IKR Publishers

IKR Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (IKRJAHSS)
Journal homepage: https://ikrpublishers.com/ikrjahss/
Volume-2, Issue-2 (March-April) 2026
OPEN ACCESS
ISSN: 3107- 4014 (Online)

Playing the Empire: *Army of Two* as a Medium of American Ideological Hegemony

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DOI:10.5281/zenodo.19260236

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received : 04-03-2026
Accepted : 14-03-2026
Available online : 27-03-2026

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Citation: Kielar, T. (2026). Playing the Empire: *Army of Two* as a Medium of American Ideological Hegemony. *IKR Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (IKRJAHSS), 2*(2), 24-35.

ABSTRACT **Original Research Article**

This article examines the 2008 video game *Army of Two* as a medium through which American political and cultural hegemony is reproduced. The study investigates how the game conveys ideological messages and assesses its role in reinforcing dominant U.S. narratives. Unlike more widely studied military shooter franchises, *Army of Two* has received limited scholarly attention, making it a particularly compelling case for critical ideological analysis. The research employs a qualitative approach grounded in Antonio Gramsci's theory of political and cultural hegemony and Louis Althusser's concept of Ideological State Apparatuses. A close reading of the game's narrative, character dynamics, and gameplay mechanics identifies the mechanisms through which ideological content is embedded and normalized. Findings indicate that *Army of Two* functions as a significant carrier of American hegemonic ideology. Its narrative and gameplay align with key components of U.S. political and cultural paradigms, including the valorization of militarism, fetishization of weaponry, legitimization of Western international interventionism, chauvinistic portrayals of non-Western countries and regions, promotion of American exceptionalism and global dominance, orientalization and dehumanization of the Other, and reinforcement of a conservative social order. As an entertainment-oriented action shooter, the game actively perpetuates "common-sense imperialism," portraying violence and domination as necessary, just, and morally sanctioned. The study demonstrates that *Army of Two* exemplifies how video games can normalize political narratives and cultural values, reinforcing dominant power structures. This analysis also highlights the potential of applying a Marxist-informed critical framework in game studies, suggesting avenues for future research on ideological content in other games and genres, as well as on how players perceive and respond to such embedded messages.

Keywords: *Army of Two*, Political-Cultural Hegemony, Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, Imperialism in Digital Games, Video Games and Ideology, USA.

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Introduction

Digital games have steadily expanded in reach and significance, becoming an integral part of contemporary culture. Over the past decades, they have consolidated their position as one of the most powerful and profitable segments of the media industry (Wijman, 2024). Beyond entertainment, they also function as instruments of opinion formation. As such, they can act as channels of ideological influence, often presenting themselves as neutral while conveying meanings that contribute to political and cultural hegemony.

The aim of this article is to analyze the video game *Army of Two* (2008) as a vehicle of American hegemony and to assess the extent to which the game reproduces that hegemony. This title was selected for two reasons. First, *Army of Two* has been relatively overlooked in both Polish and international game studies literature,[1] particularly in comparison to more

[1] *In Polish game studies, there are no analyses or academic works devoted to this game. Within the global scholarly discourse, however, one can find occasional studies that address the title in*

prominent franchises such as *Call of Duty* (2003–2023) and *Battlefield* (2002–2023). Second, the game was released during a period of intensified U.S. military operations associated with the so-called War on Terror, making it a particularly compelling case for critical ideological analysis.

Although English-language scholarship has addressed the ideological dimensions of military shooters—such as *The Post-9/11 Video Game…* (Ouellette & Thompson, 2017), *Playing War…* (Payne, 2016), and *On the Virtual Frontlines…* (Riegler, 2010)—none of these studies examines *Army of Two* or applies the concept of political and cultural hegemony as a primary analytical framework. This gap is even more visible in Polish-language research, which, despite a growing body of work on military games,[2] tends to overlook less prominent titles and rarely employs concepts derived from Marxist theory.[3] In this regard, the present article contributes both a new object of analysis and a distinct methodological perspective.

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretative research design based on close reading. The analysis draws on repeated and systematic playthroughs of *Army of Two*, completed multiple times to ensure familiarity with its narrative structure, gameplay mechanics, and audiovisual design. The unit of analysis includes narrative sequences, character interactions, mission design, gameplay systems, and audiovisual elements, all examined in relation to their ideological significance.

The analysis is theory-driven and informed by Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony and Louis Althusser's notion of Ideological State Apparatuses. Particular attention is paid to moments in which the game articulates and normalizes themes such as militarism, interventionism, representations of non-Western Others, and constructions of American identity. Examples are selected purposively based on their relevance to the research questions and their ability to illustrate broader ideological mechanisms rather than provide exhaustive coverage. The analysis proceeds through iterative engagement with the game, including detailed note-taking and comparative interpretation across multiple playthroughs, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns and discursive strategies through which ideological meanings are embedded and naturalized.

The Concept of Political and Cultural Hegemony

The contemporary understanding of hegemony derives from Marxist thought, and its political and cultural dimensions were developed most notably by Antonio Gramsci. In contrast to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who focused primarily on economic domination, Gramsci shifted the analytical emphasis toward culture and ideology. He argued that the ruling class maintains power not only through material control but also by presenting its worldview as natural, self-evident, and universally valid (Wróblewski, 2016, pp. 296–298). In this way, social consent to the existing order is produced without the need for direct coercion (Morawski, 2016, pp. 107–108).

Gramsci links the concept of hegemony to the idea of the "integral state," understood as a configuration of both political and civil institutions (Fusaro, Xidias, & Fabry, 2017, p. 12). The consolidation of ruling-class power occurs not only through coercive apparatuses, such as courts and the police, but also through institutions of civil society, including the Church, the family, and the school. The integral state thus reflects the capacity of the ruling class to exercise authority in both the political sphere and the cultural-ideological domain. For example, Gramsci argued that schools do more than transmit knowledge: they also reproduce class divisions and shape attitudes aligned with dominant values, which come to be perceived as natural, apolitical, and grounded in "common sense" (Fusaro, Xidias, & Fabry, 2017, pp. 11–12).

Hegemony operates through institutions such as education, religion, media, and culture, which produce and reinforce a worldview understood as "common sense." The beliefs generated through these processes are internalized as neutral, even though they are deeply ideological. A useful example can be found in *SimCity* (2013), whose mechanics reflect key assumptions of neoliberalism, including the prioritization of economic growth, the marginalization of social issues, and the treatment of homelessness as an aesthetic problem.[4]

question. Nevertheless, first, none of them is devoted entirely to Army of Two – in each case the game constitutes only a part of broader considerations – and second, none employs the Marxist theoretical concepts used in the present article for its analysis. For this reason, the present article constitutes a novelty as the first academic text fully dedicated to an analysis of this game, as well as in terms of the analytical tools applied. Relevant publications include studies by Ottosen (2009), Mirrlees and Ibaid (2021), and Robinson (2012).

[2] *For the studies mentioned above on military video games, see Filiciak (2004), Olszewski (2011), and Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2012).*

[3] *Although P. Olszewski occasionally references Antonio Gramsci and the theory of hegemony, as well as the broader Marxist-inspired tradition of critical theory, several distinctions are noteworthy. First, his article is not situated within a Marxist analytical paradigm. Second, these theoretical concepts are invoked only contextually and are not systematically applied to the analysis of a specific game. Third, the argument remains general in nature, primarily contributing to broader discussions on the political dimensions of video games rather than offering a detailed, game-focused analytical study.*

[4] *This example was chosen to illustrate the theory for several reasons. First, SimCity represents a widely recognized and influential series of digital games. Second, the discussion focuses on the most recent installment in the franchise. Third, the game contains no violence, profanity, or sexual content, resulting in a low age rating that broadens its potential audience. Fourth, in*

This mechanism was further developed by Louis Althusser in his theory of Ideological State Apparatuses (Althusser, 1976, pp. 8–11). According to this framework, social subordination is reproduced primarily through institutions that appear neutral—such as education, religion, culture, the family, and the media. As a result, hegemony does not rely on overt state violence; instead, it is sustained through everyday practices and internalized beliefs.

Although some actors within these institutions may consciously promote specific ideologies, many reproduce hegemonic meanings without recognizing them as such. This lack of awareness is not incidental but constitutes one of the key conditions of hegemony's effectiveness.

American Political-Cultural Hegemony – Constitutive Features

Although multiple forms of political and cultural hegemony coexist, this article focuses specifically on its American variant. Different hegemonic formations often overlap and intersect; for instance, neoliberal and capitalist logics are integral to the dominant ideological configuration of the United States. For the purposes of this study, the key features of American hegemony have been identified on the basis of relevant scholarship, including the work of Michael Parenti, Stuart Hall, bell hooks, Howard Zinn, David Smith and Richard Dyer:

1. Strong attachment to national symbols and ideology – an emphasis on elements such as the flag, the Constitution, and the Founding Fathers as foundations of national identity.[5]

2. American exceptionalism – the belief in the moral and civilizational superiority of the United States, often linked to a perceived historical mission.[6]

3. International interventionism – the justification of global military action as necessary for protecting democracy and maintaining order.[7]

4. Fetishization of militarism – the glorification of the armed forces, weaponry, and violence as legitimate instruments of global regulation.[8]

mainstream discourse, it is not typically associated with politics and is rarely perceived as a "political game." Finally, despite its non-political reputation, the game functions as a vehicle for conveying a sophisticated ideological message, one that often goes unnoticed by both players and media outlets within the gaming industry.

[5] *In his book on U.S. hegemony, Paweł Frankowski notes: "The consolidation of certain behavioral patterns – constituting the core of American ideology – in collective consciousness requires a constant reference to national symbols. The continuous repetition and presence of national symbolism reinforces civil religion within collective consciousness – hence the widespread presence of national colors, which are invoked in every possible context. Ideology or religion cannot exist without the continual saturation of collective consciousness through symbols and attributes associated with civil religion" (Frankowski, 2006, p. 60). U.S. culture is deeply saturated with patriotic symbolism, including flags, national colors, the eagle emblem, and stars. Frankowski identifies this as an expression of civil religion, which encompasses not only symbols but also "saints" such as the Founding Fathers, rituals, and "sacred texts" including the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. These elements function as unifying mechanisms, connecting a population marked by diverse origins and significant social stratification. Through civil religion, the United States constructs a national community grounded in values such as patriotism, nationalism, individual liberty, and Christianity.*

[6] *The United States openly embraces a self-perception of exceptionalism, regarding itself as morally and culturally superior to other nations and "races." This sense of superiority has historical roots in the colonization of North America by European settlers and in subsequent systemic oppression of Black communities. Exceptionalism is closely tied to the belief that American values are universally applicable and that the United States is destined to exercise global leadership. As Frankowski observes, "the conviction that American experiences can serve as a model for other states led not only to policies of interventionism, but also to the diminishing of the significance and value of other cultures, especially non-Western ones. […] This was accompanied by contempt toward other nations, sometimes even combined with racism. The process of destroying the Indigenous peoples of North America resembled in many respects the process of subordinating other states. Its fundamental premise was the destruction of local cultures and their replacement with Anglo-European values" (Frankowski, 2006, pp. 60–61). This argument is further supported by Smith (2023, pp. 14–71, 72–127) and Chomsky (2008, p. 99), who highlight the historical and ideological mechanisms underpinning U.S. interventionism and cultural hegemony.*

[7] *Closely related to the notion of exceptionalism is the missionary role attributed to the United States. The country perceives itself as possessing a moral imperative to assume global leadership, framing its international actions as duties to promote peace, democracy, and stability. This self-conception is often manifested through military interventions justified by the rhetoric of humanitarianism and the defense of universal values. As President Harry S. Truman famously stated, "peace must be built on power, as well as on goodwill and good deeds." Frankowski notes that "after 1898 the United States transformed into a state conducting 'crusades' beyond its borders, acquiring an imperial character and beginning to portray itself as a nation with a mission to 'cure the ailments of the entire world'" (Frankowski, 2006, p. 61). This perspective is further elaborated in the work of Valentine (2017, pp. 182–193, 510–535), Parenti (1995, pp. 29–43), and Leffler (1992, p. 37), who analyze the historical and ideological foundations of the United States' interventionist posture and its framing as a moral actor on the global stage.*

[8] *The United States is one of the world's foremost military powers, producing more weaponry than any other nation and maintaining one of the largest standing armed forces. American culture exhibits a pronounced fascination with military technology, including weapons, specialized gadgets, advanced espionage and surveillance tools, and firearms more broadly. This militaristic orientation is closely intertwined with the country's interventionist ideology, as within American political culture, militarism is presented as both a guarantor of freedom and, paradoxically, of peace for its citizens. A striking example of this logic is the naming of U.S.-produced intercontinental ballistic missiles as "Peacekeeper." The emphasis*

5. The white male as a normative standard – the dominance of white, heterosexual masculinity as the default model of representation and narrative centrality.[9]

These features provide an analytical framework for examining cultural texts, including video games, as carriers of dominant ideology. Some of these elements are explicit, while others operate more subtly. However, both overt and latent forms play a significant role in shaping audience perception and reinforcing hegemonic meanings.

Army of Two – Introduction to the Game Analysis

Army of Two is the first installment of a trilogy (2008–2013), developed by EA Montreal and published by Electronic Arts. The first game—analyzed in this article—was released in March 2008 for the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. It belongs to the third-person shooter (TPS) genre, in which the player observes the action from behind the controlled character.

In terms of mechanics, *Army of Two* follows established gameplay conventions[10], making it accessible to a broad audience. The core gameplay centers on combat, with players defeating enemies using firearms or melee attacks. Between combat sequences, players can control vehicles or participate in parachute segments. A key feature of the game is its cooperative mode, which allows the entire campaign to be completed with a partner. This design aligns with the narrative, which focuses on two protagonists.

The main characters are two American soldiers, Tyson Rios and Elliot Salem, who display contrasting personalities. Rios is more restrained and serious, while Salem is impulsive and reckless. This contrast reflects a common narrative trope, in which opposing character types create dynamic interactions while remaining capable of effective cooperation. Collaboration is central to both the narrative and gameplay. The protagonists operate as a unit, supporting each other in nearly every situation, which evokes the familiar "brothers in arms" motif. This is reflected in specific mechanics, such as the *Back-to-Back* sequences, where the characters defend one another against waves of enemies. Similarly, players can rescue and heal their injured partner, reinforcing interdependence during combat.

The game also includes optional interactions between the protagonists. Players can praise, criticize, or joke with their partner, introducing elements of camaraderie and esprit de corps associated with military environments. At the same time, cooperation is complemented by competition. A kill counter, periodically displayed on the screen, creates a sense of rivalry between players. In addition, players earn in-game currency for eliminating enemies, completing objectives, and finding hidden items, further reinforcing competitive dynamics.

The narrative unfolds across multiple global locations, including Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Philippines, China, and the United States. These sites are carefully chosen to correspond to actual historical events and, more importantly, to U.S. international interventionism.

The structure of the game reflects conventions typical of American action cinema. Each mission presents a clear objective, complicated by obstacles that require immediate adaptation. The game consists of a prologue and five chapters, each set in a different location.

The story begins in 1993 during a military operation in Somalia, where Rios and Salem first collaborate with the private military company SSC. After a successful mission, they join the organization, working under the coordination of Alice Murray. In subsequent years, they carry out assignments for SSC while gradually uncovering questionable actions by the company's CEO, Ernest Stockwell, who seeks the full privatization of the U.S.

on armament and state militarization constitutes a central ideological thread, providing practical justification for exceptionally high defense expenditures and participation in various arms races. Militarism extends beyond the armed forces to private and civilian spheres. U.S. citizens are legally permitted to own firearms privately and, in many contexts, to carry them in public, with federal law protecting access under the Second Amendment. This legal framework has fueled ongoing societal debates between advocates of stricter gun control and opponents who frame such measures as infringements on individual liberty. These issues intersect with the broader ideological framework of American civil religion, in which the Constitution serves as both a foundational text and a symbol of enduring national values, situated within a conservative political tradition (Zinn, 2016, p. 749; Dorf, 2002, pp. 247–282; Stahl, 2010, pp. 20–48; Frankowski, 2006, p. 84).

[9] *In the American social imaginary, the white, cisgender, heterosexual male is deeply entrenched as the default, natural, and universal social subject. This figure functions as an ideological canon: historical narratives are constructed from his perspective, he is portrayed as the normative standard, and other identities are positioned as the Other—marginalized, supplementary, exoticized, and often subject to stereotyping. This construct is prominently reflected in media and broader cultural texts, where white males frequently occupy roles as protagonists, heroes, and leaders. Such representations both mirror and reinforce existing power structures, normalizing the presumed neutrality and authority of white masculinity and legitimizing its role in cultural, social, and political spheres (Dyer, 2017, pp. 1–40; Hall, 2013, pp. 247–259; Hooks, 1992, pp. 165–179).*

[10] *The game utilizes the increasingly prevalent cover-based shooting mechanic that gained prominence in the latter half of the first decade of the 21st century. Viewed from a third-person perspective (TPP), which positions the camera behind the player character, this mechanic was popularized by the 2006 release of Gears of War (2006), which also introduced a pioneering cover system. Army of Two can thus be understood as adhering to the dominant gameplay conventions of its era, aligning with contemporary trends in dynamic action shooters.*

military. Following the events of September 11, the protagonists are deployed to Afghanistan, with later missions taking them to Iraq, the Philippines, and China. As the narrative develops, they discover a conspiracy involving SSC members, including their former associate Phillip Clyde, and—unexpectedly—their former superior, Richard Dalton. In the final mission, set in Miami, Rios and Salem rescue Alice, eliminate the traitor, and expose the conspiracy. The game concludes with the protagonists establishing their own private military company, TWO, entering the global market for private military operations.

Critical Ideological Analysis of *Army of Two*

In this section, the author examines the ideological layers embedded within *Army of Two*. The analysis is structured to provide a detailed enumeration and description of these elements. Presenting the study in a point-by-point format allows for the precise identification of specific ideological threads and facilitates their alignment with the key features of American political and cultural hegemony outlined earlier in this article. The subsequent discussion addresses each of these elements in turn.

Militarism and Machiavellian Violence

In most FPS (first-person shooter) and TPS (third-person shooter) games, violence is almost invariably presented as the primary means of problem-solving.[11] Before video games popularized the trope of the lone hero whose main tool is force, a similar pattern had already been established in 1980s American cinema.[12] The FPS genre, closely associated with brutality, gained widespread popularity shortly thereafter, driven by landmark releases such as *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992), *Doom* (1993), and *Duke Nukem 3D* (1996). These titles employed FPS mechanics and depicted violence in a manner considered realistic at the time. Both *Doom* and *Duke Nukem 3D* directed aggression at monsters, demons, and extraterrestrial beings, whereas *Wolfenstein 3D*, while portraying violence against humans, cast its antagonists as Nazi and cyborg soldiers and is therefore not regarded as the first game to depict direct attacks on "ordinary" humans.[13] By the late 20th century, as FPS games grew increasingly popular, the United States experienced a wave of protests against video games, with the medium blamed for real-world acts of violence, including school shootings (Voorhees, 2012, p. 99). In 1997, *GoldenEye 007* (1997) became the first FPS to depict violence directly against humans outside of purely fictional or allegorical contexts. Interestingly, it generated less controversy than earlier titles.[14] This period was followed by other prominent releases, including *Medal of Honor* (1999), *Battlefield 1942* (2002), *America's Army* (2002), *Call of Duty* (2003), *Vietcong* (2003), *Men of Valor* (2004), and *Shellshock: Nam '67* (2004). Many of these games present the United States positively and could be interpreted as promoting a pro-American ideological stance. It was precisely during this transitional phase, at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, that depicting violence against humans in FPS games became normalized.[15]

[11] *Given the genealogical background and historical development of so-called shooting games, this trajectory is unsurprising. The origins of shooters can be traced to the late 19th century, when shooting competitions became popular at carnivals and circus performances. In the 1930s, this lineage progressed with electromechanical arcade machines that enabled players to shoot at targets. Notably, both of these early examples reflect the rise and broader popularization of firearms in American civilian life, embedding the use of force—whether symbolic or literal—into the very ontology of these games (Wolf, 2012, pp. 25–38).*

[12] *Films starring actors such as Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Chuck Norris portrayed the figure of the lone soldier, who eliminates enemies in the name of higher principles. These productions were part of the so-called "Reaganomics cinema," a hallmark of Ronald Reagan's political era that glorified strength, individualism, and patriotism. Violence was depicted as both morally justified and effective, establishing a representational template that would later be adopted by digital games. In the 1990s, the video game medium increasingly embraced this model of the solitary, armed protagonist (Plesnar, 1989; Kołacz, 2016).*

[13] *The depiction of opponents as Nazi soldiers significantly mitigated the potential controversy surrounding direct violence against human characters in the video game.*

[14] *As an adaptation of the previous summer's James Bond film, Golden Eye 007 was situated within a familiar narrative context. It established a clear distinction between virtuous government agents and criminal or terrorist adversaries, positioning the player as one of the most recognizable champions of the West from the Cold War era. Equally important, the player, acting as Bond, is engaged in a post-Cold War struggle over the stability of the global economy. Although Bond is technically an English agent tasked with protecting British interests, his actions ultimately serve the global economy of the neoliberal world system. First-person shooter games would soon narrow their scope, sending players into active foreign entanglements to project American power and secure continued access to strategic resources (Voorhees, 2012, p. 104).*

[15] *In Monsters, Nazis, and Tangos: The Normalization of the First-Person Shooter, Gerald Voorhees argues that this normalization resulted from the intensified production of digital games conveying political and ideological messages aligned with U.S. interests. He observes: "Once the targets of public vitriol when players ran around killing demons, zombies, and aliens, now that players are more typically tasked with killing other human beings, FPS games are largely uncontroversial touchstones of contemporary popular culture. Though the cultural status of the FPS vis-à-vis its increasingly realistic depictions of violence seems counterintuitive, I show that public perceptions of FPS games improved as their themes became more militaristic and their narratives more directly supportive of American imperialism. In other words, the normalization of the genre is a result of its imbrication within a powerful regime of truth that articulates militarism, nationalism, and xenophobia to the FPS game form, rendering it an intelligible*

The narrative of *Army of Two* can be read as consistently legitimizing violence as a universal tool of action, portraying it as both effective and morally justified. The protagonists operate in a distinctly Machiavellian manner: the ends justify the means, and all actions are executed with absolute efficiency. Neither Rios, Salem, nor their superiors express ethical hesitation or question the brutal methods used to achieve their objectives. Every mission assumes the elimination of opponents; capture or disarmament is never an option. Negotiation or alternative conflict-resolution strategies are entirely absent. This dynamic may be further understood through Ian Bogost's concept of procedural rhetoric, which emphasizes how video games communicate arguments through the logic of their rule-based systems, not solely through narrative representation (Bogost, 2007, pp. 125–136). In *Army of Two*, violence is not merely depicted as necessary; the game operationalizes this principle by structuring gameplay so that violent action is the only viable and effective mode of engagement.

At the same time, the game's treatment of player agency reveals the constraints imposed on apparent freedom. Following Janet H. Murray, agency in digital environments refers not merely to the ability to act, but to the capacity to take meaningful action and witness its consequences within a system that allows for variation and choice (Murray, 1997, pp. 123–147). In *Army of Two*, however, the range of player actions is fundamentally limited: while the player may choose how to execute violent acts, they cannot choose whether to use them. Non-violent options such as negotiation, avoidance, or capture are unavailable, reducing agency to the optimization of pre-defined militarized behaviors. Thus, the game creates the illusion of freedom while directing players into a single, ideologically consistent mode of interaction.

Machiavellian tendencies are also evident in the game's linguistic layer. During a mission briefing in Afghanistan, Dalton instructs the protagonists: "Everything you see or do down there never happened. Are we clear?" to which Rios and Salem respond unhesitatingly: "Yes, sir." The game frequently uses phrases such as "Take no prisoners" or "Let's waste these guys," which can be interpreted as reinforcing a rhetoric of ruthless force. This communication style functions not merely as military stylization but as an expression of violence internalized as the default problem-solving strategy.

This mindset extends to gameplay mechanics: players are rewarded with virtual currency for each kill. The kill counter and associated bonuses align with a capitalist paradigm in which violence is monetized—here, violent acts are both normalized and incentivized financially. The protagonists' attitudes may further reinforce this interpretation: Rios and Salem unquestioningly follow orders and never reflect on the nature of their missions; every action is executed with readiness and enthusiasm. Their unhesitating loyalty produces a simplified, binary worldview in which the United States can be read as embodying moral order, while opponents appear as absolute evil. The violence carried out by the protagonists serves American national interests, whereas similar actions by non-American characters are consistently demonized. American nationalism is depicted as morally virtuous and constructive, whereas non-American nationalisms are framed as sources of disorder and threat.

At the level of narrative and world-building, *Army of Two* reproduces patterns characteristic of American militarism: global problems are consistently resolved through force. Characters with non-American surnames are immediately identified as enemies. Infrastructure objectives are invariably destroyed or subjected to gunfire. These actions invariably lead to narrative success, which may suggest the effectiveness of the adopted paradigm. Violence is not only "effective" but triumphant, embedded within a logic of agency, rationality, and order. The game offers no alternative: force is both the means and the definitive resolution to every conflict, presented as unequivocally justified.

U.S. Global Hegemony and the Construction of the Other

Army of Two can be interpreted as constructing a coherent geopolitical vision in which the United States functions as a dominant global actor, positioned as both guarantor of international order and primary agent responsible for maintaining global security. This interpretation emerges from the game's narrative, dialogue, spatial design, character construction, and audiovisual elements. Within the logic of the game, the United States is consistently portrayed as a morally privileged actor, whose interventions appear to require no external justification and whose actions are framed as inherently legitimate and beneficial on a global scale.

This hegemonic framework is reinforced through the game's deliberate selection and structuring of space. Of the six main levels, only one occurs within the United States, while the remaining locations—Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Philippines, and China—serve as arenas for American intervention. These spaces are not neutral backdrops; they are represented as unstable, dangerous, and geopolitically dysfunctional, necessitating stabilization by forces aligned with U.S. interests. Such portrayals echo representations in American political and media discourse, which frequently depict these regions as threats, with governments seen as hostile to U.S. interests or incapable of maintaining order independently (Said, 2024, pp. 10–19). The game thus can be interpreted as mirroring a familiar interventionist paradigm associated with U.S. foreign policy, particularly in the post-2001 era, framing global security as dependent on American military presence.

The narrative further naturalizes U.S. authority through explicit rhetorical strategies. For example, Richard Dalton

nodal point in the matrix of American life" (Voorhees, 2012, pp. 89–90).

declares, "The most important factor for us is the security of our nation and our allies," framing American intervention as both defensive and universally beneficial. This discourse mirrors the language of the "War on Terror," particularly that of the George W. Bush administration, which positioned the United States as an indispensable global stabilizer (Bush, 2002). Crucially, the game offers no space for questioning the legitimacy, consequences, or ethical implications of these interventions; American action is presented as self-evidently justified, while inaction is implicitly equated with global disorder.

This geopolitical framework is inseparable from the game's construction of the Other. Non-American adversaries are consistently de-individualized and dehumanized, depicted through visual exaggeration, narrative simplification, and mechanical design. Enemies are portrayed as primitive, irrational, and unprofessional, often using outdated or improvised weaponry, such as post-Soviet rifles[16] (e.g., AK-47s) or makeshift defensive structures. Their appearance—frequently characterized by sandals, improvised clothing, or exaggerated physical features—stands in stark contrast to the technologically advanced, professionally equipped American protagonists.

This asymmetry is reinforced by narrative and linguistic cues. Characters such as the Somali warlord Mo Alim are caricatured and derisive, speaking with exaggerated accents and articulating hostility toward U.S. intervention. Similarly, suicide attackers are depicted according to orientalist tropes, shouting phrases resembling "Allahu Akbar" while charging toward the player. These representations do more than advance the narrative—they actively construct the enemy as irrational, fanatical, and fundamentally incompatible with the disciplined, morally grounded American protagonists.

The process of dehumanization is further amplified through spatial and environmental design. Locations such as Somalia, Iraq, and Afghanistan are depicted as chaotic, underdeveloped, and dominated by violence and disorder, forming a stark contrast with depictions of the United States as modern, technologically advanced, and orderly. Even during crises within the U.S., such as natural disasters, the nation retains an image of structural and technological superiority, exemplified by the futuristic portrayal of Miami. This spatial dichotomy reflects a broader Western cultural imaginary, wherein non-Western spaces are framed as backward, unstable, and in need of external intervention.

This ideological division is also reinforced through gameplay and narrative logic. In five of the six chapters, adversaries are non-white, whereas white opponents—when present—are depicted as traitors to American values. This racialized structuring of conflict aligns with post-9/11 representational patterns, in which threats are externalized and racialized, and American identity is framed as morally and culturally superior. The dismissive attitude toward non-Western environments is articulated explicitly in dialogue, such as Elliot Salem's remark in Somalia: "All this shit looks the same to me," reflecting a logic of cultural erasure and homogenization.

The game's spatial design is not only ideologically selective but also historically anchored. Missions reference real geopolitical events, including the Battle of Mogadishu (1993), the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan following September 11, 2001, and the invasion of Iraq in 2003, with specific locations such as Al-Faw. These references enhance the sense of realism, embedding the fictional narrative within recognizable military interventions. By doing so, the game presents American interventionism as historically grounded, effective, and necessary.

By integrating real-world events into its playable narrative, *Army of Two* transforms historical conflicts into simulations in which players can symbolically resolve geopolitical tensions. This reinforces a hegemonic worldview: global instability is a series of crises requiring U.S. intervention, and military action is the primary—often sole—means of restoring order. From a critical perspective, this can reinforce a binary worldview: the United States as rational, orderly, and morally legitimate, and the rest of the world as chaotic and threatening.

Audiovisual elements further consolidate this ideological framework. In levels set in Iraq and Afghanistan, the soundtrack incorporates stylized "Arab" motifs designed to evoke otherness, danger, and exoticism. As Matthew Head notes, such orientalist strategies are part of a broader Western tradition of using musical cues to signify irrationality, hostility, or cultural difference. Comparable techniques appear in *Halo: Combat Evolved* (Bungie, 2001), where Qawwali-inspired[17] chant marks the enemy as culturally and morally distinct.[18] In *Army of Two*, these auditory cues operate alongside visual and narrative elements to produce a coherent sensory experience, reinforcing the perception of non-Western spaces as threatening and unfamiliar. This

[16] *Although this geopolitical stereotype contains elements of factual basis—given that many countries in the region did indeed rely on weaponry inherited from the former Soviet Union—within Army of Two it is exaggerated and compressed to such an extent that these locations emerge as caricatured, almost hyperbolic representations of political and cultural realities.*

[17] *Qawwali, a form of energetic musical performance originating in India and Pakistan, consists of Sufi Muslim poetry intended to lead listeners into a state of religious ecstasy and spiritual union with Allah (God). The genre gained international exposure in the late 20th century, largely due to promotion by the world-music industry (see Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.).*

[18] *The previously identified non-Western vocal element is described by O'Donnell as "an improvised Qawwali chant voiced over the top to help reinforce the 'alien' nature of the environment" (Summers, 2016, p. 21).*

phenomenon is analyzed by Matthew Head in the publication *Musicology on Safari*, where he identifies a broader Western tendency to deploy orientalist musical motifs as signifiers of exoticism, irrationality, or hostility (Head, 2003, p. 216). In the case of *Army of Two*, these auditory cues, combined with visual and narrative design, can reinforce perceptions of non-Western spaces as threatening.

Fetishization of Military Technology

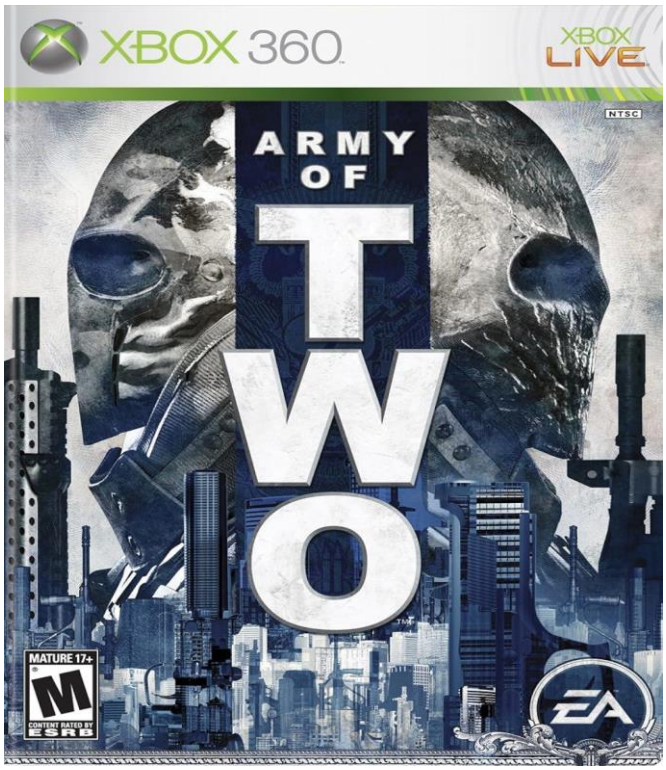
In *Army of Two*, military technology occupies a central role both within gameplay mechanics and the broader aesthetic framework of the game. The visual and functional presentation of weaponry is strongly emphasized, transforming firearms and equipment into focal points of player interaction. The arsenal available to the player is not merely an instrument of virtual violence; it is embedded in an extensive system of modifications and upgrades, purchasable both between and during missions.

This system is closely tied to the game's internal economy, in which financial resources are primarily obtained through completing objectives and eliminating enemies. As a result, a self-reinforcing loop emerges, which may be summarized as follows: "kill America's enemies to earn funds for weapons that will allow you to kill more enemies more effectively"—a paraphrase of one of the original tips displayed on the game's loading screen.[19] From a critical perspective, this loop can be read as exemplifying Ian Bogost's concept of procedural rhetoric, whereby the rules and systems of a game communicate arguments through their operation—in this case, suggesting that violence is not only effective but also necessary and desirable for progression (Bogost, pp. 125–136).

Consequently, the weapons system operates not only as a gameplay mechanic but may also be interpreted as a symbolic and ideological device. Violence becomes associated with efficiency, and enhanced tools of elimination translate into advancement within the game's structure. The apparent fetishization of military equipment is further reinforced by the inclusion of advanced vehicles, communication technologies, and other elements associated with special forces operations. This dynamic can be productively read through Roger Stahl's concept of "militainment, in which military technologies are integrated into popular culture in ways that render them attractive, entertaining, and ideologically normalized (Stahl, pp. 20–48).

A particularly illustrative example of this logic is visible in the game's graphic design, including its cover art (see figure no. 1), where urban skyscrapers are stylized as the barrels of firearms. This visual strategy symbolically merges civilian and military spaces, reinforcing the dominance of militarized perspectives and emphasizing the aestheticization of warfare as both normalized and desirable within the game world.

Figure 1: Cover art of *Army of Two* for the Xbox 360 version:



The skyscrapers and high-rise buildings on the game's cover art are stylized to resemble firearms. Weaponry constitutes one of the most prominent visual elements of the cover.

Patriarchy and Militarized Masculinity

Army of Two features only one female character, Alice Murray, who serves as an operational coordinator within the private military company SSC. She does not participate in direct combat, a role reserved exclusively for male characters. Alice's representation is constructed in a dual manner. On one hand, she is depicted in ways that may be described as "unfeminine": short hair, sharp demeanor, tattoos, gender-neutral clothing, and baseball cap symbolically align her with a masculine code of military competence. On the other hand, she is subject to sexualization consistent with Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze,[20] in which women are objectified from the perspective of a heteronormative male viewer. In Alice's case, physical traits conventionally associated with female attractiveness are accentuated, yet her narrative position affords her limited agency. At key moments in the story, she requires rescue by the male protagonists,

[19] *The original wording of the tip displayed on the game's loading screen states: "Use your cash to buy bigger guns to take out enemies faster."*

[20] *The term is widely used to describe sexism and the sexual objectification of women in popular culture. In her seminal essay Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, Mulvey argues that Hollywood filmmakers employ the camera to reflect male desire, assuming a heterosexual male viewer. While male characters are depicted as active protagonists driving the narrative, women are portrayed as passive objects, serving both as narrative props and as fetishes of male sexual fantasy (McCann et al., 2019, p. 164).*

conforming to the archetype of the heroic protectors of a woman in danger—the classic "damsel in distress."

The patriarchal order of the game world is further reinforced through dialogue. The protagonists' language frequently exhibits male chauvinism and sexism, expressed both in humor and verbal aggression directed at Murray. Such interactions reproduce norms of hegemonic masculinity, reinforcing a naturalized division of roles and underscoring the conservative and patriarchal structures embedded within the game's narrative and social logic.

Cult of the Army and Revisionist National Triumph

Army of Two can be interpreted as constructing a highly idealized vision of the American military, portraying it not only as an efficient and disciplined institution but, more importantly, as a moral foundation of the nation and a privileged bearer of its core values. Within the game's ideological framework, the armed forces are elevated above other state structures and positioned as the ultimate guarantor of national integrity, ethical order, and historical continuity. This pattern may be read as contributing to what can be described as a "cult of the army," in which the military is not merely respected but symbolically sacralized.

A key dimension of this construction lies in the contrast between institutional and privatized military power. While the protagonists operate within a private military corporation, the narrative simultaneously suggests that the "true" army must remain outside the logic of profit. Unlike other sectors of American political and economic life, which are implicitly governed by market rationality, the military is depicted as guided by higher principles—duty, honor, and sacrifice. This contrast can be interpreted as conveying an implicit moral lesson: the armed forces constitute the only legitimate domain of state power that should not be subordinated to neoliberal logic, as their mission is historically and ethically transcendent.

This ideological elevation is exemplified by a U.S. Navy captain who sacrifices his life to prevent a terrorist attack. Refusing the possibility of escape, he declares: "No can do, soldier. The Captain always goes down with the ship. Honor and duty." His death embodies a motif deeply rooted in American war cinema—the heroic self-sacrifice performed in the name of collective security and moral obligation. In contrast to the protagonists, whose actions are shaped by contractual logic and operational efficiency, the captain represents a purer, almost archetypal form of military virtue, reinforcing the symbolic hierarchy between institutional service and privatized violence.

The game's linguistic layer further sacralizes the army. The consistent capitalization of the word "Army," regardless of grammatical context, functions as a persistent marker of reverence, elevating the institution to quasi-symbolic status within the narrative. This is reinforced by the title *Army of Two*, which directly echoes the U.S. Army recruitment slogan "Army of One" (U.S. Army, 2001), emphasizing individualism, self-reliance, and personal heroism—values closely associated with American military culture. Such elements can be interpreted as reinforcing a broader cultural discourse of exceptionalism, though they may also operate as recognizable cultural references designed to resonate with players.

At the level of character construction, the protagonists themselves embody a stylized version of the "masculine soldier" archetype, drawing on conventions established in American action cinema. Their muscular physiques, military attire, tattoos, and association with gun culture situate them within a recognizable visual and cultural code. Their unreflective obedience to orders and internalized sense of duty further reinforce their positioning as national heroes. Within this framework, violence, warfare, and domination are not only normalized but also aestheticized, presented as desirable components of identity and lifestyle.

This glorification of the military is closely intertwined with a second mechanism: the revisionist reconfiguration of historical conflict. Like many Western war shooters, *Army of Two* engages with themes drawn from real-world geopolitical events, offering players the opportunity to symbolically "correct" or reframe outcomes that were ambiguous or unresolved in reality.[21] This is particularly evident in the game's selective representation of historical figures. While the game includes an indirect reference to Saddam Hussein—whose defeat was already integrated into the American narrative of military success—it conspicuously omits any mention of Osama bin Laden, despite his central role in the events forming the game's narrative backdrop.

[21] *In this context, a particularly striking narrative device is the subplot involving an aircraft carrier—converted into a bomb and loaded with nuclear materials—commandeered by terrorists on a kamikaze mission toward the capital of the Philippines. This motif clearly references the events of September 11, 2001, while intensifying them through the addition of a nuclear threat with the potential for far greater casualties. Simultaneously, the scenario foregrounds both the agency of the protagonists—contrasted with the perceived ineffectiveness of U.S. intelligence agencies during 9/11—and the heroism of an American naval captain who sacrifices his life to save a foreign nation. The episode also evokes the maxim "For our freedom and yours," implying a moral imperative for intervention. Within this framework, two assumptions are implicitly reinforced: first, that Americans inherently know what is best for other nations; and second, that they are willing to make the ultimate sacrifice without seeking consent from those they assist. Moreover, the Philippine–American War (1899–1902) represents one of the many historical manifestations of American imperialism. Following the game's pattern of situating missions in historically resonant locations, it is likely that the Philippines were chosen not merely for their "exotic" geographical setting.*

This omission is significant. At the time of the game's release in 2008, bin Laden remained at large, symbolizing unresolved trauma and tension within American public consciousness. Including him could have disrupted the game's coherent narrative of control and triumph. Instead, the game replaces historically specific adversaries with a generalized, anonymized figure of the "terrorist," allowing for a more flexible and simplified representation of conflict. This abstraction allows the player to engage in acts of symbolic retribution without confronting the complexities or uncertainties associated with real-world events.

In this sense, *Army of Two* can be understood as a digital space of revisionism, in which historical experiences are reconfigured through the logic of gameplay and narrative closure. The player achieves victories that remain incomplete or contested in reality, transforming uncertainty into resolution and trauma into triumph. The virtual battlefield becomes a site where the United States can reassert its dominance, not through historical accuracy, but through the controlled and repeatable logic of gameplay.

U.S. Symbolism and Iconography

Army of Two prominently foregrounds elements associated with American civil religion, embedding national symbols throughout its visual and interactive design. The game features iconic motifs such as the eagle, stars, and waving American flags, which serve to reinforce the ideological framing of the United States as a morally and culturally exceptional actor. Even the in-game interface for purchasing and upgrading weapons reflects this "Americocentric" orientation, with visual elements subtly echoing the geographical outline of the United States. Through these design choices, the game naturalizes national identity and subtly aligns player actions with American ideological and cultural narratives.

Conclusion

Analyzed through the lens of Antonio Gramsci's theory of political and cultural hegemony and Louis Althusser's concept of Ideological State Apparatuses, *Army of Two* emerges as a particularly salient example of how video games reproduce and reinforce dominant American ideology. Both its narrative design and gameplay mechanics consistently align with key determinants of U.S. political and cultural hegemony, including the fetishization of militarism, the legitimization of international interventionism, the promotion of American exceptionalism, the orientalization and dehumanization of non-Western Others, and the reinforcement of a conservative social order.

Framed as an action-oriented entertainment shooter, the game operates as an ideological apparatus: it normalizes and valorizes U.S. military power, presenting violence and domination as not only effective but morally justified and necessary. In this sense, *Army of Two* functions as a digital carrier of "common-sense imperialism," in which global supremacy and interventionist logic are presented as natural, self-evident, and desirable. The title, therefore, cannot be treated as a neutral text of popular culture; it actively participates in constructing, maintaining, and disseminating American political and cultural hegemony.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that many of the elements identified in this analysis—such as the privileging of combat, the structuring of enemies, or the emphasis on military spectacle—may also be understood as products of established genre conventions and industry practices. From the perspective of hegemony, however, such explanations do not negate their ideological significance. On the contrary, it is precisely through their apparent naturalness, repetition, and familiarity that these elements acquire their cultural force. Ideology, in this sense, operates not primarily through explicit or intentional messaging, but through taken-for-granted forms, mechanics, and representations that shape both player action and interpretation. The patterns identified in *Army of Two* can therefore be read not as isolated or necessarily deliberate constructions, but as manifestations of broader hegemonic structures embedded within the discourse of military video games.

The analysis also highlights the value of applying a critical, Marxist-informed approach to game studies. Future research could extend this framework to additional titles within the military shooter genre, as well as to games in ostensibly neutral contexts that may nevertheless reproduce ideological content. Moreover, incorporating reception-oriented perspectives would allow scholars to investigate how players internalize or resist hegemonic messages, offering insight into the broader cultural impact and political function of contemporary digital games.[22]

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[22] It is noteworthy that, in contemporary reviews of *Army of Two*, critics largely neglected any consideration of the game's ideological dimensions. This omission underscores the effectiveness of hegemony, which exerts its greatest influence precisely when it operates transparently, appearing "natural" and "neutral" to its audience.

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