are directed to the content they seek or to randomized content that search algorithms believe the user will like via threaded lists, sorted by popularity—i.e., upvoting and downvoting, as well as received awards—recency, or number of comments.

Between May 28-29, 2024, I combed r/CODVanguard using the keyword “history” to create a list of threads discussing the topic, a sampling approach that echoes other studies (see Bergstrom, 2021; Braithwaite, 2014) that have used similar tactics in gaming forums. To ensure a relatively high level of interaction within these captured threads, I included only those with at least 10 comments, as some posts received only 1 or 2 replies. Overall, I identified and combined 30 threads into a workable dataset. On average, posts received 201 upvotes (range: 0-4100, $SD = 739$) and 62 comments (range: 11-247, $SD = 55$). Because Reddit is a public-facing platform, and following the Association of Internet Researchers’ updated ethical guidelines (franzke et al., 2020), all textual data were de-identified and are reported here using summaries instead of direct quotations. Table 1 presents the overall topical categorizations, with some threads falling into multiple categories. Table 1 reflects each thread’s primary focus.

Broad Category	Summary	Threads	Distribution
Controversial Imagery and Symbolism	Focuses on debates about the inclusion of Nazi symbols and imagery, Axis powers, and other historically sensitive topics.	4, 16, 18	3
Critical Reception and Development Issues	Covers overall critiques of the game, debates about developmental decision-making, and reception of the game's story campaign.	10, 13, 24	3
Gameplay and Design Choices	Game mechanics, diversity of available weapons, and overall gameplay experience.	8, 9, 17, 25	4
Historical Accuracy and Authenticity	Debates about historical details, weapon accuracy, and visual authenticity; broader discussions about the importance of historical accuracy in gaming.	1, 3, 5, 6, 12, 15, 21, 22, 23, 28, 29	11
Narrative and Character Representations	Discussions about the game's storyline, character backgrounds, nationalities, and diversity in character portrayals.	2, 14, 18, 19, 26, 30	6
Player Expectations vs. Reality	Debates on the game's target audience, marketing, and comparisons to other WWII games and media.	7, 11, 27	3

Table 1. r/CODVanguard thread topics.

I conducted my analysis using the qualitative software MAXQDA. The first assessment involved observing how *Vanguard* players generally discuss history and their expectations of historical war games (RQ1). Next, I examined how historical accuracy and authenticity appear within debates involving marginalized identity representation in *Vanguard* (RQ2). A final review assessed how *Vanguard* player discourses relate to broader trends in diversity and inclusion in entertainment media (RQ3). This three-pronged approach generated emergent themes not initially outlined in my RQs. These themes are discussed below.

Analysis and Findings

The following subsections describe findings relating to (1) debates about historical representation in *Vanguard*, (2) comparisons to other WWII media, and (3) connections to broader trends in gaming culture. All tables are organized alphabetically to ensure readability.

Debating History

Debates surrounding historical representation in *Vanguard* and history more broadly align with the factors outlined in Table 2. These items served as the basis for future coding passes and can be considered top-level or primary foci in r/CODVanguard. While this paper does not have space to explore each primary code, most posts and their responses focus on history and avoid off-topic discussions.

Primary Code	Frequency	Percentage
Artistic Expression	157	2.34
Comparing Media Representations	54	0.80
Cultural Significance	41	0.61
Curiosity	48	0.72
Emotion	49	0.73
Geography and/or Location	64	0.95
History	2132	31.76
Humor	847	12.62
Identity Politics and Stance-Taking	137	2.04
Symbolic Representation	1196	17.82
Tourism	8	0.12
Ukraine-Russian War	1	0.01
Unrelated/Ad Hominem	43	0.64
Vanguard Evaluations	1936	28.84

Table 2. Primary code frequencies.

Foremost among history-focused r/CODVanguard threads are those dealing with the concept of historical representation itself. For example, these threads include examinations of events and figures, such as tensions between the in-game character Polina Petrova and her real-life counterpart, Soviet sniper Lyudmila Pavlichenko. There is also increased awareness of in-game locations and their real-world counterparts, like the Eagle's Nest and Hitler's golden elevator, as well as ethical issues regarding the use of Axis characters or Nazi symbols. Furthermore, these threads include critiques of *Vanguard's* diverse characters and narrative, as well as discussions about whether alternative histories—such as those in the Wolfenstein series (Muse Software et al., 1981-present), discussed in thread 27, which is also set during WWII—create

a more enjoyable gaming experience than those that stick to realism. Some threads express curiosity or strong emotions, such as disdain for perceived inaccuracies or anachronisms in the game. For example, some criticize Wehrmacht character models that appeared erroneously as set décor—or perhaps, placeholders—in beta versions of the Pacific campaign maps, which historically did not see deployments of German military personnel (thread 5). Others evaluate a character added in a post-launch update, whose attire is more evocative of helicopter pilots from post-WWII conflicts, such as the Vietnam War, than from WWII itself (thread 22). These threads suggest that, at least among players who participate in r/CODVanguard, attention to detail is a primary topic of conversation. Stated differently, the through-line between each thread is that the balance between accuracy and gameplay must be safeguarded to ensure the game's enjoyability; deviations of any kind are perceived to threaten *Vanguard's* reception, at least amongst those who are concerned with how *Vanguard* depicts WWII.

Accuracy, Authenticity, and Marginalized Identities

Several insights emerged regarding players' assessments of *Vanguard's* historical (in)accuracy and (in)authenticity, and how these ideas collide with critiques of marginalized identity representation. Table 3 shows the dominant frames through which r/CODVanguard interlocutors discuss history and frequently criticize *Vanguard* for its alleged historical inaccuracies. Discussions point out specific inaccuracies in uniforms, weapon models, and character portrayals—such as the nationalities of playable characters—and in the anachronistic use of modern weapon attachments and equipment that were not used during WWII (threads 3, 4, 6, 15, 20, 21, 22, and 23). Some find *Vanguard's* arcade-like play style to clash with the seriousness of historical events, arguing that the selective inclusion of certain German military symbols and the omission of others are disingenuous or even an attempt at historical revisionism (threads 16 and 18). There appears to be a division within r/CODVanguard's history-oriented threads, particularly between those who desire grounded, historically faithful WWII media (threads 1, 2, and 14) and those who advocate alternative history approaches for the sake of fun, playability, or creative liberties (threads 7, 9, and 11). Some Axis-focused discussions directly express frustration with *Vanguard's* story and visual choices, such as using sanitized Wehrmacht or Japanese Imperial Army uniforms without imperialistic symbols, which are seen to undermine the WWII setting (threads 5, 17, and 21).

History Subcodes	Frequency	Percentage
Accuracy	613	37.20
Authenticity	361	21.91
Awareness (Lack Of)	32	1.94
Context	276	16.75
Liberties	227	13.77
Preservation	12	0.73
Revisionism	5	0.30
Significance	122	7.40

Table 3. Framing and critiquing historical representation.

Concerns about historical accuracy and authenticity also surface in discussions around the Allies. For example, one discussion criticizes the alteration of a character's nationality from New Zealander to Australian, calling it an inaccurate portrayal that overlooks New Zealand's contributions during WWII (thread 14). Another attempts to strike a balance between the inclusion of diverse characters and historical accuracy, as seen in the case of Lyudmila Pavlichenko, mentioned earlier (thread 2). Some players argue that diverse representation is superficial and tokenistic when compared to the gameplay experience, or that the *Vanguard* developers' design choices do not effectively enhance the WWII setting (threads 24, 25, 26, and 28). In select cases, participants have even suggested that this inclusion amounts to pandering (thread 26). Threads in which posters frame their support for the game as a "hot take," a controversial opinion, are less common (e.g., threads 8 and 13); players generally expect *Vanguard* to honor recorded history while also recognizing that developers face the challenge of balancing history, creative expression, modern sociocultural issues, and overall gameplay enjoyment (threads 10, 12, 19, 29, and 30).

Comparing Media and Broader Trends in Gaming Culture

This dataset connects to other games and broader trends in gaming culture through ongoing debates about historical accuracy, representation, game development, and the perceived tensions between realism and fantasy in contemporary television and film. While some inconsistencies exist, for example, acknowledging design limitations while continuing to criticize developmental decisions (e.g., some responses in the set décor thread, mentioned above, point out the incorrect Wehrmacht models were likely beta test placeholders), *Vanguard* players express a desire for fluid gameplay that emulates the immersion and playable histories of other games (see Table 4). The remake of *Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward, 2019) and its sequel, *Modern Warfare II* (Infinity Ward, 2022), both feature recent Western intervention in the Middle East or fictitious depictions of terrorist attacks in cities like London and Chicago, which are commonly compared to

Vanguard despite taking place in different historical periods. Additionally, comparisons to cinematic or televised representations of WWII, such as *The Pacific* (Spielberg et al., 2010), *Saving Private Ryan* (Spielberg, 1998), *Inglorious Basterds* (Tarantino, 2009), and *Band of Brothers* (Spielberg & Hanks, 2001), appear across several discussions (threads 1, 7, 8, 25, and 28). While these dramatized depictions do not provide a comprehensive picture of WWII, they still appear among the forum interactions as ad hoc rubrics for evaluating *Vanguard*'s success or failure in historical representation. Generally, these comparisons do not directly blame *Vanguard*'s shortcomings on a perceived "forced diversity" in games but suggest that Anglo-European perspectives are the standard by which to evaluate WWII-focused entertainment media. Even in cases where players acknowledge that revisionist fiction is not actual history, as seen through *Inglorious Basterds*, critiques remain regarding *Vanguard*'s inclusion of women and LGBTQIA+ people as special operations characters, rather than the expected male Allied soldier.

Comparing Media Representations Subcodes	Frequency	Percentage
<i>ARMA</i>	8	1.76
<i>CoD: Black Ops and BO: Cold War</i>	108	23.79
<i>CoD: WWII</i>	79	17.40
<i>Hell Let Loose</i>	10	2.20
<i>CoD: Modern Warfare and CoD: Modern Warfare II</i>	102	22.47
<i>CoD: World at War</i>	76	16.74
<i>Wolfenstein</i>	71	15.64

Table 4. *Vanguard* evaluations.

Atop the contested terrain of representation and inclusivity, some players lambast *Vanguard*'s diverse characters. These debates involve non-traditional female options, such as an Indian National Army soldier or a lesbian ex-Nazi freedom fighter, and how these depictions measure up to their real-life equivalents (threads 2, 14, and 22). Arguments that diversity and inclusion feel like tokenistic, poorly integrated pandering mirror discussions around other established series. For example, *Assassin's Creed Shadows* (Ubisoft Quebec, 2025), set in medieval Japan, received mixed or negative responses from players due to similar perceptions of a liberal agenda in games:

[C]riticism from a reactionary contingent of western players [centered around] the notion that diversity, equity, and inclusion narratives are ruining games. In this case the target [was] Yasuke, a Black historical figure who serves as one of *Shadows*' two playable characters. (Fenlon, 2024, para. 1)

Such contentions mirror debates about realism in war games, in which accuracy and realism appear to serve as thinly veiled arguments for a return to Whiteness, masculinity, and cisheteronormativity (Andersen & Kurti, 2009; Salvati & Bullinger, 2013; Schwarz & Weber, 2023). When support for diversity and inclusion does appear (threads 2 and 26), it is often framed as a marginal or unpopular take, echoing the idea that the dominant perspectives listed above are the standards by which successful WWII games must be judged.

Lastly, some elements of this dataset connect to perceptions of forced political correctness in gaming (see Table 5). Building on the points above, players express dissatisfaction via perceptions of tokenism or virtue signaling through forced diversity (threads 2, 4, 18, 22, and 26), accusations of revisionism or erasure (thread 14), backlash against the alteration or omission of historically relevant symbols like the Nazi Hakenkreuz (thread 16), and broader frustrations due to perceptions of designers caving to progressive audience demands (threads 25 and 28). Some segments take oppositional stances against queer and gender inclusivity in games, and express concerns that contemporary gaming and media more broadly are supposedly misandrist or anti-White. There is also a concurrent belief that Reddit will enforce consequences for “truth-telling” or non-politically correct statements, resulting in enforcement actions like content removal, automated reporting, or account bans. These truths, of course, rely on the assumption that there is a bias for women and minorities in modern gaming, that political correctness is ruining games, and that speaking out about this would lead to censure.

Identity Subcodes	Frequency	Percentage
Anti-LGBTQIA+	29	35.80
Bias for Women and Minorities	43	53.09
Truth-Telling Consequences	9	11.11

Table 5. Identity politics and stance-taking.

Although these contentions are not new, it is essential to note that, as contemporary awareness of marginalized communities’ contributions during WWII has grown (Dawson, 2019; White, 2016), this recognition is often lacking in the dataset. This reality reflects a longstanding tension within gaming culture, wherein arguments and community backlash against representation, authenticity, and game design have continued to intersect with broader sociopolitical debates (Condis, 2021; Cote, 2020).

Significance and Implications

This thematic analysis reveals that player debates are skewed mainly towards negativity, with occasional moments of neutrality and positivity. Criticisms about inaccuracies and anachronisms in *Vanguard* reflect

frustrations that these issues may compromise the game's ability to provide a satisfying WWII gameplay experience. Still, the rubrics by which accuracy and authenticity are measured remain nebulous. Throughout the analysis, it became clear that some (in)authenticity and (in)accuracy rhetorics (at least, amongst this dataset) are entangled with anti-woke sentiments. For example, threads claiming *Vanguard* is less credible or inauthentic for including queer Allied resistance fighters are juxtaposed against those lamenting the absence of Nazi symbolism—specifically, the Hakenkreuz—with one (thread 18) even regretting the lack of “badass” Fallschirmjäger paratrooper units in lieu of available in-game options. Though it is unclear whether these remarks are direct neo-Nazi or fascist endorsements, it is evident that some players combine critiques of representational discrepancies with contemporary identity politics, like anti-woke rhetoric, to claim that *Vanguard* fails to provide a truly immersive WWII experience. In such cases where commenters acknowledge creative license might actually help *Vanguard*—recognizing it is a video game, not a documentary (threads 7 and 9)—authenticity and accuracy continue to be levied as rubrics for a worthwhile WWII game. In other words, while some threads and their responses show ambivalence or neutrality toward *Vanguard's* portrayals of history, these mixed reactions still favor already-debated historical interpretations (see Table 4) as reference points for successful war games. When participants discuss *Vanguard* choosing an alternative history (threads 11 and 29) rather than adhering to historical realism, an underlying suggestion persists that any changes are misguided or, at best, embellishments that stray from reality. Indeed, even when support for diversity and inclusion is expressed (threads 2 and 26), *Vanguard's* efforts are perceived as flawed. As such, within this dataset, it can be stated that *Vanguard* debates are predominantly negative, indicating that most players place normalized interpretations of historical fidelity on a pedestal.

Playable Histories vs. Playable Hegemonies

Although this work cannot speak to the frequency at which identity-based exclusionary sentiments occur amongst all r/CODVanguard interactions or *Vanguard* player discourses, the fact that they occur at all says much about the cultural power in gaming. Regarding RQ1, I contend that many players' fixation on historical accuracy correlates with a discursive attempt at maintaining an exclusionary gaming space, one wherein a historically accurate and authentic WWII FPS should look White, cisgender, hegemonically masculine, and true to normalized expectations regarding playable histories. This argument aligns with previous research suggesting that stereotypical gamers seek an apolitical space free from offline identity politics (Condis, 2015). Such perspectives ignore how historical depictions are inherently political and subject to the same rules of formation (Foucault, 1969/2013) that encircle society, culture, and politics. In this, playable histories often

minimize or erase the lived experiences of marginalized peoples and their contributions to world-shaping events altogether.

In the case of *Vanguard*, complaints about historical inaccuracies suggest a hegemonic push to maintain gaming culture's status quo, or rather, that playable histories must align with accepted historical narratives of the offline world. The implicit nature of this argument highlights how subtly these forces operate to maintain control; they suggest that a game becomes mediocre or unworthy of interest and investment simply by adding marginalized identities as playable options. In this way, I contend that player debates on *Vanguard*'s playable history reinforce the foundational rules that shape the West's collective memory of WWII. *Vanguard*'s use of a fictitious special operations unit only emphasizes this point: Historical accuracy arguments become disingenuous when many of the game's features lean so heavily into fiction from the onset. To push this argument further, through Reddit *Vanguard* debates, diversity often becomes a scapegoat for poorly received game design. Some threads claim that developers intentionally undermine new titles by including diverse character options, damaging otherwise well-made games to cater to marginalized gaming audiences. This view aligns with the Gamergate perception of a conspiracy within gaming institutions, where identity politics or social justice themes are imposed on stereotypical gamers' envisioned virtual utopias (Braithwaite, 2016; Condis, 2018; Jenson & de Castell, 2021). Such rhetoric underscores the need for critical interventions in both games and game-adjacent spaces. We must disrupt hegemonic thinking by unpacking the social rules that define authenticity and reshape community dialogues. Practically, this means encouraging developers to adopt pluralistic portrayals as the norm rather than the exception, and to highlight non-Western and historically underrepresented contributions in history-forward games. Doing so would acknowledge the powerful role games play in shaping collective memory and cultural identity.

It is also worth noting that these discussions subtly reinforce the connection between the military-industrial complex, playable histories, and history as a discursive field. They also support the view that war games are, or should be, apolitical, despite the logical fallacies inherent in such claims. This connection appears in two ways. Firstly, it manifests through romanticized discussions of cinematic or televised histories—especially those related to the World Wars—where Anglo-American involvement, and Whiteness in general, is justified by debates over how accurately identities are portrayed. Secondly, it appears through the contradictory idea that, despite the political nature of history and war, war games are considered apolitical because they are simply games and not cultural productions that reflect the conditions in which they were manufactured. When they surface, these game-based assertions draw discussions into debates about other media, such as film, television, or literature, highlighting how player expectations extend across media rather than being confined to a single medium, like video games. This

connects to earlier research, which highlights how cinematic storytelling conventions are frequently used to frame WWII in historical FPS; from a player perspective, the same conventions are deployed to mask exclusionary identity-based critiques (see Salvati & Bullinger, 2013). The notion of playable histories and their connection to playable hegemonies cannot be challenged without considering how they intersect with and diverge from adjacent media representations.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how discourse around historical accuracy functions as a tool of exclusion in game-adjacent spaces. Using the case of *Vanguard*, this study shows how authenticity is discursively weaponized to delegitimize marginalized identity representation in *Vanguard*'s WWII setting, framing diversity as inaccurate, irrespective of the historical record. Likewise, the notion of playable hegemonies explains how subjective gatekeeping practices are concealed, maintaining barriers to inclusive representation while simultaneously reinforcing culturally hegemonic narratives around Whiteness, cisgenderism, heteronormativity, and masculinity. The contradictory nature of such discourse—often involving other fictional media, such as Hollywood films—as evaluative criteria relies on a form of “selective authenticity” (Salvati & Bullinger, 2013) that is intended to dismiss diversity rather than tackle genuine historical concerns.

In focusing on Reddit due to its forum-style interactions and general accessibility, this paper only captures a small portion of *Vanguard* discussion. An ethnographic study of *Vanguard*'s in-game chat could provide a more cohesive and real-time understanding of how players perceive aspects such as in-game identity and diversity. However, gathering this discussion may be challenging, as *Vanguard* no longer receives regular content updates and its player base has dropped significantly, likely due to the popularity of more recent Call of Duty titles. Reddit users also tend to be younger and male, meaning the dataset's views may not accurately reflect other identities (Proferes et al., 2021). Likewise, the threads included here offer only a limited glimpse of the broader subreddit interactions to which they belong and do not necessarily reflect the attitudes of the entire r/CODVanguard community or *Vanguard* players more broadly. Reddit is just one game-adjacent space among many; this dataset does not represent community conversations on other platforms, such as Discord or Facebook. Nevertheless, focusing on the most engaging history-oriented posts in r/CODVanguard gives insight into how discussions about representation in this popular mass-market game evolve and what goals they pursue.

Future studies would benefit significantly from a comparative perspective that includes similar titles, such as *Hell Let Loose* (Black Matter, 2021), *Squad* (Offworld Industries, 2020), or *Enlisted* (Darkflow Software, 2021). This is because FPS players have generally praised

these games for their realism, and they are often compared to the arcade-style qualities of contemporary Call of Duty and Battlefield games. A comparison of their niche subreddit communities with those associated with *Vanguard* could yield insightful results, particularly in measuring community stances on so-called woke politics and marginalized identity representation in virtual spaces. Additionally, analyzing another platform, such as YouTube, may yield contrasting results, as platforms attract different user demographics. Comparisons to the playable histories presented in more recent titles—for example, *Call of Duty: Black Ops 6* (Treyarch & Raven Software, 2024), which features an initial story centered around Operation Desert Storm in early 1990s Iraq—may also yield interesting results. These more recent wars have seen greater participation by marginalized service members, particularly women, in combat roles (Goodhart & Taylor, 2020; Lafferty et al., 2023). Comparing the World Wars with more recent Western interventions in the Middle East may reveal how spatiotemporal context complicates notions of historical accuracy and authenticity as community-driven evaluation criteria. Lastly, adjacent conversations exploring *Vanguard* and related games' characters as texts unto themselves could supplement this study's discussion by offering insight into how war games' character models are gendered, raced, or otherwise categorized by their associated communities.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that demands for high-fidelity, playable histories often function as ideological shields rather than neutral criteria, thereby reinforcing the hegemonic expectations that inform these very critiques. For critical game studies, this underscores the need to further examine player debates on historical accuracy in game-adjacent discourses, as they frequently mask exclusionary sentiments under the guise of authenticity. Doing so will better illustrate how community-driven discursive feedback loops and industry incentives collectively influence the creation of historical narratives in games, and how these intersections shape playable histories into playable hegemonies.

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