Is civil war ever justified?

Previous compulsory steps / Prior students' knowledge	None
Learning objectives	Students will critically engage with civil wars and be able to identify the ethical concerns of civil wars with reference to the civil war in Syria.
Subjects	History, Politics, Philosophy of Ethics
Recommended Age	15-18
Material needed	Laptop
Sequence duration	150 minutes (2.5 hours)
Individual or group activity	Group activity
Expected production	Group assignment on the notion of civil war
Skills developed	Collaboration & teamwork, critical thinking, research, ethics, empathy, historical comprehension
Price range of the game	>20€
Tips for shorter duration	To make this sequence shorter you could change the duration of the playing session. In addition, you could skip Step 3 (Group assignment) and go directly to the group discussion. Another option would be to ask your students to complete their group work as a homework.

Tips to make the sequences more accessible or inclusive	It is important to take some time to talk with students who are refugees or who have been affected by war. Make sure they feel comfortable to participate in the class. It is important to note that this sequence is used to explain the effects of war on a society and not to promote war or any aspect of it!

Step by step: how to implement the sequence

In this sequence, students will play "Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare", which takes place in a fictional city in the Middle East where a coup d'état leads to a civil war with foreign powers supporting different actors and escalating the conflict (Call of Duty wiki, n.d.).

This sequence uses "Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare" to analyse the reasons behind the outbreak of civil wars, discuss ethical considerations relater to civil conflicts and identify possible justifications for the outbreaks of civil war. Despite referring to a fictional conflict, "Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare" makes statements about the role of Middle Eastern countries, Russia, the UK, and the US in how the conflict evolves throughout the game. The game creates a realistic atmosphere with many similarities to real civil wars that took place before and after the game was established, like the civil war in Syria that broke out in 2011 (5 years after the game was released).

The game is available on steam, and it costs 19.99€. You can use this link:
https://store.steampowered.com/app/7940/Call_of_Duty_4_Modern_Warfare/.

Limitations of the game:

- The game includes war-related material and it involves shooting and killing. These topics might be sensitive for some students. You should make sure all students are comfortable with the topic of the game before proceeding with this sequence.

- **Step 1: Introduction to the historical context (15 minutes)**

The game "Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare" refers to the outbreak of a civil conflict, following a political assassination, in a fictional county in the Middle East (gamefabrique.com, n.d.). The story involves the participation of foreign powers, like Russia, the US, and the UK in the politics of the Middle East, changing the way the conflict evolves and leading to further conflicts.

Even though the location of the game and the main characters are fictional, the political developments throughout the game plot are very similar to real civil wars in the Middle Eastern region.

Although the game was released in 2007, it has many similarities to the civil war in Syria that broke out in 2011. You should introduce the Syrian civil war to your students before the playing session to help them make connections between "Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare" and real historical events.

An introductory video on Syrian civil war:

- [The war in Syria explained in five minutes - Youtube](): short video introducing the causes that lead to the outbreak of the civil war in Syria.

- **Step 2: Playing session (60 minutes)**

In this sequence, "Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare" is used to introduce the notion of civil war to students by providing a simulation environment. While playing, the students should discuss whether civil wars could ever be justified. Players will have the opportunity to play as characters from different countries, like the US and the UK.

Image 1: Steam, "Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare", (https://store.steampowered.com/app/7940/Call_of_Duty_4_Modern_Warfare/).

Throughout this gaming session, students should identify the main causes of civil war. While playing, the students should try to understand the perspective of all characters, not just the ones they are portraying.

Divide the students into groups of 3-4 students, and ask them to play the game. Some students will play first, while the others will observe how the game evolves, and then they will change roles.

Questions for the observers:

- Why is there a civil war in "Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare"?
- Can you identify similarities between this game and real civil wars you know about?
- Can you name 5 negative effects of a civil war?

Questions for the players:

- How did the civil war break out?
- What is the role of the foreign powers in the video game?
- Do you think the game is realistic?
- Did this game affect your opinion on civil wars? If so, how?

- **Step 3: Group assignment (60 minutes)**

Following the playing session, the students should be familiar with the notion of civil war and the effects it has on people. Then, each group should write an essay on their chosen topic. This could also be part of students' homework.

Suggestions for essay topics:

- To what extent can a civil war be justified?
- Why do civil wars break out?
- What role do foreign powers play in civil wars?
- How could civil wars be avoided?
- Analyse the main ethical considerations of civil war.

- **Step 4: Group Discussion (15 minutes)**

After writing their essays, all students will come together to discuss whether a civil war is ever justified.

In this group discussion, students should refer to the civil war in Syria. Do they note any similarities between the fictional war in "Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare" and the Syrian civil war? What is the role of foreign powers in the Syrian civil war and what similarities did they identify with the video game?

As this is a somewhat controversial topic you should make sure that all students feel comfortable sharing their thoughts.

References:

"The war in Syria explained in five minutes". Youtube video, 5:28. Posted by "The Guardian", September 18 2013. https://youtu.be/K5H5w3_QTG0.

Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare. https://gamefabrique.com/games/call-of-duty-4-modern-warfare/.

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Steam. (2007). "Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare". https://store.steampowered.com/app/7940/Call_of_Duty_4_Modern_Warfare/.