

Reflections on Violence and Death in Critical War Games

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Abstract

Death and violence are prominent features in video games centered around war. These are largely dominated by hegemonic war/military games that – among other things – render them an “authentic” and pleasurable experience to be engaged in. In this dissertation, I focus on critical war games that oppose these, and question how these manage to kindle reflection about violence and death in their respective gaming communities. For this, I have dedicated myself to the study of three specific games. I have mainly used two methods: autoethnography, where I played the games myself to gain a better understanding of them and participant observation to capture the experiences and reflections of others. My findings are diverse and have to be understood within the contours of each game. However, what underpins these games is their ability to be perceived “realistic” when it comes to representing war. This is done through creating a digital death world that functions on negative emotions, rather than fun or pleasure. As discussed by others, there is a dynamic relation between having negative emotions and perceiving something as realistic or authentic. Interesting for this research, is the fact that having negative emotions while being engaged in killing and mortality, offers players a foundation for reflection. The player is encouraged to first feel and then think. These reflections go beyond digital play and questions some important aspects of war, violence and death, such as the futility of war. Moreover, having these negative emotions and reflections gives the player a better understanding in the lived experiences of both victims and perpetrators of war alike.

Abstract (Nederlandse vertaling)

Dood en geweld zijn prominente kenmerken in video games waarin oorlog centraal staat. Deze games worden grotendeels gedomineerd door hegemonische oorlogs-/militaire games die er - onder andere - voor zorgen dat ze een "authentieke" en plezierige ervaring zijn om mee bezig te zijn. In dit eindwerk richt ik me op kritische oorlogsgames die hiertegen ingaan, en vraag ik me af hoe deze erin slagen om reflectie over geweld en dood aan te wakkeren in hun respectievelijke online game communities. Hiervoor heb ik drie specifieke games bestudeerd. Ik heb voornamelijk twee methoden gebruikt: auto-etnografie, waarbij ik zelf de games speelde om ze beter te begrijpen, en “participant observation” om de ervaringen en reflecties van anderen vast te leggen. Mijn bevindingen zijn divers en moeten worden begrepen binnen de contouren van elk spel. Wat echter ten grondslag ligt aan deze games, is hun vermogen om als “realistisch” te worden beschouwd bij hun representatie van oorlog. Dit wordt gerealiseerd door het creëren van een “digital death world” dat zich baseert op negatieve emoties, in plaats van op plezier. Zoals door anderen besproken, is er een dynamische relatie tussen het hebben van negatieve emoties en

iets als realistisch of authentiek ervaren. Interessant voor dit onderzoek is het feit dat het hebben van negatieve emoties, terwijl de spelers zich engageren in moord en de dood, een basis voor reflectie biedt. De speler wordt aangemoedigd om eerst te voelen en dan na te denken. Deze reflecties gaan verder dan het digitaal spelen en stellen enkele belangrijke aspecten van oorlog, geweld en dood in vraag, zoals de zinloosheid van oorlog. Bovendien geeft het hebben van deze negatieve emoties en reflecties de speler een beter begrip van de geleefde ervaringen van zowel slachtoffers als daders van oorlog.

Acknowledgments

There is no question that writing your first master dissertation is a massive undertaking: from finding an interesting research topic, to the engagement with the field, to the writing process itself. My fascination and passion for video games and their ability to influence us, made this undertaking far more digestible than I had hoped for. Instead of playing them, I always wanted to write about them, so this dissertation was the perfect opportunity to do so.

Throughout this endeavor, I learned a lot. It gave me an opportunity to learn and enhance my academic and writing skills, I found new and interesting perspectives, learned to digest larger quantities of information and it helped me to improve my writing skills in English. I also learned a lot about myself as a person and about my ambitions further on in life.

It is however, no solo adventure. Therefore I want to take the opportunity to thank a few people:

I want to thank my promoter, Haripriya Soibam, for accompanying me throughout this journey. You were always available for giving me feedback, giving me new insights and having virtual meet-ups to discuss my work. It was nice working with you, despite it being virtual.

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For everyone reading this: I hope this dissertation will give you insight in what video games manage to do, and how it is a digital media format that we should not underestimate as researchers.

Samuel Lutters, 11/08/2021

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1. Introduction

In Western culture, dying happens behind closed doors, in specialized institutions such as hospitals and nursing homes. At the same time, death and in extension, violence, is omnipresent in our digital media, such as in movies, gore sites, and video games. The difference that distinguishes video games from other digital media, is the active involvement one has in the perpetration of violence and death. This sense of agency, makes the study of video games in this case particularly interesting.

Representations of death and violence are dominated by hegemonic war/military games, portraying war unrealistically and as a form of pleasure. It would be naive to assume that these representations do not have any consequences in the real world. Countering these hegemonic representations of war, are the critical war games managing to portray war (and thus also violence and death) differently. With this research, I am interested in the latter and how they initiate reflection among their player base concerning acts of violence and death within war.

Therefore, I focused on three critical war games: *This War of Mine*, *Spec Ops: The Line* and *Valiant Hearts*.¹ To analyze them, I played them myself, using the method of autoethnography in combination with the method of participant observation, in their respective online game communities.² With the last method, I captured the experiences and reflections of these gamers.

Aiding my research, I will use the concept of “digital death worlds” and ask myself the question how these games are part of these death worlds. Complementary to that, I use concepts as “hegemonic military/war games” and “critical war games”, to capture their opposition towards each other.³ With this, I hope to shed light on the differences between the two, according to the players, since these also interact with how players perceive, experience and reflect upon violence and death.

¹ All video games from now on, are cited in the “ludography” at the end of this dissertation. I omitted the in-text citation because I am limited in the amount of words I use, and because it became too obstructive for the reader. The three games I studied are found in a different sub-section within the “ludography”.

² Important here is my dual-role as researcher/player. I am a frequent gamer, so if I refer to “we”, further on in this dissertation, I am including myself.

³ This does not mean that they are in ultimate opposition of each other. As I will argue later on, they are far more ambiguous than they seem to be, with critical games (often “indie games”) copying elements from their counterparts, and vice versa. Strategic alliances are made between them, so it is difficult to see them as binary opposition from each other.

1.1. Problem statement & academic relevance

Little research within game studies has been conducted that centers players and their experiences. As Jørgensen (2012) argued, most scholars tend to focus on their own gameplay to gain a better understanding of video games. With this research, I tend to add to this existing gap, by placing the players and their individualized, subjective reflections central.

Secondly, existing literature on how death and violence are enacted within the digital sphere of video games is limited. This is especially lacking when it comes to the “critical war game”, able to offer resistance to the dominant representations of violence and death within hegemonic military/war games. I hope to add to this literature, by conceptualizing the prominence of death and violence in video games as “digital death worlds”, a concept used by Phillips (2018). Together with Phillips (2018), I build further on Mbembe’s (2003) work of “necropolitics” to account for the politics of death and dying, but in the digital realm of video games. This doesn’t mean that my research will be limited to the digital. As I show, the representation of mortality, killing and violence has important consequences in the real world.

Important is that I hope to contest the prominent relationship between pleasure and the engagement in mortality and violence, by showing how critical war games are able to do the adversary: cause negative emotions. I argue that they are a foundation for reflection and thought.

Finally, regarding the usage of my methods, I extend on the methodology of doing digital fieldwork. Its physical counterpart is still the standard in anthropology, and I hope to show that its digital version is equally rewarding, both during the pandemic and outside of it.

1.2. Research question and sub-questions

Research question:

How can critical war games kindle reflection about violence and death within their respective gaming communities?⁴

Sub-questions⁵:

- How are video games dealing with war part of so-called “digital death worlds”?
- How do players compare critical war games to hegemonic military/war games in terms of reflections on violence and death?

⁴ Of course I am also going to present these reflections. However, I mainly want to capture how they manage to initiate them, since this makes the research more applicable to generalizations. Through capturing their reflections, I get insight in how critical games manage to evoke them.

⁵ Both sub-questions relate back to the main research question. The first question is more conceptual and helps understanding the prominence of violence and death in video games. The second question helps identifying certain aspects that are central to the critical war game and that form the foundation of many reflections that my preliminary research revealed.

2. Conceptual framework

In this short chapter I give an overview of the two concepts that I will use as an analytical lens to look at the data I gathered. First, I discuss what I mean by “digital death worlds”, thereafter I move to hegemonic and critical video games.

2.1. Digital death worlds

There is no questioning the omnipresent of violent mortality in the entertainment genre of video games. Whereas the more traditional media of cinema uses death as a spectacle to entertain us, video games entertain us through enacting in the violence ourselves. We don't watch someone get killed, but we often actively contribute in it.

A lot of ink has already been spilled on the hypothetical causal relation between violence in video games, and violent behavior in real life. While there is not quite a consensus, there is a broad agreement that no such link exists. I do not wish to expand upon these debates with this research. Instead, I want to gain a deeper anthropological – and to a lesser extent, philosophical – understanding of how violence and death functions in these digital spaces of video games, and how players act, reflect and think about it. To understand this, I conceptualize the existence these digital spaces as “digital death worlds” used by Phillips (2018) and its relation to her conceptualization of “mechropolitics”.

Mechropolitics obviously refers to Mbembe's (2003) concept of necropolitics, which is used to explain the governing of death, tied to racial politics, one-sided wars; settler colonialism, and more. Specific populations are then subjugated to death or are left in a status of “the living death” in which entire communities are limited in the chances of life. To account for the digital, and more specifically to account for video games, Phillips (2018) coins the term mechropolitics, by combining “necropolitics” and “mechanics”. Phillips (2018) explains:

Video games construct death and dying as both technological processes and gamic goals, turning them into mechanisms and mechanics that structure the activity of gaming: for fun, frustration, or fairness. The systems that comprise video games determine who may live and who may die and in what manner according to the interlocking scripts of rules, procedures, and narratives. (p. 173)

Power is thus encapsulated into the game and determines who is eligible to die and who is not. The idea that mortality of the player itself is limited to “die and try again” (respawning), while opponents are completely vanished when killed is an excellent example of how a game possess the power to decide who dies and who lives.⁶

Important is the fact that Phillips (2018) acknowledges the fact that death in-game is completely different from death in real life. The fact that digital bodies of video games suffer representational violence rather than real violence is the key difference between Mbembe’s (2003) necropolitics and her concept of mechropolitics. However, while a different violence is applied within video games in opposition to real life, Phillips (2018) notes that it nevertheless constitutes part of the technological apparatus that contributes to what Mbembe (2003) calls “death-worlds” (p. 40). Chun (2011, as cited in Phillips, 2018) explains, computers have a huge impact on the governmentality by direct management of populations, but also by structuring the way we think about how society functions. Video games are part of it and are able to make arguments and influence people, also about death and violence. Phillips (2018) explains:

The ludic and narrative structures of many contemporary video games create digital death worlds that allow and even encourage gamers to play with dying and killing, so it is important to think about how these cultural products fit into a wider milieu of domination by death. (p.138)

These simulated death worlds are then enacted with what she calls “mechropolitics”: “a virtual, often whimsical, politics of death and dying with complicated resonances in the real world” (Phillips, 2018, p. 138). Phillips (2018) further explains that mechropolitics makes death fun, both as a visual spectacle, but also as a cooperative activity with a machine and with the functions of the game. It is on these digital death worlds where mechropolitics is enacted, that I wish to expand upon in this research.

⁶ The manner in which digital characters die is extremely varied. An example that Phillips (2018) mentions in discussing “the mechanical” of mechropolitics, are the ragdoll physics. Often they are implemented to add variety to the death animations, which makes them essentially endless. When an in-game avatar dies, they fall to the ground in an original fashion with limbs moving in different directions. They are a desire for more realism, but they also cause unintentional comedy since they are often notoriously glitchy. The mechropolitical function of the ragdoll is then that it objectifies the body, bypassing its agency since it is subjected to the physical forces of the game (Phillips, 2018).

2.2. Hegemonic and critical games

Ideological assumptions underpin almost every video game we play. Despite common reactions denoting games as useless leisure, unworthy to investigate, video games often have more meaning behind them than we would first assume. Many scholars have dedicated themselves to study how ideology is disseminated through this relative new form of interactive media. Frasca (2003, as cited in Hayse, 2014) for example, approaches video game analysis within an ideological framework, suggesting that video game representations convey the ideological perspectives of their designers. However, the most cited academic studying ideology in video games, is definitely Bogost (2007).

Bogost (2007) introduces the concept of “procedural rhetoric”, meaning that video game rules, operations and practices make persuasive arguments about the world and its order. As Bogost (2007) further explains, this procedural rhetoric is not only applicable to the so-called serious games movement, which sought to create video games supporting social and cultural positions (games for institutional goals, such as learning), but is also common for commercial successful games. “Commercial games may be less deliberate in their rhetoric, but they are not necessarily free from ideological framing; such games may display complex procedural rhetorics with or without conscious intention of the designers” (Bogost, 2007, p. 112).

With this in mind, there is no questioning the fact that many contemporary military/war games ought to be seen in the context of ideological frames. In some games this is overtly visible, such as with *America’s Army*, a government-funded first-person shooter (FPS) game released by the U.S. Army in 2002 (Bogost, 2007). In other, more commercial games, such as *Call of Duty* or *Battlefield*, this is more covertly. Many scholars, such as such as Robinson (2012), Crogan (2011), Pöttsch (2017), Payne (2016), Lenoir and Lowood (2003), Stahl (2010) and more, have given academic attention towards the intersections between the military and video games, or the so-called “military-entertainment complex”. These studies mostly engage with hegemonic representations of death, violence, war, and more, seen in military/war games. While these analyses do not focus on the possibility of causality between in-game violence and societal violence, most academics agree on the fact that these ideological militaristic meanings are altering players perceptions about real war, violence and death. For example, Pöttsch and Hammond (2019) note:

Our inquiries are underpinned by the conviction that games and play matter – that how we represent and playfully re-enact past and present wars has implications for how we see

these wars, how we perceive our own role in them, how we remember them – and how we might react to future military engagements. (p. 1)

In explaining this, they subscribe to Matthew Thomas Payne's (2016) view that "the act of gaming is always inextricably connected to extant material forces", and that a "complex but co-evolving dialectic" connects the physical world and virtual realm of play (p. 4, 11).

On the other hand, we also see an emergence of critical games, capable of approaching war in a different way. Resistance is however, not solely restricted to the creation of critical games.

Robinson (2012) identifies three possible ways of resistance: 1) social protest within game space, 2) subversion of games through a process called "modding" and 3) through the creation of critical military games.⁷ For this research, I am interested in the more critical military/war games, providing a more dissident or counter-hegemonic perspective on war. Less academics – but still a considerable amount, such as Pöttsch (2017) and Keogh (2013) have dedicated themselves to the study of these games. However, as academics, we have to be wary to not see both hegemonic and critical games as extreme opposites of each other.

With these concepts in mind, I will now tend to a discussion of the existing literature needed to ground my research.

⁷ I will come back to the other possibilities of resistance towards the so-called "military-entertainment complex".

3. Literature study

3.1. The existence of “digital death worlds” in gaming

Imagine sitting behind your computer, playing a video game after a long work-day. After a small cutscene, the first thing that appears on screen before you start playing is: “you are not expected to survive”. Immediately, you get transported into the body of a soldier, seeing everything through his eyes: mud, broken down houses, barbed wire, bodies that scatter the desolated and bombed landscape... The Western front of World War One, never looked so immersive and chaotic. A black soldier appears before you and commands you to hold the line, as German soldiers start appearing at the horizon, attacking your position. With your light-machine gun, you start firing at every advancing soldier, mowing them down, one for one. Eventually, too many Germans appear and you get overwhelmed by the continuous enemy fire. Your vision becomes blurry, everything appears to be in slow-motion, and you pass away. The camera zooms out and the following text appears on screen: “Clarence Point Coupee: 1900-1918”. In the meantime you hear the narrator saying: “We came from all over the world, so many of us thinking this war would be our rite of passage, our great adventure. Let me tell you, it was no adventure”. Immediately, you switch to another soldier, operating a mounted machine gun, mowing down the German soldiers who are now flooding the trenches before you. Once again, you get overwhelmed and die. Once again you see the name of your soldier appear on screen: “James Johnson: 1892-1918”. The narrator tells you: “New killing machines, like the tank, changed the shape of the war overnight. Luckily they were mostly on our side, mostly.” Now you get transported into a soldier sitting in a tank, rolling over the desolated landscape, launching a counter-attack. Through the scope of your tank cannon, you see German soldiers, running away from the newly mechanical beasts of that era. In the distance you see some soldiers, standing, lying or crying: shellshocked ones merge with the wounded and with those still able to take on a fight...

This fragment is from the popular military First Person Shooter (FPS) *Battlefield 1*, set in WWI.⁸ There is no shortage of similar gamic experiences that centralize violence and death so immensely. This is not solely true for fragments of games based on historical events, but also fantasy and science fiction games have their sheer amount of mortality and traumatic moments. In analogy with

⁸ The game is mostly known for its multiplayer component where two teams of players oppose each other in frantic warfare. The fragment above is from the single player component or “campaign”, focusing on six different chapters, each dedicated to the personal story of one soldier.

Phillips (2018), I see these digital spaces as “digital death worlds” encouraging us to engage with violence and death, that we inflict on other digital avatars and on ourselves. But can we actually speak of digital worlds in video games? How do they manage to seem convincing to players, and how do they relate to real life?

Video games give players opportunities to do things otherwise not possible in real life. You can become a pilot without prior training and fly a virtual plane, engage with creatures such as elves, orcs or other mythical/fantastical creatures, or become a soldier in a historical setting, such as in the fragment above. Moreover, they convince the players that the world they visit, is real, without actually being there.

This is done through a process that we call world building. The most powerful tool for world building is lore: a type of mythos. It consists of any element in the game – text, visuals, or other design elements – that contextualizes a game’s world. Lore offers players a feeling that the diegetic world has existed long before them and will exist long after them. The idea of a fantastical or a historical world, and the possibility of doing something which would otherwise not be possible, distinguishes the digital world from the real world (Anderson, 2019).

In these spaces, real life rules are suspended and new rules apply. Because of that, the space you inhabit, can be seen as separate from that of the real. Interestingly, Hong (2015) suggests that these game-worlds constitute a form of Turner’s (1969 as cited in Hong, 2015) so-called “liminoids”. For Turner (1969 as cited in Hong, 2015), premodern events such as calendric festivals and religious rites de passage were considered liminal, since they acted as exceptional spaces for consolidation, experimentation, and/or transformation of the social structure. Important in this regard, is that they were still built into the collective flow of “actual social life” (Turner, 1969 as cited in Hong, 2015). In relation to video games, Hong (2015) notes: “in contrast, modern liminoids are autonomous “realities” clearly demarcated from social structure and optionally entered into. Liminoids reify leisure as their primary work, and fulfil this function by producing reductive, bounded worlds” (p. 38). Hong (2015) further explains: “liminoid games provide relatively, self-contained, rules-bound spaces that allow for experimentation and simulation with varying degrees of fidelity to regular social structure” (p. 39). These demarcated spaces suspended from real life rules, open up the opportunity for players to safely engage in experimentations, simulations, but also in transgressive behavior, otherwise forbidden in real life. In similar fashion, Atkinson and Rodgers (2016) consider violent video games and pornography as cultural zones of exception.⁹ They note that in these

⁹ Obviously based on Agamben’s (2005) concept of “state of exception”.

spaces we become temporarily suspended from normative sociality, which enables us to do things normally condemned by society.

Despite game worlds being demarcated spaces, it would be an illusion to state that they do not “seep into our social world”, in the form of representations and ideologies. This is not only true for video games, but for computer technology in general, which Chun (2011 as cited in Phillips, 2018) explains, by stating that we have to be aware of the intrusion of computational metaphors that structure the way we think about how society functions. There is a certain governmentality in this regard, in which computers manage populations. Games are part of that. Phillips (2018) explains that they fit into a wider milieu of domination of death, since they encourage us to play with death and dying, like in the fragment above. These digital death worlds, are thus both demarcated spaces, with their own rules and logic, but also affect and seep into our social world.

The idea that these digital death worlds have effect on our real world, is also expressed by Phillips (2018) her concept of “mechropolitics”: a virtual politics of death and dying with complicated resonances in the real world. As stated before, Phillips (2018) argues that mechropolitics makes death fun as part of a cooperative activity with a machine, and encouraged by game design. Killing virtual others is rendered as a pleasurable experience. Also stressing the importance of “fun”, Matthew Thomas Payne (2016) introduces his concept of “ludic war” which he defines as: “the pleasurable experience of playing military-themed video games alone or with others” (p. 11). While he doesn’t directly note that killing or violence is fun, military-themed video games are often solely about the engagements in warfare. Payne (2016) further explains his concept by stating that “ludic” comes from the Latin word *Ludus*, meaning “game” or “play”. The intrinsic characteristics of “play” being enjoyment and recreation, makes a ludic war experience, an experience which makes it fun to be engaged in violence and death, within the contours of military-themed video games. The idea that we can do things that we would normally not been able to do only heightens the pleasure we get from being engaged in war.

While the aspect of “fun” may be true for more mainstream or hegemonic military/war games, I suggest that “critical games”, have a more realistic gaze upon warfare, in which “fun” is often absent or even subverted. Before engaging in these debates, lets first have a look at hegemonic representations of war with the existence of the conventional war/military game.

3.2. Hegemonic representations of war

It is not a new claim to state that representational media throughout history was often influenced by imperial interests (Keogh, 2013). With the emergence of video games, many authors, such as Dyer-Witheford & De Peuter (2009), Payne (2016), Crogan, (2011), Lenoir and Lowood (2003) and many more, have focused on the intimate relation between technology, entertainment and the military. As Payne (2016) notes: “There is no is no entertainment genre that more vividly and viscerally explores the cultural values central to the United States’s political imaginary than the “military shooter” produced after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks” (p. 2). Most authors conceptualize this intimate relation between the entertainment industry and the military as the “military-entertainment complex”, with Der Derian (2009) calling it the “Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network (or MIME-NET).

As Keogh (2013) explains, each author traces different links between the US military and the video game industry, that being historical, ideological or material. Much attention has thereby given towards the creation and usage of military simulators. Lenoir and Lowood (2003), for example, explained the interest by the US Department of Defense (DOD) in war game design since the 1950s. However, since the 1980’s, deep collaborations between the military, commercial designers, the entertainment industry and academics had been established to create high-end computer simulations for military training, such as SIMNET. Many others authors such as Andersen & Kurti (2009) have focused on the case of *America’s Army*, a game used as a recruitment tool for the younger generation.

However, most popular games today fall outside the wider net of simulation games and recruitment tools.¹⁰ While these popular games are less connected to the military itself, most blockbuster franchises, claim to have an “authentic” window into US military operations (Keogh, 2013).

It would be beyond the scope of this dissertation to fully dissect the military/war shooter, or to engage with all the complexities between the entertainment industry and the military. Therefore, I want to focus on a couple of aspects and discussions that generally surround these games, and

¹⁰ There are of course exceptions, such as the highly popular military sim *Arma 3* often used to recreate high-tech virtual battles. However, most popular military/war games fall outside that niche of simulation games to appeal to a wider population of consumers. This because these simulation games often require a lot of knowledge and time dedication to fully enjoy the experience, a privilege many average game consumers don’t have.

are worth explaining in the contours of this research. Let's start with how these games converge with the real, and how they shape a subject in the virtual citizen-soldier.

3.2.1. Convergence with the real and the creation of the virtual citizen-soldier

With the ongoing invasions in the Middle East, predominantly within Afghanistan and Iraq, an audience was built for the interest in contemporary military engagements (Dyer-Witthford & De Peuter, 2009). As Keogh (2013) explains, many games shifted their focus from replicating famous WWII battles to captivate the audience with post-9/11 battlefield scenes. Claims of “authenticity” and “realism” are abundant in their marketing.

Having a quick look at a website of the popular military shooter *Insurgency: Sandstorm* helps to reaffirm this idea of “authenticity” and “realism”: Prepare for a hardcore depiction of combat with deadly ballistics, light attack vehicles, destructive artillery, and HDR audio putting the fear back into the genre”. The game furthermore claims to be set in a “fictional contemporary conflict in the Middle East (New World Interactive, 2018).

While these games claim to be “authentic” and “realistic”, we also see that real wars are increasingly being fought behind pixelated screens, with soldiers using controllers, resembling those used by console players (Dyer-Witthford & De Peuter, 2009).¹¹ Working further on that, Keogh (2013) states:

As military shooters use increasingly advanced technology to convince players they are depicting war how it ‘really’ looks, real wars use increasingly advanced technology to turn war in to a videogame. There is a *convergence* of how war is conducted and how it is represented, with death devalued and humans othered. (p. 7)

The idea that real war is turned in a video game is excellently illustrated in a fairly recent video from VICE (2020), called the “The Gamer Who Flew Killer Drones for the US Army”. In this video, Brandon Bryant, a drone whistleblower, explains how he flew predator drones for the US army. He was a gamer, and notes that:

¹¹ An excellent example of course is that of drone warfare. Through the screen and the use of a controller, soldiers are killing targets in foreign countries, fully remotely. These attacks are often launched from military installations based in the US.

The skills needed to be a gamer versus a drone operator are essentially the same. You just need to be able to sit in a place and stare at a screen and move a control stick until time to action. (1:46)

So it seems that the technique between gaming and that of the perpetration through drone warfare, is essentially the same.

Besides games claiming to represent war “how it really is”, they also make war something interactive. Stahl (2010) emphasizes this interactivity, stating that it caused a shift from a representation of war in terms of “spectacle”, which sculpted people into citizen-spectators, to an “interactive” mode, transforming the citizen into a virtual citizen-soldier. This interactive war, where video games are the ultimate example of, colonize the civic identity, by encapsulating them with the logics of war. While previously the war was consumed as a kind of voyeurism, it now became something to act within.

Real and virtual war thus become more and more meshed, and also makes the recipients more susceptible to the idea of perpetration, when it comes to war in foreign countries. What it also does, is providing the player with an opportunity to feel as a “hero”. The engagement in war becomes a sort of “power fantasy”, through domination of the other.

3.2.2. Military/war games as power fantasies

In almost every game power plays an important role, since games are spaces in which players often have control over their fate and experience a sense of authority (Hammer & Baker, 2014). These power fantasies function because they give the player something which they can't do in real life. This also connects to the idea that I earlier explained, of gaming space as something demarcated, having its own rules and possibilities, separate from real life.

Military/war games often give this power fantasy substance by transporting the player into a hero, letting them act as a one-man-army, ready to save the day from the bad guys. These narratives calls Jensen (2014) in his thesis, “knight romances”.¹² Other games in the genre have countered that somewhat, by letting the player be a small cog in an expansive military machine (Keogh, 2013). However, the premise is essentially the same, since the player is still part of something that he probably wouldn't be part of in real life, doing things he probably cannot do.

¹² One game I study, *Spec Ops: The Line* counters this element by showing how vulnerable the main protagonist is (see game analyses).

The problem of these power fantasies, is the fact that power is imagined here as “power-over”, or power in the form of dominance and control (Follet, 1924 as cited in Hammer & Baker, 2014). Indeed, in the military/war game, the power you receive is almost always at the expense of others. Phillips (2018) also mentions this aspect of domination when conceptualizing mechropolitics, and when discussing the cultural significance of the headshot in gaming. With the headshot, the shooter is marked as master over others, by being a skilled perpetrator.

This process of domination is often combined with a process of “othering”, legitimating military interventions in foreign countries. I will now tend to this process of othering.

3.2.3. The othering in military/war games

Stahl (2010) explains, with the transition into an interactive war, we also become more tolerant to the presence of death concerning *foreign* populations. Imitating the political realities of war, military video games often transport the player into a Middle-Eastern country, making them susceptible to fighting endless waves of faceless Arabs.¹³ They are stereotyped, with most populations in these games relegated to Middle-Eastern terrorists.

Often these worlds are suspiciously absent from civilians, with only combatants lurking behind every corner. One of the latest controversies within the gaming world, concerned the upcoming, yet unreleased, First Person Shooter (FPS), *Six Days In Fallujah*, a game focusing on the war in Iraq between 2003 and 2004.

The game managed to gain some controversy since it attempts to engender sympathy for US soldiers at the expense of Iraqis. An aim from the developers of the game is to teach players empathy, but that empathy is selective, reserved for the US Marines that the players will experience the game through (TRT World, 2021).

Högland (2008) connects these games to neo-orientalism, based on Said’s (1978) original conceptualization of Orientalism. Högland (2008) explains that the military shooter game realigns itself with neo-orientalism, since it describes the Middle East as a site for perpetual war and continuously dramatizes the necessity of continuous military violence in the Middle East. Högland (2008) further explains that playing these games “implies at least a tacit acceptance of this rationale

¹³ This is not always the case however. These type of games have also us frequently opposing Russians, or a mix of Russians and Arabs.

which is reflected in the games' unceasing rendering of the Arabian urban maze and the terrorist that always and forever lurk within it" (p. 18).

In a sense, the player or the virtual citizen-soldier becomes compliant to the practice of American neo-orientalism, seeing the Middle East as a region employed in the battle against terrorism. The over-presence of terrorists and the absence of civilians, says enough of how dominant the perception is of othering

Moreover, the absence of civilians is an aspect of another worrying trend in military/war games: the sanitization of warfare.

3.2.4. Sanitizing warfare

When playing games centered around warfare, there is always a selection of war which is shown and which is not. Civilians, rape, extreme brutality, mental illness, or long-term consequences of war, are almost always absent from the representation of war. Instead developers focus often on what is easy digestible and won't gain them controversy and criticism. By excluding controversial topics, developers manage to keep the game fun and pleasurable.

In his article, Pötzch (2017) focusses on what is not represented, or what remains beyond the generic frames of war and violence themed games. For him, different filters are applied to these games which glorifies warfare and soldiery, but suppress unpleasant, yet salient features and consequences of military and other violence. One of these filters is the so-called violence filter, which determines which forms of violence are depicted and can be enacted. Interestingly, in many of these hegemonic war/military games, there is an absent of civilians. Moreover, collateral damage is most of the time not a feature, unless it is disconnected from the players involvement, to show for example, how bad the bad guys really are. This of course gives you a legitimate reason to inflict violence upon them. War-related abuses such as rape, the killing of children, and more, are also most of the time absent. The violence and death depicted within these games, is most of the time reserved to the soldiers. Therefore, most of these generic military/war games play into discourses that sanitize warfare, which presents it as a struggle limited to soldiers and armies (Pötzch, 2017).

Pötzch (2017) also identifies a consequence filter, where the after-effects of military combat – such as traumatization, PTSD and negative effects on societal, economic and political level – are absent. Most of the time, these games solely focus on the combat itself and not on the long-term consequences.

By avoiding these moral difficult scenarios, such as the absent of civilians, collateral damage and long-term consequences, hegemonic war games offer an ideal picture of war (almost utopian in a sense). Avoiding these controversial topics, prevents the player from experiencing negative emotions that could harm the overall flow, fun and pleasure of being engaged in warfare.¹⁴ In the logic of some of these games, warfare has to be fun, not depressing.

The ideal picture of war, is also a picture with a loss of references. In a sense one could argue, that they present a copy or replica of war which is non-existent, since they deliberate portray an image of war that is non-existent in real life. Before going deeper into this debate, I want to focus more on the logics of death itself within video games: the concept of selective mortality and death as a form of capitalization.

3.3. Selective mortality

In gaming, death always had a specific function. For the 1970's arcade games, the implementation of death were mainly for economic reasons as Lange (2002, as cited in Wenz, 2014) shows. Investors in arcade machines saw opportunities to maximize profits, by restricting playing time. Therefore, the difficulty of the game was ramped up, through your playtime and led to the famous "game over" screen or to the death of the player's avatar. Inserting a coin in the machine, would allow you to continue playing. This mechanic never really went away, it only changed.

In recent video games, the avatar can be resurrected on the spot, or from a last save-point. The player can then continue playing. The graphical representations of avatars have also changed a lot, making them more realistically (Wenz, 2014). A lot of modern games also have a sort of death-cam, rendering death more realistically and visual pleasing. One excellent example in this regard, is found in the *Tomb Raider* game series, especially in the later, more modern iterations. Countless times, Lara Croft (the main protagonist) gets killed in gruesome death animations, ranging from: impalement on a spike, watching her stomach being pierced, or seeing a tree branch cut through her jaw. They are very original and numerous.¹⁵

Interestingly, Brown (2018) notes, that while most players want to avoid death, since they want to continue playing, this mechanic has for certain players the opposite effect: they try to actively kill

¹⁴ There is definitely a recent turn, where some Triple-A video games try to avoid sanitization techniques. However, these are still in a minority and often still glorify warfare and soldiery

¹⁵ While the game, is both an action - and platformer -game, the gruesome death animations only appear during the platform sections, where the press of the wrong button can lead to Lara's horrible death.

Lara to see all of her unique death animations. This is seen through for example the many “death-compilations” surrounding the game, found on YouTube, where players collect all the possible death animations from within the game. If we connect this highly mechanical aspect to Phillips (2018) we can see why within mechropolitics, death becomes a “fun” experience.

While we can watch Lara die multiple times over and over, her death is not final. She never disappears since we can keep playing with her avatar through the save-point system. As Wenz (2014) explains:

Playing a video game includes several decisive moments a player has to solve by using a trail-and-error method. In a situation where the player makes a wrong decision or lacks the skills to solve a problem, the avatar dies. This does not end the avatar’s existence since games, as we have previous noted, offer a “replay” function through resurrection or revitalization of the avatar. (p. 314)

This immortality however, is not reserved for the non-player characters (NPC’s), who die at any instance, often through your own actions. At its core, there is a system of what I call “selective mortality”, death being reserved for those characters who are not playable, who make up the decor of the game, while death for the main character is not final.

Because of the ability to keep playing, when the main avatar dies, the event of dying is more seen as a disruptive factor, since the player loses momentum, immersion and sometimes in-game currencies, such as items and money (Wenz, 2014). As Wenz (2014) further explains: “the death of the avatar is a loss, but mainly a loss of time and money. Both are annoying, rather than a reason for mourning” (p. 314).

However, some video games have a feature called “perma-death”, an game option which is limited to certain games. Perma-death moves digital death within video games closer to real life death, since it removes the possibility of resurrection. This doesn’t mean that playtime is over. In many games, a new avatar can be created or a new playthrough can be started upon death, which renders death, just like before, a penalty without grief or mourning. In many games however, the death of others have another function: that as capital.

3.4. Death of others as a form of capital

As described above, our own death in games is often experienced as a hinderance and is most of the time not final. The death of others, however, is final. Similarly to people collecting all the death animations of the main protagonist Lara Croft from *Tomb Raider*, the death of opposing NPC's often rewards the player with a form of capital, such as points, upgrades, coins, and more. This mechanic is used in many games: from the original Mario-games to common military/war games. It is only in the latter however, that I see them as problematic, since the violence and death are inflicted upon virtual representations of real people and not upon monsters or non-human creatures.

When conceptualizing mechropolitics, Phillips (2018) discusses the fascination with the headshot in gaming. As she explains, headshots are “marks of skill in shooting games that are often rewarded with point bonuses and special character celebrations. In video game culture, headshots are highly respected feats whose repetition lends the gamer considerable cultural currency” (p. 140). Indeed, headshots are often seen as the highest capital in gaming culture. The currency can also be a form of a corporal spectacle. In the newest iteration of *Sniper Ghost Warrior* for example, when the player successfully targets an enemy, the camera repositions itself and follows the bullet been fired, until collision with the human head. The player is then treated with a realistically explosion of the head. For Phillips (2018) the headshot is mechropolitics par excellence, because it fuses mechanics of fun, death and domination into one.

But even, normal “kills” are rewarded and praised. In the multiplayer component of *Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* for example, the players are rewarded with XP or “experience points”, that they receive when they successfully kill another opponent. Extra XP is given to the player when they take out the opponent in an original way, or when they take out multiple opponents in quick succession. For example, when a player kills four or more players in quick secession, a message pops up saying: “Multi Kill!” which grants them with another 100 XP upon the 100 XP for every individual kill. With these XP-points, the player can level up and gains access to new weapons, upgrades and cosmetics.

This reward system, capitalizes the death of others and reduces the enemy to a puppet in a shooting gallery. It removes the “human” element of the game. The player doesn't see a virtual representation of a human, but an opportunity to gain currency. This system also gives the perpetrator a form of domination, because he masters the death of his opponent and uses it for his own benefit. Therefore, the death of others is almost commodified, solely used to capitalize on by

the perpetrator.¹⁶ While in real war the death of others is also sometimes used to gain profit (e.g. looting), within games it goes much further, and also diminishes the opponents in their representational form as virtual humans. Therefore, just as war, death becomes completely detached from real life and becomes “hyperreal”. Let’s discuss this further.

3.5. War and death as “hyperreal” experiences

With the avoidance of difficult elements of war in common military/war games, these games are complicit in sanitizing warfare. They paint a rosy picture, an utopian world and a war which is non-existent in real life. Moreover, In the excerpt of *Battlefield 1* for example, described in the introduction, the developers went to great lengths ensuring the historical accuracy. However, like any historical reproduction, games are subjected to the subjectivity of those re-creating the historical representation. They are never a perfect simulation or recreation and always have their historical fallacies. Sometimes, anachronisms and inaccuracies are designed into the game, to enhance the playability of the game. Firearms were for example included, which never saw trench-warfare, but offered the players in-game more diversity in killing other soldiers.

The lack of a true representation of the “real thing”, is also acknowledged by Eva Kingsepp (2007) stating that many games can be seen as substitutes for the real world. They are the perfect copy without an original, overflowing with signs claiming the game’s real appearance, but on the other hand, disguising a basic loss of referentials. Therefore virtual worlds in video games can be described as what Baudrillard (1981/1994) calls “hyperreal” and “simulacra”. Analyzing World War II games, Kingsepp (2007) explains how they are often marketed as immersive, promoted in a way that it would place the player in a real, authentic war. Kingsepp (2007) further notes however, that this is not real reality because:

. . . it might be close to reality, or rather hyperreal, and your feelings are authentic (because you have them), but it is not real reality. Therefore, this can never be anything but a second-level experience, a substitute for a reality that is lost to us; although for us, it takes the place of reality. (p. 367)

Since they are substitutes for reality, reproductions of the real, showing a basic loss of referentials, they become a hyperreal experience: a copy without its original. In these experiences, some elements of the “real” are missing. In the case of many World War II games, there are no ghettos,

¹⁶ One could also argue that this capitalization helps making the game “fun”. The player receives a form of reward, when he kills and becomes incentives to keep going.

no concentration camps or gas chambers, there are only the good and the bad guys, and the good guys will always win (Kingsepp 2007).

For Kingsepp (2007) even death itself within video games has lost its connection to reality, and becomes a hyperreality. As I discussed, selective mortality, prevents the main character from really dying, which is not reserved for the NPC's. When your enemies die, a pool of blood might be the only thing that remains, or as Kingsepp (2007) notes: "the corpses might remain, adding to the atmosphere of the game but also functioning as practical tools for the gamer's orientation, which tells you that you have been in this place before" (p. 371). In most cases, the bodies of the fallen soldiers eventually disappear, often because of technical limitations. In this regard, Kingsepp (2007) explains that these mortalities are postmodern because they fully disappear in a certain sanitized way, as if the killing never happened. She compares this to the sanitized media representations of today's war, which Baudrillard (1985 as cited in Kingsepp, 2007) describes in his book "*The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*".

Another example of this sanitization and the postmodern death is found in the game *America's Army* that I previously introduced. While being made and promoted as a recreation of military life, fostering "realism", the realism does not extend to include the gruesome realities of war, however, when humans are hit, they fall to the ground, without making a noise. Wounds are invisible and blood minimal. Bodies mystically disappear afterwards. Even a parental control feature turns all the gun fighting into laser tag if wanted. The avoidance of the gruesome aspects of war, earned the game a "T" rating, indicating that the game was suitable for players thirteen years of age and up. If the game would show the horrors of war, it would be detrimental to the original goal of the game: recruiting new soldiers into the U.S. Army (Stahl, 2010).

However, in some games, especially in some modern military shooters, bodies don't disappear and stay on the battlefield, often dismembered or disformed in a grotesque way. Kingsepp (2007) calls this type of death, carnivalesque: "an attempt to capture a notion of death where accentuation of the corporeality of the event, highlighting the bloody, the gory, and the grotesque, is crucial" (p. 371).¹⁷

¹⁷ Personally, I found the depiction of violence in *The Last Of Us Part II* quite striking in this regard. It goes to extreme lengths showing the endless variations of dismemberment and gore. An explosive has different ways to dismember, or kill an enemy, dependent on various factors such as distance between the body and the explosive, power of the explosive, and more.

Kingsepp (2007) however, argues that the postmodern and the carnivalesque should not be seen as binary opposites. Featherstone (1991, as cited in Kingsepp, 2007) explains that the carnivalesque is considered one of the main attitudes in postmodernity. So sometimes the in-game violence is sanitized, while other times, it is overemphasized.

The manner in that war, death and violence are represented in these virtual death worlds can be close to reality, but are nevertheless always distanced by it to. Games will always be a substitution or a second-hand experience. They do however, in some extent, ideologically form our perspectives on death and violence. The question then remains if games as a media format have the possibility for offering resistance or counter dominant perspectives on mortality and violence.

3.6. Possibility for resistance?

As any popular culture product, video games are still part of our capitalist production, which made me question the possibility for change. Are games capable of confronting and resisting the hegemonic view of the military gaze concerning mortality and violence? Bailes (2019) sees video games in a sort of ambiguous position. They are able to offer critique towards certain existing social conditions, while at the same time, they reaffirm certain common assumptions about how the world works. However, this doesn't mean that we should underestimate the possibilities for change when they present themselves. They are worth investigating which I hope to show during the discussion of three game case studies. Notwithstanding, the production of games specifically designed to challenge the hegemonic order, is not the only way in which games offer a possibility for change. Robinson (2012) discerns three ways for political protest and activism, which I will discuss down below.

3.6.1. Virtual protest

The first way for dissidence and social protest, are found in the digital game worlds themselves. Protests, virtual marches and other forms of dissidence, occur in online spaces for many reasons.¹⁸ Despite the existence of dissidence in these digital game worlds, Robinson (2012) notes that demonstrations against militarization are relatively rare, but do exist. One excellent example however, was the project called "dead-in-Iraq" by Joseph DeLappe, an Associate Professor at the

¹⁸ One example where the various "riots" that occurred throughout the history of the popular online game *Runescape*, which were often targeted against the developers for the implementation of unwanted updates. In my youth, I attended such various protests, which are often a site to behold because of the amount of people attending. However, in my experience, they were often ineffective and rarely have beneficial results

University of Nevada, who logged into the servers of *America's Army* and typed the names of American service personnel killed in action (Craig, 2006). Despite the attention and success this project generated, Robinson (2012) notes with regard to virtual protest: "The principal reasons offered for the limited scope of in-game protests have been the conservative nature both of players and the possibility spaces they inhabit, which have been designed for different ends" (p. 14). Games are most of the time seen by players as fun and a type of leisure, with many condemning the intrusion of politics within these digital spaces.

3.6.2. "Modding"

The second possibility for resistance, is that of subversion of games through "modding". By altering the processes of games ("modding"), activists have tried to create new possible spaces for social protests in video games. One example, is that of *Velvet-Strike*, a mod for the popular first-person shooter video game, *Counter-Strike* (CS) (Robinson, 2012). The mod was developed just after 9/11, alongside the United States declaration of the "War on Terror". It introduced a collection of aesthetic mods, or graffiti "sprays" which the player could spray on walls in the map of the game. It defied in a sense the hypermasculine and often grotesque mainstream sprays commonly used by players. New introduced sprays featured men kissing, or a "Born to Kill" peace sign from the anti-war film *Full Metal Jacket*. The performance received widespread acclaim from the art world, but in contrast to that, the responses from gamers and CS Fans, were intensely negative. The *Velvet-Strike* website received a lot of angry and furious emails. Most players just perceived CS as pure entertainment, without any political meaning. One developer of *Velvet-Strike* noted that there was a player who said he used CS as a means to vent his frustration against the terrorists and 9/11. Their sentiment was fierce and many responses from players were: "it's just a game" (Schleiner et al., 2002).

When discussing the subversion of video games through "modding", Robinson (2012) explains that this is a minority activity, because it requires technical know-how, and thus therefore, limiting its potential to offer critique. "Modding" is indeed a practice that needs a lot of computer and coding knowledge. However, I think that we should not underestimate the intrinsic dissident power behind the activity, independent from the new created content. Through "modding", players are subverting the game, carving out a separate space from the original game, to act within. Mods are also often made and distributed for free. Coleman & Dyer-Witheford (2007) connect the creation of mods to the commons, resources that everyone in a specified community may use. This in contrast with commodities that are exchanged for profit. They describe how a cluster of game activities of

copying, re-purposing and collective production are models of digital play that can be seen as commons. Goods are shared rather than owned. Through the creation of mods, players are thus creating new commons, separated from games (commodities) made by big commercial corporations. Independent from the content these mods possess, I argue that this is already a highly political, dissident act, especially when we keep in mind that “modding” is often prohibited or not possible by the developers.

3.6.3. Critical games

The final and most successful way of exerting critique towards highly (Western) militarized games, is through the creation of critical games themselves. Some games, are created to counter the hegemonic Western militarization, others are critiquing the militarization itself, through the creation of so-called anti-war games.

Saber and Webber (2017) have dedicated themselves to the former and investigated how media produced by IS and Hezbollah challenged Western military games. One example they illustrate in their article, is that of *Special Force 2* (SF2), produced by Hezbollah, which contextualizes the action, and reverses the ‘hero’ and ‘enemy’ status, by casting Israel as the “enemy” who the gamer needs to “resist” (Saber & Webber, 2017). Another example I came across a couple of years ago, was a suspected “modded” version (contrary to SF2, which was a whole new game) of *Grand Theft Auto V*, featuring violent clips interspersed with the IS logo. According to IS’s media wing, it would have been used to recruit and train children for a battle against the West (Tassi, 2014). Despite this alternative towards these Western hegemonic military/war games, Saber & Webber (2017) note that they actual reinforce the production of the hegemonic order, instead of actively attacking it. This is predominantly because of a lack of agency. In these games, players are forced to play by the rules that are often limited between shooting and not shooting. Players are therefore no longer actors, but are acted upon. For this they base themselves on Mouffe’s (2005 as cited in Saber & Webber, 2017) proposition, that resistance towards hegemony often reproduces similar hegemonic frames, thus contributing to the maintenance and reproduction of the hegemonic order. With regard to the game *Special Force*, Robinson (2012) similarly states:

. . . the question remains whether these game series, while critiquing Western/Israeli ideology, simply reproduce the military-entertainment complex from a different perspective, here generated by Hezbollah rather than the West. Even *Under Ash*¹⁹ (less obviously in

¹⁹ Another critical game

tone) does not allow or suggest alternative ways in which political accommodation could be reached, for through the use of a court of law or the promotion of policing: the possibility of spaces of the games are still limited to military solutions. (p. 21)

Both Saber & Webber (2017) and Robinson (2012) see thus the limited agency (which is restricted to military engagement) as the key problem in achieving a true anti-hegemonic stance. It must not only attack the Western gaze found in these military/war games, but also attack its militarization. Additionally, as Robinson (2012) explains, their reach and persuasion for Western audiences is also limited. These games have most of the time a localized impact and are often accused of promoting terrorism. Most of the time, only players who are largely supportive of their message are experiencing these games (Robinson, 2012). These games are thus often supporting, instead of critiquing the military-entertainment complex, but from a different, non-Western side.

Critical military games with an explicit dissidence towards militarization are fairly rare. As Robinson (2012) explains, the vast majority of games which are explicitly critical, are so-called “indie-games” or independent games. Only a limited section of commercial games tend to give critique to these militaristic games. However, their potential can be substantial since they often generate more sales than indie-games (Robinson, 2012).²⁰

Beside the occasionally critical commercial video game, the vast majority of critique given lays within the indie games. However, is such a distinction between mainstream and indie games even feasible? As Pérez Latorre (2016) argues, they are often closer to each other than we think. Indie games often oppose mainstream games and have a significant ideological component. They often foster anti-establishment attitudes, have anti-capitalist resentments, criticize neo-liberalism, etc. They also shed light on society’s blind spots (Pérez Latorre, 2016). However, he further states that indie games don’t follow a monolithic opposition or dissociation from the mainstream video games. They often have a complex relationship towards each other, including strategic articulations between the alternative and the commercial. Many ‘independent’ games for example, were and are distributed via platforms owned by major publishers. The intrinsic relations between indie games and mainstream games, shows how these two cannot fully be seen as polarized opposites (Pérez Latorre, 2016). I think it is therefore, crucial to not only focus on their political-economical context, but more on the content they deliver, since making oppositions is rather artificial.

²⁰ An example, is that of *Spec Ops: The Line*, which is also widely discussed in the literature, and I want to complement with my research further on.

3.7. Critical games and the issue of “fun”

As Phillips (2018) explained, mechropolitics makes death a fun activity within the contours of “digital death worlds”. She quotes therefore Mbembe (2003, as cited in Phillips, 2018) who observes that “a new cultural sensibility emerges in which killing the enemy of the state is an extension of play” (p. 19). To make this aspect of “fun” within games more tangible, Phillips (2018) focusses on the headshot, which we already discussed. It mixes reward, death and domination. As she states: “rewards for headshots vary from extra damage dealt to impressive and graphic animations, and as a virtuosic mechropolitical performance they mark the shooter as a master over others by being skilled, often unseen executioner” (p. 143).

However, the meaning of death and violence changes from game to game. Building further on her argument, I argue that the concept of fun in these simulated death worlds, is often restricted to hegemonic war/military games predominantly due to their sanitization techniques and by offering the player a power fantasy at the expense of others.²¹ Claiming to be “authentic” and giving the player a realistic look into the theaters of war, is in reality further from the truth since the game is mostly about pleasure.

There where the hegemonic game fails to show a realistic interpretation of war, the critical war game offers a more realistic picture, showing the real hardships and consequences of violence and death. They are less concerned with the game being fun or pleasurable. Instead, they want to shed light on the usual forgotten elements of war and want to be thought-provoking and initiate reflection. Sometimes, the experience can be “fun”, but this is not often the emphasis of the critical game. Instead, they often rely on emotions opposite to fun: deadness, depression, sadness, etc. As you will see in my discussion of the case studies, some games avoid “selective morality” combining it with the creation of an emotional attachment, giving the player a sad feeling when a character dies.

Bjørkelo (2019) conceptualizes this dynamic relationship between negative emotions and what is perceived truthful and authentic, as transgressive realism. If the feelings are real, what evokes them must also feel realistic, or, that what is perceived real causes negative emotions. As I discussed, true realism is never possible, it is always a second-hand experience, with flaws and discrepancies, or what we have dubbed a “hyper-real” experience. However, while the experience may be close to reality, what is truly “real” are the emotions they evoke upon us. In similar fashion,

²¹ The capitalization of death, the often prevalent weapon fetishism and the emphasis on hypermasculinity, are also important contributors in providing the player a pleasurable experience.

Grace (2011) investigates the potential of taboo game design. She notes that games can provide a critical experiences through socially prohibited play. For her, taboo gameplay exposes that what we don't want to discuss. While she focusses on explicit games concerning sex and race, her argument can also be applied to critical games since they often function on the boundaries with taboo subjects, such as suicide, rape, extreme violence, and so on. They try to avoid the sanitization of warfare through the construction of discomfort; that enables us to stand still, think and reflect.

While certain games may be critical and offer a counter-hegemonic perspective, it would be rather naive to assume that these messages are always necessarily top-down internalized by the player. This is often shown by the various negative reactions towards games "doing something different". To understand this better, its crucial to have a look at the players themselves.

3.8. Focusing on the players

Consulted many academic literature surrounding video games, I noticed a minority focusing on the players themselves. Most game scholars study their own gameplay to gain insight in the workings of the game. When reading their analysis, they often generalize their own experiences and thoughts. Thereby, they forget the extreme diversity of possible playstyles and reactions people can have when playing the game. Jørgensen (2012) accounts this and suggests:

As games are emergent systems that potentially react differently to different kinds of playstyles, we cannot be limited to studying our own gameplay. We also need to investigate how other players interpret specific game features and respond to them for a fuller understanding of games, not only as activity, but also designed artifacts. (p. 375)

This also means, that it would be an illusion to suggest that the game's ideology, is top-down internalized by the players. Personally, I have played many military/war games when I was younger, but I was always aware of the U.S. hegemonic representations, including its many problems. Playing them, didn't directly brainwash me and it would be premature to denote every game as simple "propaganda". Moreover, the same applies for playing more critical military games. Playing these types of games often doesn't directly change people's assumptions and worldviews. It is therefore crucial that we remember that people have agency within the structure of the video game. Each player has a different personal context when they step into the game. They play for different reasons, use other (in-game) methods to game, and have different thoughts, experiences and aspirations.

Recently, developers have also been more susceptible to the inclusion of progressive values in their video games: playable female protagonist, representations of minorities, etc.²² On the vocal rightwing section of the gamer community, there has been the claim that games extol leftwing ideology by featuring marginalized characters. Some players strongly believe that games are being hijacked by a group of "social justice warriors" to disseminate progressive values. To give an example: in the widely critically acclaimed sequel to the *Last of Us*, players expressed that the developers had some agenda, because you play as the main character "Ellie", who is gay and is in a relationship with another girl. In a marketing video showed at E3 (gaming convention), she is also seen kissing a girl. As Tassi (2020) argues:

It is ridiculous to me that these characters simply existing somehow defines an agenda. If a guy and a girl get together in a cutscene, it's par for the course in any game (or movie, or show). If a girl and a girl do it, *it's being shoved in our faces!* (para. 19)

In addition, a well-heard argument to resist this, has been that "games aren't political". Of course, like I have shown, games are deeply political, which makes this argument not feasible.

Despite the fact that these arguments can easily be refuted, these do however underscore the idea that video games aren't that easily top-down internalized. Gamers have their own propositions, ideas and thoughts and this isn't easily changed just by playing a video game. However, this doesn't mean that they aren't worth investigating, but we should make a distinction between the game as a structure, and the player as an actor. Furthermore, as game scholars, we should focus more on the individualized experiences of players, their thoughts and reflections. Instead we focus too much on analyzing the game itself and generalize to often our own experiences as the standard.

I have discussed the prominence of hegemonic representations of war in conventional war/military games. Critical war games are in the position to counter this, creating new meanings and reflections surrounding death and violence in warfare.

In the upcoming pages, I will focus on these critical war games, by looking at three specific games. Before going deeper into these games, I first discuss my methodology that consists out of doing autoethnography and participant observation in the communities surrounding each game.

²² The inclusion of progressive values doesn't directly mean however, that the game takes an anti-hegemonic stance. Many games strategically include progressive values, to increase the sale of their game. An analogy can be made with companies using marketing regarding social issues to gain a "woke status".

4. Methodology

In this chapter of my master dissertation, I will discuss the relevant methodology connected to my qualitative research. This does not only include my “mixed-methods” approach, but also my positionality, the space wherein my research was conducted, the ethics and storage. I end with a short reflection on how I experienced the research process, what went good and what could’ve been better. Let’s first move to my positionality, since the reason to focus on video games is intimately connected with the fascination I have with them.

4.1. Positionality

Doing ethnographic fieldwork within the discipline of anthropology, has an enduring tradition wherein the research is focused on people and cultures who are distinctly “other” and in places which are distinctively “elsewhere” (Carruci and Dominy, 2005; Mughal, 2005 as cited in Anderson, 2021). Morton (1999 as cited in Anderson, 2021) argues that ethnography at home is an impoverished version of the real thing. Indeed, I always felt that “going out” and travelling was “the standard” of doing anthropology. Going into familiar territory as an anthropologist, felt as an option too easy and seemed less viable or even less “objective”. Perhaps being less adventurous and forced by the pandemic to stay at home, I dedicated myself to the, for me familiar field, of game studies. While the pandemic was definitely a huge factor in deciding a research thematic, my main motivation was of course my lifelong fascination with video games and their capability to transport players into a world distant of ours. At a later age, I became aware of their intrinsic ideological frames, and their possibility to say something about our society. Traveling or entering the field as an outsider may be the standard in our discipline, but I see the close relation between myself (as both a researcher and a gamer) and the field, largely as a positive factor.

Contrary to outsiders visiting the field of gaming, I was already quite familiar with everything surrounding video games when starting my research process. I played them, so I knew how the medium interacted with storytelling and narratives, how game mechanics worked, what subgenres there were and much more. I was not the most active member in one or more particular online gaming communities, but I knew my way around them and was accustomed to the various debates held within them. I also followed the gaming news quite extensively, keeping myself up-to-date with the latest facts and discussions. Altogether, I see myself in a privileged position to talk about games, argue about them, and research them. It offered me a great advantage in my data analysis, because my prior knowledge abled me to go deeper in discussing the collected data than the

surface meets. Interpreting gaming reflections and experiences of players is much more easy when you are already familiar with the “inner logics of gaming”. Finally, my personal interest helped me get acquainted with the theoretical and academic debates within the discipline of game studies more easily, since they are often based on case studies (for example, of the games I already played).

However, my intimate relation with the topic as a researcher has a minor hinderance. When it comes to games, I have to acknowledge that I am definitely in a biased position to study them. Research results could be presented in a more positive light, or literature could be solely selected to support my argument, without incorporation of those which are more critical. However, we have to remember that my research is not striving for ultimate objectivity. Games have no final “truth”, they are culture products differently experienced by players and critics, which my autoethnography and participant observation will show. This does not mean that I won’t be critical. As a researcher and video game player, I place myself within a more critical academic tradition when it comes to game studies.

As Dyer-Witthford & De Peuter (2009) explain, with regard to ludic scholarly, there have been three broad stances that have been taken towards video games by academics: condemnatory, celebratory, and critical.

The first one, the condemnatory stance, emerged when games were a new medium and authors were relatively unfamiliar with games. Scholars focused primarily on “the problem” of video games, meaning violent video games causing real life crimes. The condemnatory perspective surged after the Columbine school shootings in 1999, with the perpetrators often projected in the media as fervent *Doom* players. This negative and condemnatory perspective, which thrives on “moral panics” surrounding new media, still persists today, but has lost a lot of adherents. The second one, is that of a more celebratory stance, which arose at the turn of the new millennium and was mostly started by people outside scholarly production, such as game reviewers, game journalists and more. They praised the medium, seeing it at least as potentially rich as literature or film. By praising the medium, they often bended the stick the other way, ignoring important facts such as the political and economic contexts of games, paid and unpaid labor in game production, etc. From there on, a third position arose, a critical one, tempering the negative perception of the first position and the over-the-top praising of the second one. The critical position situated games within formations of societal power. Scholars within this position address issues such as gender,

corporate power and militarism. Probably the most sustained position is the criticism of video games as a masculine domain from academic feminists (Dyer-Witthford & De Peuter, 2009).

It is in this third, critical position that I position myself as a researcher. I see video games as a possible virtual space for political resistance and change, but also see the inherent fallacy of many, more hegemonic military/war games. However, this was not always the case. When starting this research, I would place myself more in the celebratory position, since I focused more on the positive effects of video games. This shows that your own position towards your research subject can make some dramatic turns throughout your research.

Before moving to my mixed-methods approach, I will first delph deeper into the field wherein I will conduct my research.

4.2. The research field

Within my research, the field exists out of two parts: the games itself and the online communities surrounding each game. I first give some short context to the games I used as case studies, before moving to the online communities, requiring some more explanation.

4.2.1. Games as case-studies

Like any cultural product, video games are diverse in their existence: different genres, different styles, single player or multiplayer (or both), availability on different platforms, etc. This is also true for the manifestation of violence and death. They are well entrenched in the medium and are often spanning different gernes, from their presence in historical games to their existence in fantasy games. However, the military/war game genre, dominates mortality and violence, so it was natural to investigate those games who try to counter this, like the critical war game.

There is no game genre in existence that is called “critical games”. Therefore I had to explore game libraries in search for these games. Preliminary research in different online communities helped me to find three games with interesting vantage points on themes such as war, violence and death. I decided to limit myself to three games, because playing them and investigating their online communities, requires a lot of time. Many of these gamic aspects presents in the selected games can be generalized to say something more about other games or gaming in general.

A couple of factors determined which games I selected:

- 1) *Cost and availability*

Games are quite expensive software, especially when they just released. I focused mostly on “older” titles, that are less expensive and primarily looked at the games I already owned.

2) *Successful games*

I tried to choose between those games that were quite successful when they released, since they have a bigger societal impact and cult following, increasing the availability of data.

3) *Critical content*

Obviously the main factor was the content of the games. They had to have an element of protest, dissidence, objection or separation from regular military/war games. This could be explicitly present, as in the case of *This War of Mine*, or more implicit and hidden. Is the content within the game critical in some sort towards militarization? How does it manifests itself in the game?

On basis of these three factors, I decided to focus on the following games: *This War of Mine*, *Spec Ops: The Line* and *Valiant Hearts*. Without going to deep into them individually (which I will do in my analysis), all three games have a unique perspective on war: *Valiant Hearts* being democratic in nature, *Spec Ops: The Line* through subverting the military shooter, and finally *This War of Mine* being iconic through highlighting the depressing nature of warfare. Important is that all games are single player experiences, so there is no communication or teamwork between different players. Although this seems negative, the single player component highlights the individualized experiences players have. This means that within the online communities, interesting and original contributions are made, which are highly individual.

4.2.2. Online gaming communities

Accusations of antisocial behavior proliferates when people are asked about video games. Stereotypes of gamers being loners and antisocial are far from the truth, since there has been a lively history of community formation around and through video gaming. There is a huge diversity of different forms of community formation present, stemming from various aspects of gaming culture (Kocurek, 2014).

The first one is that of networking gamers, with players coming together to play video games, to demonstrate their skill or engage with others having similar interests. Local area network (LAN) parties are an excellent example of this. These are gatherings at which players game in a shared space, often for long periods at a time. These LAN parties overlap in-game and in-person social interactions. The second one, is that of games with in-built social interaction systems or tied to

social media. *FarmVille*, for example was a popular game on Facebook, encouraging players to leverage their existing social networks for in-game success. Thirdly, you have existing communities outside of games. Often they exist around single player games or other non-networked games, which means that they have no intrinsic way of communication. Often these players meet at conventions or at other physical settings. Finally, you have the online fora such as message boards, blogs, or other online communication tools that allow for the formation of communities. Sometimes they are dedicated to one game, one genre, a specific console or have a general focus. They may be player or company supported (Kocurek, 2014).

Because of COVID restrictions and the extensive depth of player conversations, I chose to focus on the latter set of gaming communities: those residing on message boards and online communication platforms. While the platforms where the communities run on, are often managed by big companies, the game-specific communities often have their own eco-system where open critique on the game is allowed. Preliminary fieldwork also uncovered a lot of data and easy access to threads, discussions and more, since everything is databased. Interestingly, because many of the platforms are company-owned or dedicated to a specific game, there are sometimes interesting interactions between the developers and the player-base. Developers are often active on these platforms, meaning that they can gather direct feedback on their game. I primarily focus on two platforms housing thousands of communities: *Steam* and *Reddit*.

1) Steam

Steam is a software client, predominantly used as an online store where developers can publish their games, and players can buy them. Over the years, it has become so much more than an online store. The most prominent feature besides the store, is that of the *Steam* community, which lets players chat with each other, make groups, and so on. Each game has a specific community page that consists out of different sub-sections as seen below:

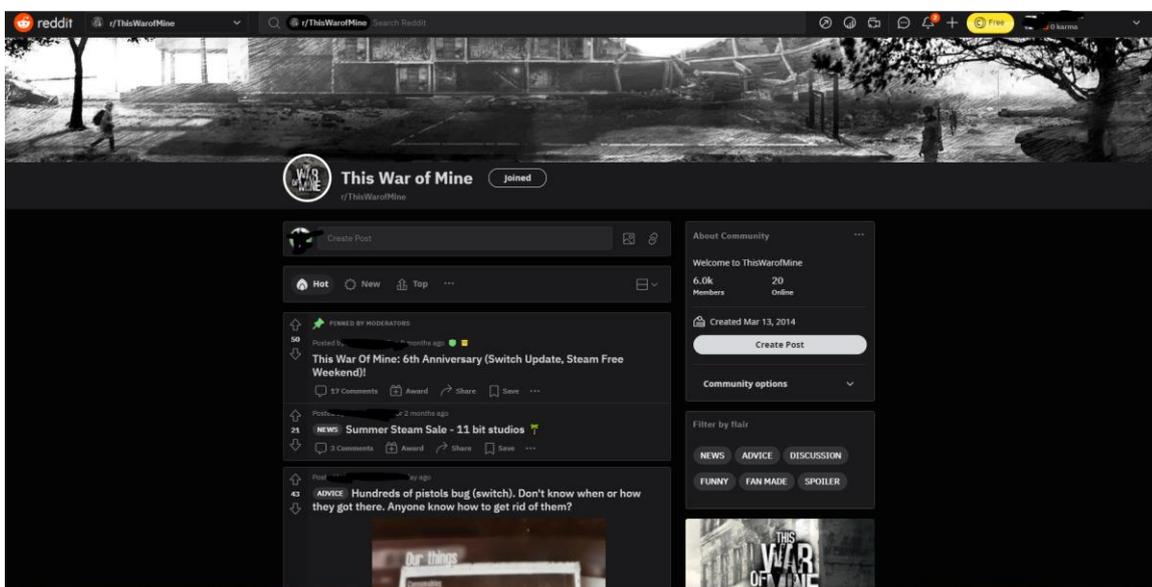


An example of a community or “hub” page, that exists for every game released on the platform of Steam. A lot of information can be found here. [personal screenshot]

I predominately focused on the “review”-sections, since this is where the most extensive and thought-provoking experiences of the game were shared. I often visited the “discussion”- and “artwork”-sections, which were also quite interesting.

2) Reddit

Reddit is a similar platform, but consist only out of “subreddits” or community pages. Important is the fact that *Reddit* is not solely dedicated to gaming culture. There are many other non-gaming related “subreddits” from political communities to DIY ones. Here, I focused on the dedicated gaming communities of the games I took as case-studies. Contrary to *Steam*, there are no dedicated sections for artwork or discussions. Everything appears on the main-page based on a community rating system.



An example of a “sub-reddit” dedicated to *This War of Mine*. [personal screenshot]

3) Other fora

Sometimes, I went on other fora, such as developer message boards, blogs or social media. However, I mostly took my time to extensively investigate the communities on the platforms above.

4.3. Used Methods

It is clear that the digital is entrenched throughout my whole research process. Studying virtual games and observing their respective communities, is doing digital ethnography, in a digital space, using digital methods. Sarah Pink et al. (2016) claim that the digital often has “unorthodox” forms of communication. Indeed, when engaging with games, non-textual data such as videos, images,

sound, music, are essential . This is also reflected within the communities surrounding these games, with data such as memes, artwork, screenshots, videos, etc.

Because of the “mixed-methods” approach and the different data I collect beyond the textual, my research is an example of so-called “multimodality”. Beyond other things, this approach demands the questioning and decentering of the hierarchies of scholarly production where text is the most important (Collins et al., 2017). When dealing with video games and their communities, it is important to remember that some experiences do not fit into verbal categories of expression. To respect the intrinsic value of some of the data I gathered, the analyses of each game will include a lot of images and hyperlinks (to videos or other media).

There are two main methods I will deploy in this research, and that I will now tend to: autoethnography and participant observation. Finally, I will shortly discuss the gathering of secondary sources.

4.3.1. Doing autoethnography to “understand” the game experiences

The best way to truly understand a game, is by playing it. Therefore, the first method I use, is that of autoethnography. “Autoethnography is a research method that uses personal experience (“auto”) to describe and interpret (“graphy”) cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices (“ethno”). Autoethnographers believe that personal experience is infused with political/cultural norms and expectations, and they engage in rigorous self-reflection – typically referred to as “reflexivity” – in order to identify and interrogate the intersections between the self and social life (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p.111 as cited in Adams et al., 2017). My autoethnography will focus on the selected three video games I mentioned above.

I use this method for two reasons: 1) as I am part of the player-base, it is useful to investigate my own experiences and reflections, and 2) the method of autoethnography is an excellent stepping stone for the next method I use: participant observation. By playing the game I hope to gain an insider-perspective in the game, just like an anthropologist hopes to, when he participates into the daily lives of citizens in a village. It will help me to contextualize, the experiences I gather from other players, within the contours of the game. Playing the game will place me in a better position to understand the experiences which the players share online.

Playing to analyze the game, has become an accepted method for game research (Jørgensen, 2012). Mäyrä (2008) for example, explains how it is crucial for any student who is serious about

gaining an expertise in the field of game studies, needs to play a wide range of video games. While this seems pleasurable, Mäyrä (2008) further notes:

. . . analytical play as part of one's studies is different from leisurely play. Such more 'utilitarian' playing involves making notes and relating games to wider contexts of historical, conceptual and social range of thought that constitutes games studies and game cultures in their reflexive form. (p. 165)

Mortensen (2002), also stresses the importance of "play", claiming that the play activity is closer to a *performance* than a *reading*. The player has more influence when it comes to his own experience than the reader. This heightens the fact that playing games is a highly individualized matter.

Mäyrä (2008) differentiates between two sorts of game analysis while playing: structural gameplay analysis and thematic analysis. The first one is concerned with how game rules and interactions are structured with game objects and other players. It involves the parts and processes that have a strong influence on the players. The thematic analysis, is concerned with the experiences of the players. It deals with the central idea or message that is revealed by playing the game. While my research involves both, I predominately focused on the thematic analysis, wanting to understand the game, and see what reactions, thoughts and memories the game evoked in me. It also enabled me to focus on the game as a whole and make cross-references to other games I had played in the past. Gameplay analysis is more micro-scoped and less interesting for this research.

When playing each game, I put a notebook on the side, which I used to write interesting thoughts, experiences, emotions and memories. Sometimes, memories appeared from other games that I had played before. In this sense, my autoethnography can slightly be considered "cross-textual", since I sometimes understood the experiences in the context of other games I had played.

When playing, I always tried to play each game for a couple of hours during one playthrough. It enhances the immersion and keeps me invested into the game. For example, I almost finished *Spec Ops: The Line*, in one playthrough of six hours, which was exhaustive, but rewarding. After playing each game, I tried to categorize my notes and immediately started to write down a report. I ended up integrating my notes into the analysis that can be found in the following chapter.

4.3.2. Players as coresearchers: doing participant observation

The second method I use is participant observation. Solely using an autoethnographic account would not be feasible to answer my research questions, since playing a game is a very subjective, individualized matter. As Boudreau (2012 as cited in Bjørkelo, 2019) states, playing a game is an

individual experience and it is formed by, among other things, the player's individual context and game design.

Therefore it is nearly impossible for a developer or a researcher, such as in my case, to account for every individual player. Jørgensen (2012) explains that we cannot be limited to the study of our own gameplay. We get a fuller understanding of games, if we investigate how other players interpret specific game features and respond to them.

Jørgensen (2012) used this to understand how game features work with respect to the game as a whole. This is contrary to my research, where not necessarily the game is an object of research, but primarily the experiences of the players themselves.

With an emphasis on the other players, I observed the online communities surrounding each studied game, mainly on *Steam* and *Reddit*, as I mentioned before. The data was primarily textual with some visual data, such as artwork, videos, memes and screenshots, often reaffirming what was written. Memes for example, often showed what "lived" in the communities, acting as true "emic" data.

I mainly collected data that was fairly prominent on the community pages. The visibility of the data was dependent on the likes, comments, etc. Occasionally, I went deeper to gather less visible data, to capture the diversity within the groups.

4.3.3. Gathering of secondary sources

Finally, less central in my research is the gathering of secondary sources, that predominantly consisted out of academic literature on the games I studied. The games I focused on, were already given quite some academic attention, so I used their insights and research to complement mine, building further on the existing literature. Occasionally, I read game reviews and gathered social media posts.²³

4.4. Data analysis

After collecting my data by making screenshots of the content, the process of data analysis was fairly simple. I attached codes to every screenshot I made, often multiple codes that describe the

²³ For example, I gathered a lot of Twitter posts from the developers of *Valiant Hearts*, because they interacted quite extensively with their players, sharing artwork that they had made.

content in a few words.²⁴ Sometimes, I took multiple screenshots (in the case of artwork for example) and labeled them together, when the content was similarly or the same.²⁵ After the coding sessions, some categories or themes started to appear. When writing each data analysis separate, I took the codes, my own notes and the gathered secondary sources together, to write a cohesive essay about the game.²⁶ I ended with a general conclusion of all three game essays.

4.5. Ethics and storage

Creating an online identity such as a “nickname”, protects our real identity and personal information, when we move around online. While there is already a privacy layer, this does not mean that we should simply abandon ethics and the way we storage our data. It is known that a lot of people use the same identity for different platforms, social network sites and communities. This implies that a track record can be held to capture wat people say and do online. For example, when one knows the nickname of a reddit user, one can see all his contributions in that specific community or across different ones. For that simple reason, I chose to, not include nicknames of individuals in the collection of my data. There is also no reason to, since the content written down or artwork being shared doesn’t get more meaning when the nickname is known. Moreover, I did not use a consent form to ask permission for data collection, since most communities are public and can be reached quite easily. As for storage, I collected my data in a Word document on my personal hard drive.

4.6. Reflection on research process

Overall, I really enjoyed the research process, especially finding new literature to sustain my claims and arguments. I felt that the methods I used, were sufficient in addressing my research questions, especially the second method of participant observation. However, I think that a focus-group discussion with the players of each game, could be also an excellent method to delph deeper into some topics that this research has touched upon. Due to the covid-restrictions this was sadly not possible and a more difficult endeavor.

“Playing” the games, was also quite fun, however, harder than I anticipated. Actual “play” is sometimes obscured when you try to be observant to every little aspect of the game. Sometimes,

²⁴ It is important to state, that it was sometimes very difficult to the describe the data in a few codes. Therefore, it can sometimes seem as a description of what is presented.

²⁵ The collected data with the attached codes can be found in a separated document that can be consulted separately.

²⁶ It is important to know, that there is no way of including or accounting for every single collected data-piece. I took the most striking and most frequent themes to write my essay about.

especially during long playthroughs, It felt like a chore, something which I had to do. This took out the spontaneity which I generally associated with gaming. However, I also learnt to be more observant, both towards the game and the emotions it was able to trigger.

Games are also often long and require a lot of time and dedication. While I played every game, I think it would benefit my research more, if I had more time to actual play them. Because of their length, I also decided that I did not have to experience everything the game had to offer.

During my research process, I also encountered a couple of dilemmas and problems, however, rather non-intrusive. The first one, is that of “too much data”. Within the communities, I found a sheer amount of data which was sometimes hard to go through. However, often the posts repeated themselves in a similar fashion: the same, or similar comments were made. Once I achieved this saturation, I often stopped collecting data and read secondary sources offering another unique look on the games I studied. Another problem I faced was the amount of possible topics I could go into, analyzing the game. This due to the fact that games are extensive and multi-layered in their meaning and the topics they cover. Therefore, I had to categorize and choose on which analyzed data I wanted to focus. A minor second dilemma I encountered, was the sometimes highly qualitative contributions made by some players which I then could not cite to protect their identity. Sometimes their reviews (and even artwork) were impressive and were essay-like. Not quoting them, felt wrong, but also justified when you remember that you want to protect their identity.

Overall, I learned a lot, especially of game studies as a discipline and doing digital ethnography. This dissertation also encourages me to work further on some of the arguments I made here.

5. Case studies: game analyses

5.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I focus on each game separately, combining my own experiences and reflections with those of the players from each respective community. I connect the data to the already existing scholarly literature of academics mainly focusing on their own gameplay to make a textual analysis. I complement and extend that literature by focusing on those most accustomed to each game: the players themselves.

The analyses mainly focuses on the reflections and experiences of players (and myself) concerning violence and death within the game's representation of war, and what triggers them. I have tried to contextualize the contributions of the players within the contours of each game. Some elements may be specific to one game, while others are appeared in all three. By focusing on violence and death, I show how these critical games are part of these so-called "digital death worlds", and in what aspects they differ from the more hegemonic military/war game.

I start with an analysis of *This War of Mine*, before moving to a discussion of *Spec Ops: The Line* and *Valiant Hearts*. I end this chapter with a general conclusion.

5.2. This War of Mine

At one time, at night, I decided to scavenge a desolated apartment block that looked promising. A lot of material were known to be located there, which I could use to secure our house better from night-time raiders. Upon my venture to the apartment, I needed to cross a public square. Loud bangs echoed the square, indicating that a sniper was targeting anyone who was brave enough to cross. Scared to get shot and die (since there is no bringing back to life of a character), I tried to traverse Pavle across the square, hiding behind each cover, waiting for the sniper to reload his rifle to run to the next cover. In the middle of the square, behind a large statue, I found a man, wounded and pinned down. He asked for help, wanting me to bring him back home, to the apartment block across the square that I was planning to scavenge. Still under continuous sniper fire, I found a sewage tunnel under the square that led directly to the apartment. Upon entering, loud baby cries filled the corridors of the desolated apartment block. After going upstairs, it seemed that the man I saved, was the father of the child. The child was crying because his caretaker left him to search for supplies, which eventually led to him getting shot in the square. The man thanked me extensively and told me I could take anything from the chest behind his bed...

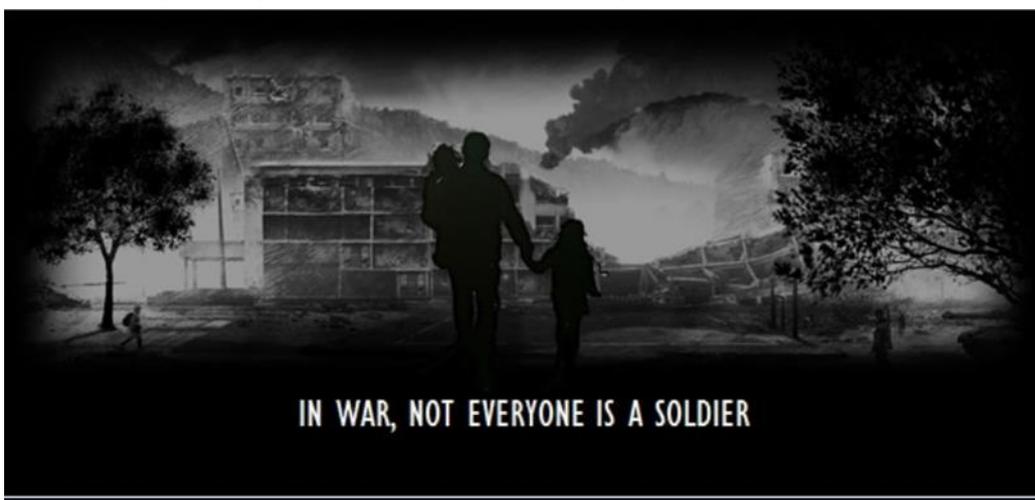
What I remember is not the reward I got for saving the man, but the haunting cries of the baby, mixed with the distanced sniper shots targeting ordinary people. A sense of dread, desolation and depression fell over me, that caused me to stop playing and think about what I witnessed. I was not forced by the game to save the man and his child. I made that choice. I did not have to save them. I could just have left him, ignoring his crying baby and loot his apartment, just as I was planning to. However, my morals guided me in a different direction.

This is a personal experience of the game: *This War of Mine* (TWoM), a game loosely based on the siege of Sarajevo. In this game you play as a group of civilians trying to survive the war, which you do through managing resources, scavenging, crafting, trading and much more. The game is played in a 2D-setting and consists out of a day and night cycle. During the day, you manage your supplies and craft things, during the night you go out to scavenge. The game is fairly hard and throws some difficult dilemmas at you. Similar narrative-written vignettes, such as the above one, are made and shared by players, since the game really acts as a “carve-your-own story”, with random encounters, decision making, etc. The most striking features of the game, were the centrality of the civilians and the positive effect of the negative emotions.

Civilian experiences and their precariousness

From the above vignette, civilian life stands central in TWoM. The game does not solely focus on the military and soldier aspect of war, like conventional military/war games do. It counters the general marginalization of civilians by rendering them the central protagonist of the game. They are not part of the decor or are given a non-significant role. Instead, the player is forced to embody the perspective of a civilian in war: to think like them, act like them and make decisions like them.

The main marketing slogan underscores the centrality of the civilians: “In war, not everyone is a soldier”. This central, promotional message is re-purposed and re-used in various community artwork, exhibiting the significance of the main protagonists.



Artwork with the marketing slogan (Appendix A, Figure 53).

Many players appreciated the successful attempt to shed light on this forgotten population in military/war games. As one player explained:

Uniquely, a game that has you play as a civilian, not a soldier, a victim of politics and perpetrators, forced to endure the reality you find yourself in when a battlefield happens to coincide with that which you call home. . . . This embodies the basic form of humanity. (Appendix A, Figure 19)

What is more, in TWoM you are not playing with a single civilian, but with a group of civilians managing to ensure communal survival. With this, TWoM deconstructs, to a great extent, the prevalent “individual hero complex” in more common military/war games, where one soldier -often in hypermasculine fashion - manages to defeat the evildoers with excessive violence, or, as House (2020) excellently explains: “Through its narrative and representation of domestic responsibility,

TWoM, reframes the experience of war from a hypermasculine glorification of violence and death to a mediation on communal survival and the challenges of non-violence in the face of violence” (p. 54).

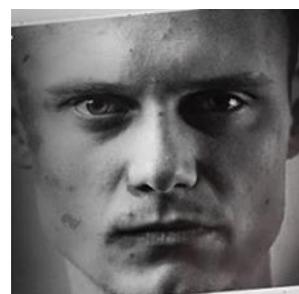
How you manage to ensure survival is up to you though: violence is an option, but is often non-beneficial, causing a lot of stress upon the survivors. Scavenging during the night and careful management of your supplies and equipment is often a safer option. This management-system however, burdens the player with a huge responsibility, which is heightened by the “perma-death” mechanic. “Selective mortality”, where death is only reserved for the non-playable characters (NPC’s), is here absent. Instead, when a character dies, he is gone for the remainder of the game and this has an effect on the survival of the group. House (2020) argues that these characters epitomize what Judith Butler (2010 cited in House, 2020) calls “ungrievable lives”, because they are framed as already lost or forfeited. Indeed, the lives of the characters are extremely precarious, and it feels like a detrimental loss when they die. You might survive the war and see the end of the game, but at what personal cost?

I found it very difficult to ensure survival, since there is often little time to correct mistakes or make the best out of bad situations. As their lives became lost, I often gave up, ending the game prematurely. From many reactions of other players, it seems that I was not the only one in having trouble to manage their survival. One player tells us:

The last time I played this game, I managed to get my survivors pretty well set up... until things started to fall apart. Resources got scarce, and people got sick, and... I deleted the game, and hid it from my library because just looking at the title was painful. (Appendix A, Figure 12)

When losing a survivor, you know that they are gone for the remainder of the game. While it is definitely a loss gameplay-wise (since survival for the rest of your characters becomes more difficult if one dies), TWoM manages to conceptualize death not only as a hinderance or burden, but also as a loss at an emotional level. This because you get attached to them as you play.

For example, from the beginning of the game, you can read your characters back story. You get accustomed to who they were before the war and how they ended up in it. Pavle, for example, the character I controlled in the vignette above, was a football player. Although, his sports history doesn’t matter in the midst of a military siege, he proved to be an excellent runner, which I deployed to full



Picture of “Pavle”, the former football player I controlled during my night-time mission to the apartment. [personal screenshot]

use when I needed to cross the square. There is also a sense of liveliness to the characters, because characters do not “hide” behind a digital rendered face. When selecting a survivor to control, pictures of real humans appear, giving them some human weight. This is accompanied with realistic human features, such as them capable of having emotions. Doing horrible deeds can plummet a character into a depressing state, causing them to act differently. Eventually, they can also commit suicide, that as a consequence, has an effect on the mental state of the other survivors.

This brings me to the cornerstone and the greatest achievement of the game: these negative emotions exert a sense of “realism” when it comes to portraying war, and they have the ability to initiate critical reflection.

TWoM’s inner-logics of negative emotions

Claiming to show how war really affects civilians around the world, TWoM is overall a depressing game causing much discomfort. While the game certainly has its moments of minor enjoyment, – especially when you overcome a problem or manage to secure your shelter – throughout most of the game, the word “fun” is absent from its dictionary. Despair, loss, worrying, sadness, fear, depression and disturbance are the more common feelings while playing. I never felt a full moment of security. This is predominantly triggered through the randomness of some game mechanics.²⁷ Bad things almost always happen, which means that you can never fully prepare yourself. Graphically and musically, the game does an excellent job in setting the tone of these negative emotions: the game looks like an dull oil-painting with little color used (often dark), and the music accompanies the desolated setting wonderfully.

²⁷ This includes: survivors getting sick and need of medication, random encounters with other survivors, nighttime raids of people stealing valuable supplies, etc.



Screenshot from the game, showing the desolated landscape. The graphics look like an oil painting, with dull colors, excellently supplementing the depressing tone of the game. [personal screenshot]

Various reviews and comments made by players stress the negative emotional nature of the game. One player started a thread on the subreddit of the game to ask how other players dealt with these depressing feelings:

I love this game but find myself becoming depressed when playing. Does anyone else experience this? The game loop is one of my favorites of any game, but I can't play the game very much anymore because it starts to "get to me". . . . Have you experienced this and how have you dealt with it? (Appendix A, Figure 40)

Many other players replied and shared their experiences and coping mechanisms. Scrolling further on the subreddit revealed similar questions and threads of people discussing these negative emotions and how to cope with them. A lot of artwork, screenshots and other visual creations reaffirm those emotional feelings that the game evokes.



Various memes, artwork, etc. (Appendix A Figure 50, 65, 66)

The emotionality of the experience is also intensified through the complex moral dilemmas you encounter. Uncertain events or actions that are often randomized, can get you caught up in tough situations that force you to make terrible moral considerations.²⁸ One player explains to be forced choosing between a rock and a hard place:

Down to my last survivor (who was depressed, starving and severely ill). I had no choice but to raid people. I was caught so I had to kill two people. I got everything I needed and more. Went back to my shelter, but he couldn't handle killing anyone. He was racked with guilt, and was broken and alone. He couldn't even eat the things he stole. Boris hung himself that night. (Appendix A code, Figure 9)²⁹

²⁸ When making a choice, the game is not scared to start questioning your morals. This is for example done through in-game characters asking why you choose that option. (e.g. "Why did you steal from us?")

²⁹ Also striking is the level of identification the player has with the character he is controlling: first he speaks of "I", then the player refers to "he", finally he ends with "Boris".

Whatever you choose to do in this situation or any other situation in the game, there is often no definitive “right” answer. As already hinted by the player, often there is not even a choice. Technically, there might be an option to choose, but because the game puts you in the most difficult situations imaginable, where every option leads to a bad outcome, it appears to us, that there is no choice.³⁰

More than often, you have to set your own morals aside, to ensure survival. As Hartmann & Vorderer (2010) state, this causes these negative feelings: “If a user violates his or her internal moral standards by doing harm to video game characters, dissonant feelings like guilt and disgust are likely to emerge. Feelings of guilt or remorse, in turn, should hinder enjoyment” (p. 97).

Accompanying the depressing nature and the moral choices, was also the choice to include the horrific consequences of warfare, that are generally excluded from more hegemonic military/war games. TWoM does not shy away from the horrors of war and actively avoids sanitization techniques that need to secure the enjoyment of the game. The violence inflicted on civilians and children, sexual violence, suicide, psychological illness and more disturbing consequences are all part of the experience. I – and a lot of other players, so it seems – vividly remember “the infamous supermarket scene”, where you are witnessing a girl that was looking for food, being sexual assaulted by a soldier. You can intervene, risking your life and save the girl, or just look away and leave.³¹

This all, let me to conclude that the biggest achievement of TWoM is its capability to let the player feel bad. In more common war/military games, war is something fun to be engaged in. It is thrilling and fetishizes violence, death and guns for pleasure. TWoM completely inverts this, by making war a horrible experience, rather than a “fun” activity. The politics of death and dying in the virtual world, conceptualized by Phillips (2018) as “mechropolitics”, functions in the sieged world of TWoM not as fun, but as discomfort, horror, fear and depression.

Paradoxically, having negative emotions, opens up the possibility for something positive: realism and reflection. With regard to realism, Bjørkelo (2019) conceptualizes these negative feelings within TWoM, and uses the concept of “transgressive realism”: a dynamic process between negative emotions and perceiving something as more truthful and real. This can work both ways: if the

³⁰ This issue of choice and how war forces us to do horrible things, is also discussed in the analysis of *Spec Ops: The Line*

³¹ There are many other more horrific scenes to encounter. The one with the baby in the above vignette is another one.

negative feelings feel real, what evokes them must also be realistic, or, that what is perceived as real causes stronger negative emotions.

This proves that TWoM manages to give the player a more “realistic” representations of war, unlike more hegemonic military/war games. War appears more real, because it causes moments of discomfort, feelings that are usually felt during war in real life. Perhaps, we could then also better understand this reaction: “This War of Mine makes you realize the terrible nature of war better than a thousand ad-campaigns can.” (Appendix A, Figure 10)

When it comes to the other positive outcome of discomfort: reflection, Grace (2011) argues that taboo game design causing discomfort, can be an affective opportunity for developers to remind players to think. Grace (2011) further explains:

It is most powerful in its ability to rip a player from the rhythm of play into the laboratory of thought. Like a child who falls off a bike, or the recipient of a great gift, the player is likely to ask – what happened? Sometimes the moment of discomfort will lead to positive revelations, other times they will be negative. (p. 6)

That moment of thought and contemplation, appeared to me many times, including that time when I instructed Pavle to save the man on the square, reuniting him with his crying baby. Seen from the many contributions, the game really accomplishes initiating reflection through discomfort. Similarly, Jørgensen (2016) talks about “positive discomfort”, when analyzing the game *Spec Ops: The Line*, that I also focus on, down below. She notes that the game creates a sense of gratification in the player, through evoking negative experiences.

While discomfort is TWoM’s strongest point, I want to mention the fact that this can somewhat be avoided, especially after playing multiple playthroughs. In an interview, Miechowski, stated that they want to avoid a “gaming mindset” through for example, avoiding a common used term called “crafting” and changing it with “creating” (Petit, 2014). They want to portray the game as a form of art, a representation of the reality of war, without portraying it as too much of a game. However, personally, after many hours in-game, I felt that the emotional nature wore off, partly because I encountered most scenarios, but mostly because “the gaming rationale of beating the game” takes over. After multiple hours, you start calculating which survivors to pick, what the best decisions are to make, what to create first, how to manage your food supply, etc. You start to think extremely strategically, almost in a quantitative manner, which removes the emotional spontaneity of the game. This is also stressed by players, usually by those who are less positive of the game.

Finally, while the game itself is centered around the hardships of war, the contextual frame of “what is happening politically” is in my opinion somewhat missing. There are almost no clues of why the war is occurring, who the conflicting sides are, or who started the war. It seems that the developers intentionally avoided creating a fictional (or real) political context. However, this does not mean that players themselves aren’t connecting their game experience to their own, personalized and localized war stories.

Connecting the game to “reality”

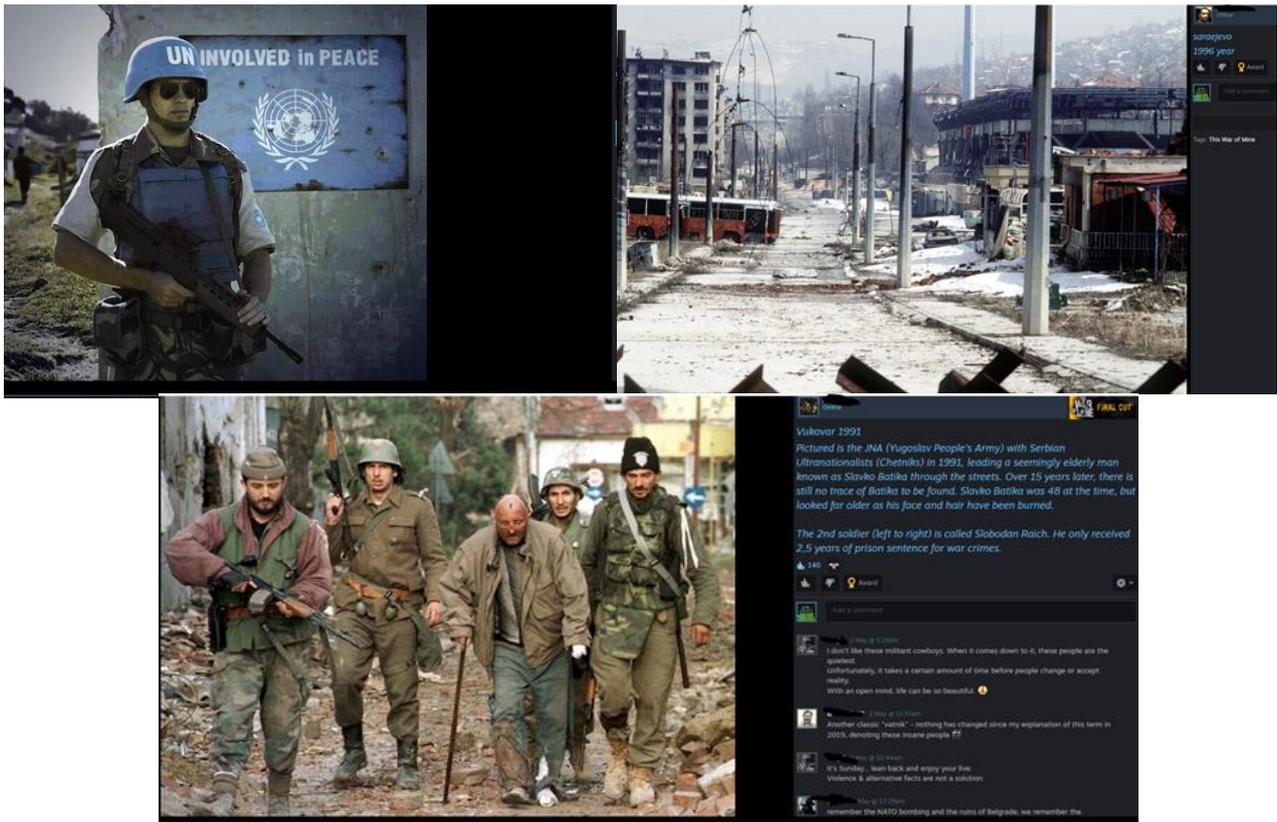
While the game is inspired by the Siege of Sarajevo during the Bosnian war, in an interview Miechowski, a developer of the game, emphasizes the universality of the event in-game. For their research, they based themselves on data from Syria, Libya and thus also Sarajevo, because the Yugoslavian wars are pretty accurate documented. While the game is inspired by different war situations, it is not set in a particular setting. The pattern is pretty much the same for every conflict, so it could be set in any city (Petit, 2014). While I definitely understand the universality of the experience or the “it could happen anywhere”-mentality, I also think it is a safe option to “depoliticize” the game by making the game not a localized experience.

However, the game has definitely a political impact, especially when it comes to humanitarian assistance. In 2015, an add-on chapter was released in conjunction with War Child, to raise money for young Syrians displaced by conflict. Miechowski noted that this was a way for the industry that profited from depictions of war to give something back (Petit, 2014).

While the game is not set in one specific conflict, this does not mean, that gamers themselves do not make the game personal by relating it to individual or political memories. One player for example, connects his own virtual experiences to familial memories of WWII:

My grandfather spent his childhood in the middle of Berlin between 1939 and 1945 and he told me how his mother used to leave him behind in their ruined flat so she could go and find something to eat. I suppose, this game explains the dilemmas she faced to a lot of people. (Appendix A, Figure 2)

Others, shared personal stories when they were soldiers or survivors from wars. Some post pictures of real-life wars, predominantly from the Yugoslavian wars, that inspired the development of this game.



Pictures of real-life wars (predominantly from the Yugoslavian wars) are often shared in the community section of TWoM (Appendix A, Figure 52, 54, 55).

Similarly, de Smale (2020) shows, through her excellent research, how in the comment section of YouTube videos concerning TWoM, connecting but also colliding memories appear from people discussing the Yugoslavian wars. For example, she shows how people share childhood and family memories of the war, with the overarching content crossing themes such as feelings of loss, displacement and insecurity. Some even explain how they are hesitant to play the game because of the memories it triggers (de Smale, 2020). de Smale (2020) explains: “because playing these games can potentially offer embodied experiences of the past – as seen in historical re-enactments – it is not difficult to imagine why some players are hesitant” (p. 198).

With the emerging discourses surrounding childhood and family memories, these videos of the game are used as a memory object, a way to remember traumatic pasts (de Smale, 2020). Therefore YouTube serves as a global “accidental community of memory” (Huttunen, 2016 cited in de Smale, 2020). Furthermore, besides connecting memories, there are also colliding memories focusing on war events that are perceived differently between actors of the post-Yugoslav states

(de Smale, 2020). All these reactions show how players are keen to personalize and politicize their play by relating the game to their own, or national reality.

5.3. Spec Ops: The Line

As a frequent adolescent gamer, I first encountered *Spec Ops: The Line*, when a classmate urged me to play it. He didn't tell me too much about it. "I just had to experience it for myself", he insisted. Excited as I was whenever I could play a new game, I pirated the game (I had no money) and played it for a couple of hours. I remembered stopping prematurely, exhausted and shocked from what I just witnessed. I never finished the game. More than five years later, I managed to finish the game, in preparation for this dissertation. The negative feelings persisted, but this time, I kept playing.

Contrary to the other two studied games, *Spec Ops* isn't some obscure indie-title, but a big budget "triple A" game. The game follows captain Walker, a commander of the U.S. Army's Delta Force, instructed to search for survivors of a failed evacuation in Dubai several months earlier. The rescue operation was led by lieutenant Colonel John Konrad. Throughout the story, Walker and his three men discover that Konrad's battalion, the 33rd have disobeyed orders and enforced martial law in the destroyed city of Dubai.

When discussing critical military/war games, there is no avoidance in mentioning *Spec Ops*, since it is one of the best examples explicitly critiquing elements of the military shooter genre. Many critical scholars, such as Smethurst (2017), Jørgensen (2016) and Keogh (2013) have turned their gaze towards this third-person shooter. Much has been said about this game. Keogh (2013) for example, did an excellent job in explaining how the game does not give an alternative to the military shooter, but instead critiques the West's technological and ethical superiority present in the genre, by slowly subverting it. One example to illustrate this, is the fact that in the beginning of the game you encounter mostly Farsi-speaking "bad" guys. However, through a series of events, you start to fight US soldiers. This not only deconstruct the othering in regular war games, but also inverts the "bad and good guys" binary. Besides his excellent textual analysis, there has not been an extensive overview of the non-researcher players' experience of the game, apart from Jørgensen's (2016) analysis. I hope to add to this body of literature by focusing on what was striking in my data collection and by sharing my own thoughts on the game.³²

Discomfort through complicity

³² This is therefore by no means an complete overview of the game, since this would be an impossible undertaking in the scope of this dissertation. I mostly focus on my own thoughts and that of the players.

Just as in TWoM, the abundance of reported negative feelings by the player-base of *Spec Ops*, are enormous. In her qualitative study, Jørgensen (2016) held a focus group discussion and captured the uncomfortable experience of guilt, regret, as well as queasiness of five players that played *Spec Ops*. Central in her thesis and that of the reported feelings, is that of complicity. The game emphasizes the consequences of your actions, through the main protagonist Walker, and therefore players feel morally responsible. Similarly, Smethurst (2017) explains that *Spec Ops* refuses players to rationalize violence, which makes them vulnerable to feelings of complicity.³³ One excellent example everyone witnessed, and widely mentioned, is the infamous “white phosphorus scene”. White phosphorus is a chemical weapon which burns the skin in a devastating way.³⁴ In this scene, Walker and his crew are arriving at a camp filled with military personnel. The only way to advance through the camp is by using a suspicious laptop, that is connected to a firing mechanism containing the chemical. Upon using the laptop, the player see an black-and-white arial view of the military camp, with a crosshair on top, ready to fire. After firing, you and your squad move through the camp and are exposed to the horrific consequences of your actions: burned soldiers are scattered around the camp, asking for water and crying out loud. But it gets worse. When you move

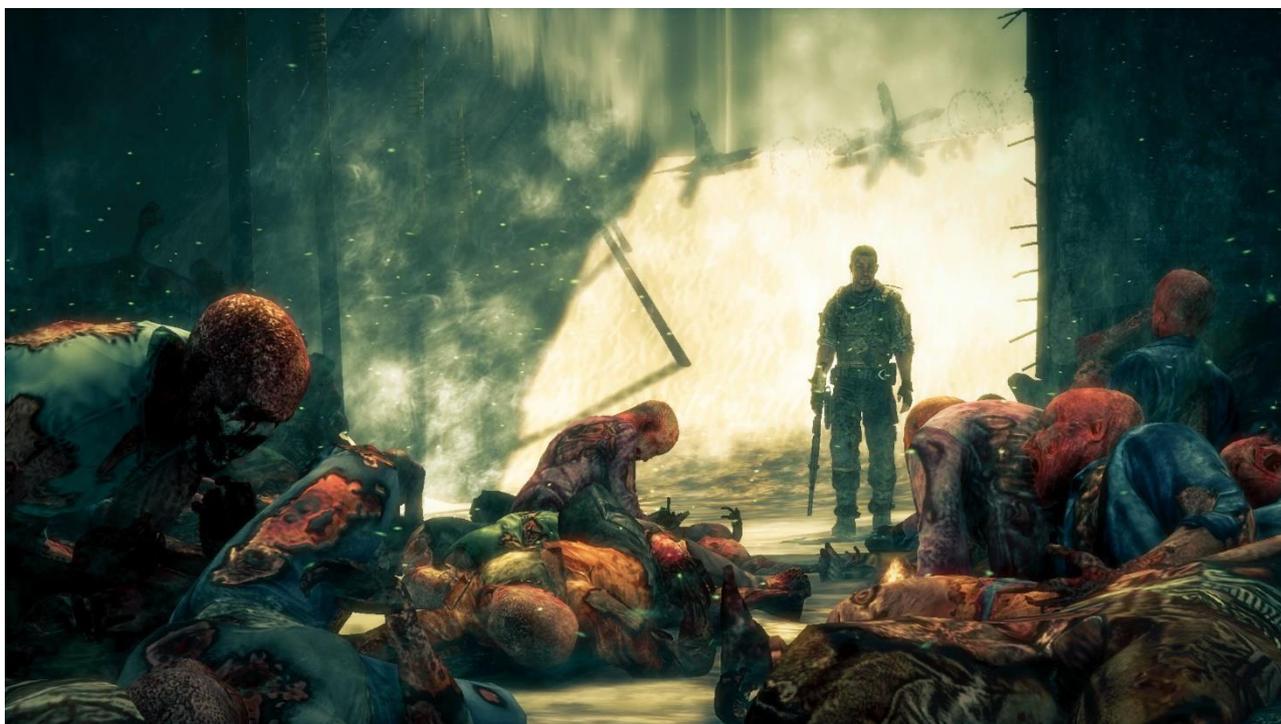


Aftermath of the white phosphorus that you fired upon the camp. Everywhere are burning and dying soldiers. Someone of your squad mentions: “This... This was too much...” [personal screenshot]

³³ Ways of rationalizing warfare are manifold and often occur when playing regular war games. Examples are: othering the enemy, considering that the end justifies the means, telling yourself that you had no choice but to use violence, etc. (Smethurst, 2017).

³⁴ In 2019 white phosphorus was also allegedly used in Syria, after people entered the hospital with “suspicious burns”. The weapon has been used repeatedly during the Syrian civil war (Sabbagh, 2019).

further, you discover that the 33rd were transporting refugees that you killed in the process. At that moment the camera zooms in at Walker's face and you clearly see his distress.



The moment when Walker (and the player) realize that he killed many civilians in the process. [personal screenshot]

This scene is thus an excellent example of how the in-game violence cannot be rationalized. There is no way to justify what happened, which makes you complicit in what you did.³⁵ This idea of “complicity”, being morally responsible for the actions in-game, is also emphasized by a lot of players online. One player for example notes: “It’s called Spec Ops: The Line because you keep crossing it.” (Appendix B, Figure 4)

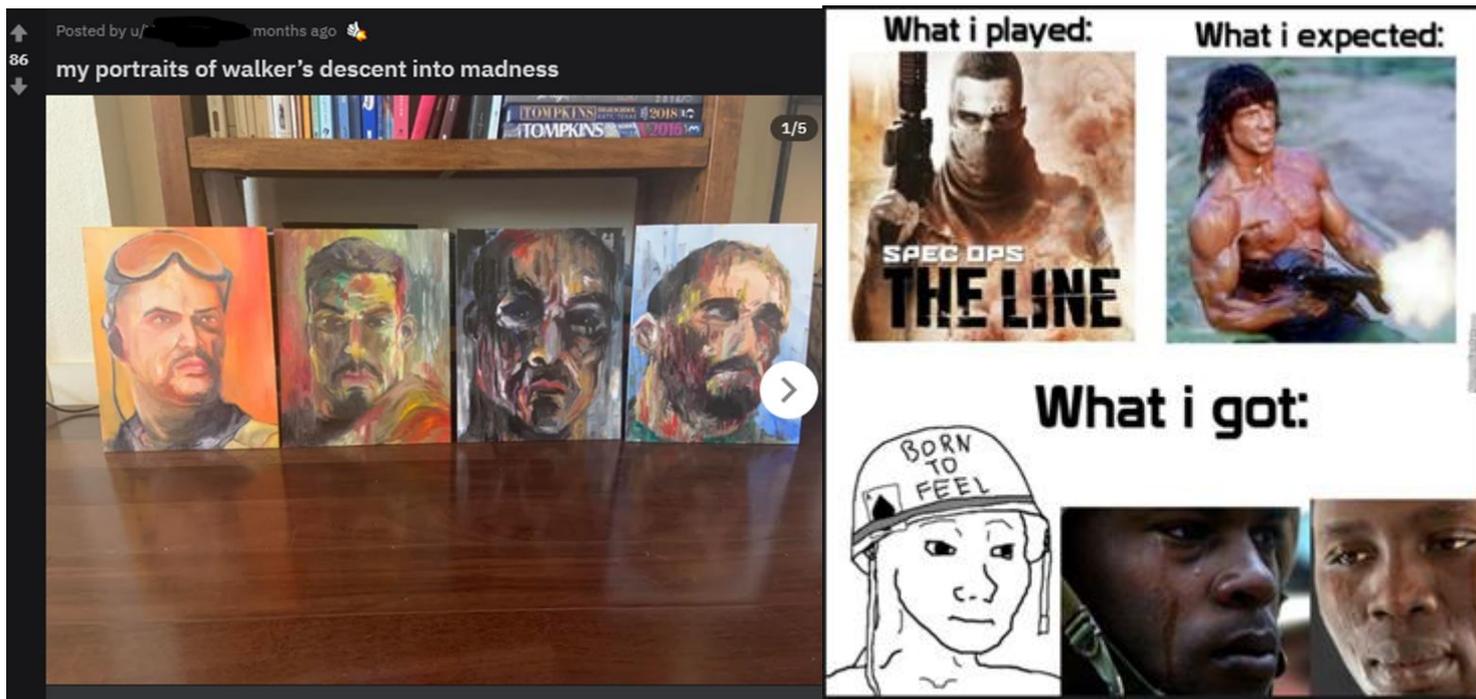
Another player highlights the exhausting character of the game: “Finishing Spec Ops The Line is exhaustive. . . . The sheer raw brutality of the whole narrative will draw you from the get-go and doesn’t let go as it further descends into a complete spiral of destruction.” (Appendix B, Figure 3)

Indeed, after my personal playthrough of six hours straight, I was exhausted, not only because of the long screen time, but also because of what I witnessed. What is more, throughout the campaign, you see Walkers mental health deteriorating. While regular war games have a clear power/hero

³⁵ Sure, you could rationalize your actions by stating that you did not know that there were civilians in the camp, but with the graphic representations of the aftermath it almost forces the player to see and be responsible for the consequences of his deeds.

fantasy, *Spec Ops* inverts this fantasy and exposes the hard realities of warfare on the human psyche. *Spec Ops*, also avoids sanitizing warfare, since the effects of war on the mental health is rarely shown, in other games. Physically, Walker also gets more torn-up when the story advances: he has blood everywhere, his face is burned, his clothes are torn, etc. It is almost as if his physical appearances move along with his mental deterioration. The third-person perspective keeps you close to Walker and you are always a witness of his downward spiral. Because you control Walker and you are the one doing the atrocities, it seems that his mental descent gets projected upon the player. A lot of people refer to this. One player in the review-section comically states: “Get your own PTSD simulator” (Appendix B, Figure 2).

Another player questions the possibility of sensitive people getting PTSD by playing this game. He also explains how he himself had nightmares for months and had difficulties sleeping after playing. An extensive amount of memes, artwork and other visual material has been shared online, backing up the depressing nature of the game and its emphasis on Walker’s mental descent.



Two images found on the Spec Ops subreddit. Left: artwork made by a fan showing Walker’s mental deterioration. Right: a meme, showing how the game tricked players into playing a normal shooter and causing an emotional reaction (Appendix B, Figure 43 and 47).

Just as in TWoM, the centrality of the negative emotions has a positive effect on the players: realism and reflection (see Bjørkelo, 2019; Grace, 2011). Seen from the data, the discomfort in *Spec Ops* triggers people to reflect about war, about the consequences of war and how war is represented in

digital media. An element more emphasized in *Spec Ops* however, is that of complicity since it forces you to do the horrible deeds, whereas in *TWoM* you still have somewhat of a choice. This brings me to the first critique point of the game, that a lot of players mentioned: that of a lack of choice. This undermines the complicity of the game, as I will show in the following section.

***Spec Ops* and the issue of “choice”**

A debate surrounding the game, both by academics and players, is the issue of choice. Many players express their discontent with the fact that the game essentially forces you to do the horrible actions (such as launching the white phosphorus). The game doesn't seem to offer the player a choice. They felt frustrated at the game for guilt-tripping them (Smethurst, 2017). One player stated:

As much as I like [*sic*] direction of the story, it relies too heavily on forced shock value to actually be effective, because none of the war crimes you commit, were directly because of your actions. The vast majority of war crimes you commit, were forced on you by the game. (Appendix B, Figure 40)

Interestingly, this player does not feel any complicity or responsibility for his actions, since there was essentially no choice. However, in an interview for *Giant Bomb* (Klepek, 2012 as cited in Smethurst, 2017), Walt Williams, the game's lead writer, notes that there was a choice after all: the player could just simply quit playing.

That is just what I did the first time playing the game, I stopped playing, immediately after the notorious “white phosphorus scene”. I was horrified and did not have any incentive to keep playing. However, it seems that many players did not follow my path and kept playing till the end.

In this regard, Smethurst (2017) notes, that many players did not stop playing because there is a sense of authority present that connects the player to the game. Players are committed to see the end of the game and won't prematurely end their session. Moreover, game developers also function as authority figures, since they put the rules into the game and the players often drive to go along these rules. Also, money has to be accounted. Games are not cheap, so the player is incited to play further to make their money worth (Smethurst 2017). Smethurst (2017) further notes:

For all of these reasons, subjects are led to inflict pain on virtual beings, despite potentially extreme levels of discomfort. The choice to stop is there, but the player is highly

disincentivized from doing so, to the extent that many players did not regard it as a choice at all. (p. 215)³⁶

This lack of choice, was extremely well argued by another player in the *Spec Ops* subreddit. He argued:

The things [*sic*] is, you don't have a choice every time. War forces many people to do things which are morally wrong, and sometimes downright criminal. I get the point being made, but I choose to look at it that way. . . . In short, I think the lack of choice added to the game. It made people think about question [*sic*] which could have been conveniently avoided had there been a choice. Of course, people can dislike it for that, but I think the majority have got what the game was trying to say. (Appendix B, Figure 39)

Another player added: "Walker's mantra through the game "I didn't have a choice" (Appendix B, Figure 42).

In this sense, the lack of choice is part of the message the game tries to convey. In war people are forced to do horrible things, that they would not do in normal conditions.³⁷ While in his book "State of exception", Agamben (2005) focusses on the power of the government to do exceptional things within a state of emergency, we could say the same for people in war situations. They too do things which they wouldn't usually do, with the difference that they are forced, while the government isn't.

Still, with the message of the narrative being overtly "anti-war", focusing on the consequences of war, and so on, the game lacks in my opinion, in the gameplay department because you still do the same things as in any other shooter: shooting and killing people. It seems that there is real dissonance between the narrative and the gameplay, which I will now tend to.

Dissonance between narrative and gameplay? Or form of satire?

At its core, *Spec Ops* is still a war game that lets you do the same things when playing any other military shooter game: shooting, running, taking cover, swapping weapons with that of dead soldiers, shooting explosive red barrels, going through the occasional "turret-sections" and so on.

³⁶ A striking similarity can be made between the game and the experiment of Stanley Milgram. In the experiment, people show their obedience towards the authority figures by inflicting pain to others, also if it meant to go against their own morals.

³⁷ Here a reference can be made to *This War of Mine*. While in TWoM, choices can be made, there is often only a choice between two equally bad options. The game forces you to make decisions to ensure the survival of your group of survivors. Decisions you normally would not have to make.

These tropes aren't new or revolutionary, but standard in many of these conventional military/war games. The game is tied together with repetitive shooting and because of that, it would be naive to assume that there isn't any "fun" to be found in the game. Just as any other games, these shooting sections still feel as a power fantasy combined with the thrill of firing a weapon.³⁸

After a while however, it gets boring and repetitive. Personally, most shooting sections felt as a "chore" until the next story set-piece. Seen in many negative reviews, players tend to agree with that. One player states: "I'd rather watch a movie of it than play through it. I'm okay with linear, but there is no complexity to the gameplay. Go to room – shoot people – get plot – repeat" (Appendix B, Figure 30).

There are also some questionable design choices, such as the sprint button also being the cover button, and some performance issues on PC that hinders the experience. With regard to the recycling of the same tropes from other military shooters and the constant shooting, I found the gameplay inconsistent with the narrative and its message. Its narrative and message attacks explicitly certain elements within the military shooter genre, but on the other hand it copies many gameplay components from that genre. However, an argument can be made that reunites the narrative (and its message) with the gameplay, possibly as a form of satire.

If the gameplay is a form of satire, the game doesn't have to be unique. Instead, it wants to mimic the general tropes, and by doing that, it – in combination with the narrative – critiques the conventional shooter at its core, and questions it. Another explanation is given by Jensen (2014) in his dissertation. He notes that the familiar gameplay completes the idea that *Spec Ops* is just like any other military shooter on the market. When it later reveals its true intentions and message, it completely takes the player by surprise. By taking the player by surprise and tricking them in thinking that it is was just an ordinary game, the intertextual anti-war message and its critique towards conventional military games gets more internalized by the player.

Another element I could not directly wrap my head around, was the unapologetic and excessive emphasis on the corporality of the in-game violence and death. Sure, the game is overall very graphic and doesn't shed away from showing graphic scenes such as that of the aftermath of the white phosphor above. However, these are important narrative set-pieces, implemented to evoke a sense of complicity and cause reflection. This is completely different from the regular shooting

³⁸ Below I go deeper into the aspect of "fun" and how it relates to its opposite of discomfort and negative emotional feelings.

gameplay, between the set-pieces, where gore is implemented cheaply and almost laughable. For example, when shooting with any kind of high explosive weapon, enemies literally “evaporate”. With other weapons, limbs get blown off, blood splatters around and bodies get horrible mutilated. What’s more, sometimes, the death of an enemy soldier is “captured in slow-motion”, making the scene, more spectacular than it should be. Another example, that I found very awkward, were the executions you could perform in-game. Sometimes, when an enemy fell to the ground, an “execution prompt” would appear, letting you kill the wounded soldier in horrific fashion without wasting any bullets. This all, is an excellent example of what Kingsepp (2007) has called the “carnavalesque death”, where the corporality of the event is highlighted, and the blood, the gore and the grotesque are crucial. To me, the fetishization of the in-game violence, seemed inconsistent with the narrative and the critique the game offers at the same time.

It is difficult to say exactly why this was implemented. As satire? Or was it unintentional or with other means implemented? The latter is a more plausible option. In an interview from Adam Smith (2012) in *Rock Paper Shotgun* (RPS), senior designer Shawn Frison explains that their vision was to show how horrific war can be and part of that was showing the carnage on the battlefield. Nevertheless, he explains how it is a really thin line to go between and that they really struggled with this while they were making the game.

This shows how difficult it is to represent the real horrors of war, without fetishizing it. It also demonstrates that games are ambiguous products, seen here in the dissonance between the narrative and the gameplay. Let us explore this ambiguity further in relation to “fun” and “discomfort” since it seems that *Spec Ops* manages to do both.

Both fun and discomfort?

Spec Ops ambiguous status places fun and discomfort in an awkward position towards each other. On the one hand, I felt that it wanted to be a fun shooter since it copies many of the same tropes and overemphasizes the corporality of the violence.³⁹ As Phillips (2018) shows, within these digital death worlds, there is fun and a sense of power to be had when engaging with virtual death. On the other hand, the game wants to be serious and exposes the consequences of your actions,

³⁹ With regard to the “recycling of the genre’s mechanics”, indeed Jensen (2014) has a valuable argument in stating that the game wants to trick you in thinking that it is any other ordinary game to later surprise you with the opposite. However, this doesn’t take away the fact that the game is still about shooting and killing people, with many people getting some form of gratification from it.

letting you feel complicit and distressed. This brings the game in an awkward position surrounding its intentions.

However, as contradictory as it sounds, the combination of fun and discomfort can also be considered as a strength. Joyfully shooting people and enjoying the visual spectacle of your carnage gives you a sense of power that can later trigger even more discomfort when you realize the consequences of your deeds. The fact that you had fun while doing these things can backfire and cause even more reflection on the relation between fun and violence. You start questioning yourself: why exactly did I had fun doing that? Should I have been having fun when killing people? I think it is therefore that the notorious “white phosphorus scene” felt so horrible for many players, since all the fun you had before, culminates in its opposite during one horrible story sequence. As Frison in the interview states:

We have you joyfully bombing the hell out of people, which gives a sense of power, but then you have to go down and walk through the aftermath of what you actually did, so you get both sides. The fun side and then the regret of what you did. I think the fact that it felt fun makes the impact that much worse. (Smith, 2012, para. 54)

5.4. Valiant Hearts: The Great War

In opposition to *Spec Ops* and *TWoM*, playing *Valiant Hearts* is a different experience: it doesn't let you engage in violence, but still manages to – in my opinion – portray the horrors of the war. It is emotional, has a strong message and manages to educate, but these are often hindered with comical and silly game sections.

Valiant Hearts: The Great War is a 2D side-scrolling adventure puzzle game set in World War I France. As a player you control five ordinary characters: the Frenchmen Emile, his German son-in-law Karl, an American soldier volunteering in the French army called Freddie, a Belgian nurse called Anna, and Walt, a dog which accompanies the characters on their journey. I start my analysis with many players and myself describing *Valiant Hearts* as an emotional journey.

An emotional journey

From the onset, it is clear that the emphasis of the game lies on the characters and their emotional journey. Unlike *Spec Ops* and *TWoM*, that both trigger the inner discomfort, complicity and depressing feelings because of the horrors of war, I felt that *Valiant Hearts* was more centered around empathy and compassion with its main cast. There is no horror, shock-value or disturbances. Instead, emotions are triggered because of its story and its ability to give a human face to the conflict. This is also widely acknowledged and appreciated by the players themselves. One player notes: "If tears pool after finishing this game it means that you are mature & compassionate. One of the most beautiful stories out there. Only for *Valiant Hearts*!" (Appendix C, Figure 18).

Also shared memes and artwork, stress the centrality of the emotional journey the player is experiencing.



Meme about the emotional nature of the game (Appendix C, Figure 51).



Meme critiquing the 3 percent of players that have rated the game “negative” on Steam (Appendix C, Figure 49)

This emotional journey is triggered through telling the tale of a varied cast of characters that you play as and manages to give the war a “human face”. *Valiant Hearts* does this not with a focus on the allied side of the war, but includes many different identities, such as a nurse, a German soldier, and even a dog. This really arouses the idea that everyone is a victim of the war and that there is no “good” or “bad”, which we generally see in conventional military/war games. *Valiant Hearts* deconstructs this binary and exposes the true antagonist of the game: the war itself. As one player excellently explains:

The real-life war was marked by its ferocity and lethality being almost as noted as its utter pointlessness, which makes it hard to make compelling video games about it. *Valiant Hearts* is about the best attempt I’ve yet seen to square that particular circle, and it does so in quite cleverly: By making the war itself the antagonist against which the characters struggle, rather than choosing one side or another to make the villains of the piece. This is obscured at first by the invention of a German villain . . . but he’s vanquished about half the way through, and by so doing the player becomes gradually aware that he was at best a symptom of the larger, looming menace of the war, which cannot be defeated but might be survived. (Appendix C, Figure 31)

In this sense, *Valiant Hearts* does an excellent job, since as Chapman (2016) explains, WWI memory does not feature the same perceived moral clarity. Therefore many games distance themselves from that time-period (Chapman, 2016). However, *Valiant Hearts* does just that and shows how morality is blurred.

While the main cast is varied, I found the non-playable characters (NPC’s) quite the opposite. Soldiers are often stereotypical represented, such as German soldiers having big moustaches. The Congolese and Indian soldiers are easy recognizable because of their stereotypical

representations and lack of variation.⁴⁰ These NPC's are what Kempshall (2015) calls "the mass": soldiers in the game who are not the main characters and will always appear of less importance. They are a group marked by their lack of autonomy, individuality and agency.

What's more, "the mass" are the one engaging in violence and death, while our main cast is abstained from that. There is also no explicit gore or extreme violence present. But this doesn't mean that the game did not manage to convince the player of the horrific nature of the war. Instead, I found that its strongest capacity was to do just that, but without letting the player engage in excessive violence.

Telling a gruesome story about war, without perpetrating in violence

In my literature study, I used a vignette of the popular WWI game, *Battlefield 1*, to describe how it is an excellent example of so-called "digital death worlds". While *Valiant Hearts* is also part of these death worlds, since it centralizes violence and death, it manages however, to abstain the player from using excessive, graphic violence. This contrary to *Battlefield*, where almost every second playing is spent shooting. Most of *Valiant Hearts'* gameplay loop is solving puzzles and engaging in rhythmic sections such as avoiding being hit by bombs. Occasionally, you knock down an enemy soldier (not killing), or shoot at a plane, but there isn't much direct violence.

Mostly, the player engages in "structural violence". When playing, the player encounters puzzles that he or she has to solve to advance. Usually, the player is hindered by an obstacle. When solving the puzzle, the obstacle is removed, and the player can continue the story. The violence is thus aimed at the obstacles, and not towards the enemy soldiers. Kempshall (2015) also mentions this structural violence when analyzing "Freddie", another playable character. Kempshall (2015) explains: "His [*sic*] is a structural aggression. He wishes the defeat of the enemy. But the enemy soldiers are not the same as the German state" (p. 660).

While the player stays absent from any graphic violence, there is no shortage of violence - although rather non-graphic - between the non-playable characters (NPC's) or what Kempshall (2015) calls "the Mass". Kempshall (2015) explains: "death and violence of war being applied to the bodies of soldiers becomes a defining aspect of the playing experience for those soldiers who make up the Masses" (p. 661). You are thus not a perpetrator, but a witness of the violence between the soldiers of "the background". As a player you are constantly reminded of this gruesome story, the huge

⁴⁰ This is probably because of technical limitations or due to the amount of work it would otherwise take to render and animate each specific character.

death toll of WWI and the futility of war. In numerous game scenes, the landscape is scattered with graves, dead bodies and wounded soldiers.

Also, for the background soldiers, mortality is imminent, while that of the main characters is absent. Technically, our characters can die, but this is not final. We can just restart from a save point and keep playing. This is essential, because they are the ones driving the plot forward. The player has to experience their story, and therefore they can't die prematurely. This also means that, when they die (for instance, failing at puzzle), there can't be any feelings of loss, since their death is not final. Wenz (2014) explains that the event of dying is then often seen as a disruptive factor rather than a loss. However, this selective morality shatters at the end of the game, when Emile dies. Then, there is a significant feeling of loss, since the character's death is final, and because the game managed to build an emotional connection between us and Emile.

Instead of engaging yourself in violence, you are often doing the opposite: saving or helping people. An excellent in-game example illustrating this, is the story of Anna, a Belgian nurse. Particularly, I remember playing through one section where I arrived at the battlefield with Anna, encountering numerous bodies and graves scattering the landscape. Some soldiers, were still alive, crying for help. Anna, being a nurse, lets you treat these wounded soldiers. Through "quick time events" (QTE's),



Anna saving a French soldier. The player is prompted to press the right buttons at the exact time it appears on screen. [personal screenshot].

the player is prompted to press the exact button at the exact time, to help the soldiers. I remember numerous other scenes where you control Anna and are able to help the victims of the war, no matter what uniform they are wearing. With violence being inflicted upon "the Masses", Anna functions as the bright spot, doing her best to help everyone.



Anna, the Belgian nurse, amidst a depressing landscape scattered with freshly dug graves. Perhaps also an excellent screenshot reaffirming its existence as a “digital death world” [personal screenshot].

The absence of engaging in violence, also places *Valiant Hearts* in juxtaposition to more conventional military/war games. This is mentioned in many reviews and discussions by players. One person explains:

Unlike all other war games that revolve around mowing down enemies and being some great hero, *Valiant Hearts* tells the story of the soldiers, of the conditions, of the mentality, horror, insanity and futility of war. This is what a war game should actually be. (Appendix C, Figure 34)

Bringing the devastation of WWI to the foreground, with an emotional and gripping story, is however, throughout the game alternated with more comical and lighthearted sections. While this – in combination with the absence of gore and excessive violence – democratizes the game for younger players, it also seems inconsistent with the serious message of the game.

The comical: democratic but inconsistent?

From the onset, *Valiant Hearts* seems to be a children’s game: the absence of extreme violence, the comic-style graphics and the alternation between emotional and comical gameplay sections, etc. After playing it, I don’t think it was made with a specific demographic in mind. It was just made to be played by anyone: younger people included. This also opens up its message to more people, including its educative function, that I will tend to later on. For now, I want to focus on the comical/humorous aspects, that are also interwoven in the game and seemed inconsistent at times.

Comical aspects appear often. Besides the cartoony, but beautiful artwork, wherein the game presents its story, the game is interspersed with elements that make you laugh or smile. Personally, I vividly remember the pigeons. Every pigeon you see in the game, is personified as a little “mailman”, including a little mailbag and helmet, a hint towards the use of pigeons to transport messages and mail across the front.

Furthermore, one moment you are helping the victims of war or are part of a trench attack, where dead and violence surrounds you, and in another moment you’re doing a rhythmic car scene avoiding aerial attacks on a song of Johannes Brahms. Sometimes I had to laugh, but more than often I just found it silly and, in a sense, inappropriate compared to the rest of the game. Yes, these comically tones make the whole experience lighter and more digestible, but I found it more damaging to the overall strong and serious anti-war message. Some players also saw it as a hinderance:

 Serious or silly, make up your mind. I wanted to like this game, but the much praised story, IMO ended up all over the place, at times it tried to convene the horrors of war and the madness of the period, but far too often there were lapses of silliness (armoured [*sic*] car chase for example) that ruined the whole atmosphere. Now, I guess some might feel, perhaps the developers included, that the subject matter needs some glimpses of humour [*sic*] to lighten the mood, but for me It didn’t work. (Appendix C, Figure 37)

Similarly another player explains:

 what got me was how little the narrative they were trying to present actually meshed with any of what they presented in any other aspect. Without spoiling anything, Ubisoft has managed to push some of the most atrocious war crimes into a cartoony game with a cartoony feel but slam you with heavy handed messages of reality and remembrance every change they get. (Appendix C, Figure 40)

As Donlan (2014), a reviewer of Eurogamer, explains that these sections were a bit of a letdown and that the game worked best when it was “working on an intimate level”. Indeed, the game’s best moments, were those that focused on the humans and their stories amidst the horrors of the war.

Just as *Spec Ops*, this shifting between emotional/serious and comical/humorous, and thus “fun” moments, brings the game in awkward position and questions the intentions of the developers and the message of anti-war and remembrance they are trying to convey. Furthermore, I also conflicted somewhat with an otherwise excellent attempt to educate the players about WWI.

Valiant Hearts as an interactive museum

Playing through the levels of *Valiant Hearts* often felt like walking through a virtual, interactive museum. There were items to collect that told you more about the people throughout the war, there was contextual narration about WWI when arriving in specific locations, and there was also a facts section, where one can read about the war. As Anderson (2019) states: “much like a museum, *Valiant Hearts* presents a pedagogical stance on WWI: museums aim to teach and commemorate, and so does *Valiant Hearts*” (p. 182).

I found the item collecting process quite enjoyable, especially because they were interesting to read. One particular item stood out to me: a lace tightener made from a bullet. Not necessarily the item itself stood out to me, but the fact that I later learned, that this item was included in the game, because of a social media contest. This item does not only show the relevance of so-called trench-art, which was a viable past-time for many soldiers during the war, but also shows the close relation between the developers and some of its players.



Lace tightener that can be found in the game as collectible. This item was included because of a social media contest, thus showing the close connection between the developers and the player base. [personal screenshot]



One of the many "facts" which the player can read about. [personal screenshot]

Just like the incorporation of portrait photos in TWoM, the photographs incorporated in the "facts" section, helps the game feel more real and historical grounded. Anderson (2019) excellently explains:

the photographs tie the gameplay experience in the game to lived experiences and historical facts, and therefore help history feel more vibrant and relatable to the players. Unlike the items which the game depicts as illustrations, the photographs accompanying each fact confront the player with people, environments, and objects through an aesthetic of realism. (p. 187)

Many players appreciated this educational perspective, with some stating that it should be used as learning material in schools. This educational perspective was also one of the prime motivations in the development of the game. Some developers went to the former trenches of the Western front in France, and many had family that had lived through the war. This made them feel that they were not trivializing anything (Diver, 2014)

As a former trainee in a WWI memorial museum, I found the educational aspect very interesting. Educating players about the atrocities that happened gives them also the opportunity to think and reflect about current wars and violence. However, as with the serious and the emotional message the game wants to evoke, this pedagogical function is ultimately conflicting with some of the more comically sections in the game. Personally, I think its message and educational function could be

so much stronger if the game abstained from humor. By including these sections, the developers do exactly what they claim not to do: trivialize.

5.5. Conclusion case-studies

It is important that each game has to be understood within its own contours. Both *Spec Ops* and *Valiant Hearts* were made by major publishers, while *TWoM* is a clear “indie-game”. This could explain why *Spec Ops* and *Valiant Hearts* were more ambiguous in their message and meaning.⁴¹

Spec Ops lets you still engage in violence and death, while also critiquing many elements of the military shooter genre, making it an ambiguous game. Therefore, I base myself on Keogh's (2013) understanding, that *Spec Ops* is not an attack on the military shooter per se, but a reaction against many of the problematic elements within the military shooter genre.

Valiant Hearts had a strong emotional, educational and anti-war message, that sadly lost its power because of the more comically and silly game sections, that many players, including myself, detested. This made *Valiant Hearts* ambiguous.

TWoM was more consistent and had an overall stronger message, because it centralized civilians, rendered them precarious, included a permadeath feature, presented moral dilemmas and much more.

Despite their own specifics, there are some striking similarities found when it comes to the debates surrounding all three games.

With each game is centered around war, there is no denying the fact that they are part of digital death worlds. They do, however, engage differently when it comes to violence and death, bringing them in juxtaposition with more hegemonic war/military games. They tend to portray war more realistically and less selective than their counterparts. Factors enhancing their realistic character and stressed by the players are manifolded and diverse. For example, they avoid the sanitization

⁴¹ Major publishers are often in a difficult situation. They want to do “something different”, but still need to attract investors and make their game enjoyable to a larger segment of the gaming player base. Therefore, questionable design choices can appear. “Indie-developers” have often more freedom and are more in a position to make strong statements, question societal issues, etc.

of warfare by confronting the player with the harsh consequences of war, include the most marginalized identities from war games, or make them the main protagonists.

Another similarity, is that of the clear emphasis on the negative emotions. Players report and discuss various negative feelings that they experience during their playthroughs. Playing *Spec ops* resulted in feelings of disturbance and complicity, while players of TWoM usually described their experience as “depressing”. *Valiant Hearts* manages to do it differently, by excluding horror, shock-value or disturbances and focusses instead on the emotional journey of the main protagonists, resulting in feelings of compassion and empathy. As stated, these negative feelings have a dynamic relation with feelings of “realism” and they force players to think.

Interwoven in all three analyses, are the apparent strong identifications players have with the in-game characters. This is not something particular special for critical war games, but combined with the thematic of war, it is particularly strong in heightening feelings of empathy and feelings of understanding when characters die or are placed in tough situations.

These tough situation often forces us and our characters to commit forms of perpetration, especially when it comes to *Spec Ops* and TWoM. By placing us in desperate scenarios, we are driven to commit violence upon others. Seen from the reflections, players do reflect and discusses these acts and what triggers them to do these.

Connected to the idea of perpetration, gamers of *Spec Ops* and TWoM also revealed interesting debates surrounding the issue of choice and force. While technically, TWoM offers the player some moral dilemmas and *Spec Ops* offers no choice at all, they both engage with the idea that war forces humans to do horrible things, that they would not do under normal conditions. These debates are extended beyond the realms of digital play and questions the way war forces people into situations that are suspended from conventional ethics.

Education may be the most exemplified in *Valiant Hearts*, but given the existing reflections in the other two games, it is not far-fetched to conclude that these also offer some form of insight and

understanding about war. Seen from the discussions, this may be especially true when it comes to the lived experiences of people who survived war or those who perpetrate violence.

Finally, players also tend to connect their in-game experiences to personal, familial and national memories, even if the game itself is universalized. This proves the idea that gamers will frame their experiences and thoughts along personal lines, and that their memories extend digital play.

6. Conclusion

Robinson (2012) has distinguished three categories of resistance towards militarization: virtual protest, “modding” and critical military games. With this research I have focused on the latter, asking **how critical war games kindle reflection about violence and death within their respective gaming communities**. Related to my main research question, I hoped to gain insight in how games featuring violence and death are part of so-called digital death worlds, and how players compare critical war games from hegemonic military/war games in terms of reflections about violence and death. To answer these questions, I focused on three game case studies: *This War of Mine*, *Spec Ops: The Line* and *Valiant Hearts*. I used autoethnography to collect my own reflections and participant observation to collect that of others.

Video games and the existence of digital death worlds

Conceptualizing the prominence of killing and dying in video games can be done using the concept of “digital death worlds”.⁴² In these games, players are encouraged to play with violence and death due to their ludic and narrative structures. The element of interactivity is very important here: we don’t watch someone get killed, but we are actively engaged in it. Phillips (2018) extends this, with her concept of mechropolitics, a virtual politics of death and dying with resonances in the real world. The meaning of death and violence, however, changes from game to game.

I argue, that the hegemonic military/war game is more concerned in giving the player a pleasurable, fun and easy digestible experience, rendering its digital death world a playground for mortality and violence. The act of killing and the mechanics behind it, makes it fun to kill and cause death to others. Currencies are rewarded when we land the perfect headshot or we are satisfied with the grotesque spectacle we manage to render on screen. Pleasure is further ensured by glorifying warfare and soldiery, usually encapsulating the player with the logics of war, realigning them with US (or Western) foreign intervention. Unpleasant features and harsh consequences of military violence are suppressed, to avoid uncomfortable feelings. The digital

⁴² As I explained before, “digital death worlds” is used by Phillips (2018) and derived from Mbembe’s (2003) usage of “death-worlds” wherein people are relegated to the status of the “living death”. Important here is the difference between “real violence” and “representational violence”, with the latter being applied to the digital bodies of video games. While a different violence is applied within video games in opposition to real life, Phillips (2018) notes that it nevertheless constitutes part of the technological apparatus that contributes to what Mbembe (2003) calls “death-worlds” (p.40). Their representations in these cultural products structure the way we think about violence and death.

death world being a playground for mortality and violence, brings the hegemonic military/war game in juxtaposition with the critical war game.

The critical war game is still part of these digital death worlds, since they let you engage with violence and death. They distinguish themselves from their hegemonic one, by providing a more “realistic” representation of war and being less concerned with giving the player a fun, pleasurable experience. Instead, negative feelings emerge when players engage in the game. In the critical war game, the digital death world is not rendered as a playground since the involvement in death and violence is a transgressive and emotional experience, rather than a pleasurable one. Besides the different meaning that they apply to violence and death, they critically examine the logics of war, which brings me to my next sub-question.

Differences between the critical war game and the hegemonic military/war game

Seen from the data, players tend to compare the critical war game with their counterparts, in terms of reflections about violence and death. They mention, appreciate and reflect on these aspects that makes the critical war game a more realistic depiction of war. First off, the critical war game tends to deconstruct the binary opposition generally used in more common representations of war. There is no overtly “good” or “bad”. They also manage to show the real consequence of violence, unlike the sanitized representation. In critical war games, there is often no “hero complex”, which makes it difficult for the player to feel powerful.⁴³ It shows how violence renders humans precarious. Civilians, children, refugees – minorities that are often marginalized in regular war games – are generally included.⁴⁴ These games also offer alternatives beside the use of violence and differ in their representation of death and violence.⁴⁵

To conclude, the critical war game differs from the hegemonic one, as the former depicts warfare more holistic and realistic. The elements included are generally a reaction, and thus a critique, on those elements that are absent in hegemonic representations of war. This means that the critical

⁴³ This is perhaps mostly visible in *Spec Ops*. Throughout your playthrough you are witnessing the mental descent of Walker as he becomes more conflicted with the deeds he has done. In the beginning he seems a strong, capable soldier, while at the end we see a broken man.

⁴⁴ The best example is found in *TWoM*, where civilians are rendered the main protagonists. After reading their backstory, players embody normal humans and are offered a unique perspective upon war. This is also well depicted in *Valiant Hearts* as the player embodies a wide variety of different characters, that are not solely soldiers.

⁴⁵ In *TWoM* for example, we have the opportunity to avoid conflict and scavenge for resources at night to ensure our survival. Moreover, processes of selective mortality are absent here, because of the “perma-death” option. Dying is final. There is no resurrection of characters that died.

game cannot be understood in a vacuum, as the meanings of these games are built on the intertextual critique towards more hegemonic representations of war, not only in video games, but in the media as a whole.⁴⁶

The realistic and holistic representation of warfare brings me to my overall conclusion.

Negative emotions, the foundation for reflection

Due to the realistic and holistic depiction of warfare in these critical war games, players are confronted with the horrors of war. The involvement in death and violence is a transgressive and emotional experience. This close connection between “realism” and having negative emotions, reaffirms Bjørkelo’s (2019) argument in the existence of a dynamic process between the two, which he dubs, “transgressive realism”. As Bjørkelo (2019) explains, this dynamic works in both ways: if the negative feelings feel real, what evokes them must also be realistic, or, that what is perceived as real, causes stronger negative emotions.

Paradoxically, having negative feelings opens up the opportunity for an essential positive side effect: reflection. In these games, feelings of discomfort, sadness and depression are foundations for thought, reflection and contemplation about war, violence and death. Similar to taboos, these games frequently function on the boundaries of the acceptable, ripping us from the comfortable world of gaming and placing us in a laboratory of thought. We are encouraged to first feel and then think.

Crucial to these reflections, is that they are not confined to the game that initiated them, they extend to other games, and even extend the realm of play.⁴⁷ The critical war game manages to kindle reflection about how violence and death is portrayed, but also questions the often problematic relationship in our media products between pleasure and the engagement in killing and mortality. Is it OK to have fun when shooting someone? This also proves the idea that the

⁴⁶ This intertextuality is mostly prominent in *Spec Ops*. First off, the game is partly based on Joseph Conrads novelle *Heart of Darkness* and the film *Apocalypse Now*. Secondly, the game is a conventional subversion of the military shooter as Keogh (2013) explains. This means that, in order to fully understand *Spec Ops* critique towards the hegemonic military/war game, we have to understand how war is generally depicted in the later and in other media representations.

⁴⁷ One example was that of players discussing the element of choice in war, with some stating that war forces people to do horrible things they would otherwise not attempt. Another example is that of players reflecting about the futility of war, since war is often non-beneficial to many people. These debates extend beyond what is present in-game and questions intrinsic elements of war.

relevance of how violence and death are represented in-game is not limited to the digital world, but has important consequences in the real world. Further breaking this digital/physical divide, is seen in players relating in-game experiences and thoughts to personal, familial and national memories.

Reflections also result in (or are the result of) some kind of education and understanding, when it comes to the lived experiences of both the survivors and perpetrators of war.⁴⁸ Especially when it comes to the latter, these games may be in a unique position to better understand what moves people to do horrible things.⁴⁹

Further research

Additional inquiries could expand on the concept of digital death worlds and its inner workings, both in hegemonic and critical war games. We may focus more upon the players themselves, since player-centric research is in the minority and opens up the ability to account for a diversity of new inquiries.⁵⁰ More research could be done to expand upon the genre of critical war games and in what ways they differ from their hegemonic counterparts. This could be done through further analyzing existing or upcoming critical games. An excellent method to expand upon the touched topics in this research could be a focus-group discussion with players of these studied games, or with other games. Finally, beyond the realms of digital play, researchers within conflict studies could continue to expand upon the interrelatedness between digital and physical reality when it comes to processes of conflict, war, violence and death.

⁴⁸ This is aided by the high level of identification that many gamers had with the protagonists they played as.

⁴⁹ Smethurst (2017) explains this by stating: “[...] because of their inherent interactivity, video games have the potential to fill this artistic niche in a way that has (so far) not been considered within cultural or memory studies” (p. 202). This is especially useful, since perpetrator perspectives are often in a minority position related to that of the victims. In this regard, Rose Richard Crownshaw (2011 as cited in Smethurst, 2017) speaks of a universalization of the victim’s identity.

⁵⁰ As Jørgensen (2012) explained, game scholars have been mostly focusing on their own gameplay to better understand video games. She is a profound adherent of using players as co-researchers for academic inquiries.

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