

## **Great War Games: Notes on Collective Memory, the Adynaton, and Posthumanism**

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### ABSTRACT

This essay performs a narratological reading of 2014 video games *Valiant Hearts* and *Super Trench Attack* and the ways through which they memorialize the Great War. By close-reading the narrative techniques of these games, I argue that through their storytelling elements they memorialize the Great War by countering the narrative trope of the adynaton, often employed to manage the traumatic articulation of war narratives. Bathetic, pathetic, and chronotopic representations contribute to the affective economy on which these video games rely to memorialize the war, and hint at what posthumanist memorialization could mean for the remembrance of Great War.

**Keywords:** Great War, video games, collective memory, affect

Memories of the Great War have found particular ground in transmedia such as comic books and video games, largely because of these artistic means' range of expression and point of view (Kempshall, 2015). Whereas Great War novels and films have been extensively discussed in critical theory, this is not the case for war games, which have received little scholarly attention, albeit increasing in the last five years (Thomson, 2014; Werning 2015; Kempshall, 2015; Harrigan et al., 2016). Whether striving for accuracy or expanding upon mythological views of the Great War, combat-focused or centring on civilian suffering, war games set between 1914 and 1918 enable individual players to 'experience' world strife, not only by remembering key historical facts, but also by actively simulating war experience. If collective memory is defined by its ability to transport one who 'consumes' it, for lack of a better word, into a shared past, thus justifying its characterization by Jo McCormack as a metaphor (2010: 3), war video games may function as the means of this transportation. As historian George Lipsitz argued in 2001,

Time, history, and memory become qualitatively different concepts in a world where electronic mass communication is possible. Instead of relating to the past through a shared sense of place or ancestry, consumers of electronic mass media can experience a common heritage with people



they have never seen; they can acquire memories of a past to which they have no geographic or biological connection (352).

Similar views echo Lipsitz's statement throughout the crucial decades of the 2000s and point to an augmentation of at least the historical aspects of collective memory through video gaming. Wulf Kantsteiner posits that video gaming provides alternative sides to the official, historically accepted collective memory (2007: 143) and Adam Chapman adds to this view by arguing that historical computer games are not merely rehashing a factual reality, but essentially infuse the present with a changed version of history (2013).

This change is noted on a human level as well: Kempshall (2015) argues that, not only are war games inevitably untrue to historical facts, but they also 'make us superhuman,' because of the repetitive virtual death and resurrection in a war game setting (x). This idea speaks to the gamer's post-humanity: the gamer's ontology changes as she uses technologically-enhanced means, both physically and mentally through contact with the gaming machine and the gamers' community, to access the past and inform her memory (Nayar, 2014: 3). My argument here is that the gamer's post-humanity results in an affective commemoration that goes beyond the cornerstone of Great War collective memory, namely the monument of the Unknown Soldier, which traditionally comments on the loss of words as well as the loss of lives (Wittman, 2011). In other words, affective expressions in Great War gaming move beyond the Unknown Soldier and, through what Roger Stahl terms 'authorial kinetics of war' (42), include the unknown gamer in the formation of collective memory.

### 1. How can Great War games impact collective memory?

By close reading the narrative structure and techniques of indie war games *Valiant Hearts* (*VH*, 2014) (see Fig. 1), and *Super Trench Attack!* (*STA*, 2014) (see Fig. 2), I argue that these Great War games function as live memorials by countering the trope of the adynaton, often evoked to describe the Great War, and also prevalent in war memorialization (McLoughlin 2011). Specifically, the tropes of affective repetition and virtual chronotopicity enable the player to negotiate her place and identity in the collective narrative.<sup>1</sup> While both games are different, with *VH* being a 6-hour cinematic PS4 game with a comic book aesthetic and easily solvable puzzles, featuring the lives of four individuals interrupted by war, and *STA* being a 7-hour comedic shooter PC game with the aesthetic sensitivities of a brutalist monument, the games both employ affect as a way to express traditionally hard-to-express war memories.

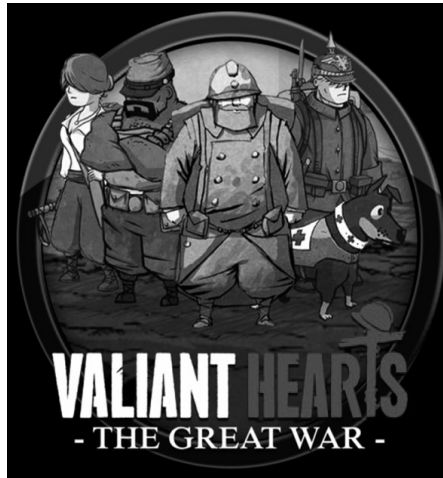


Figure 1: *Valiant Hearts*



Figure 2: *Super Trench Attack*

Both as a sign of the body's potentiality and as a site of 'forces of encounter' (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010: 3), affect resonates with what takes place through the gaming experience: through gameplay, the gamer's body is inevitably affected by and reacts to a possible Great War narrative. Indeed, war gaming signals the body's potential to experience war narrative by proxy, as the player's motive participation is required for the narrative to develop. Considering that affective gameplay is determined by the player's physical movements, but also her sensations, bodily experience, and interactivity with the game content and design (Nørgård, 2016: 90), and that affect works like an atmosphere that the player may carry with them for weeks (Karoff, 2013), it is reasonable to suggest that gaming influences the way that the player views an entire world system and that

game narrative and responses to that narrative may be conflated with facts that are part of the collective memory.

The narratives of *VH* and *STA* combine pathos and bathos in equal doses in order to trigger different affective responses that depict the realities of war in a way that circumvents the binary of words/loss of words. Such an example would be the use of language, or lack thereof, in *VH*: the little speaking that takes place in the story is the narrative voice over. The characters communicate through speech bubbles containing symbols, and through exaggerated gesticulation (Fig. 3).



Figure 3: Effective communication in *VH*

Additionally, the game's most powerfully affective moments are the ones where there is an epic release. Paul Merchant's explanation that an epic is not about 'length or size, but weight' (2017: 94) takes into consideration the generational changes in the term: scenes like the epic cinematic moment of American volunteer Freddie tearing the enemy flag apart (Fig. 4) are particularly weighty in the world of gaming.

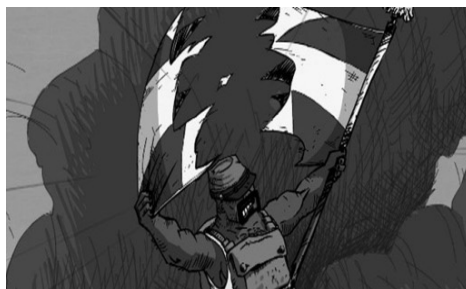


Figure 4: Pathos and epic release in *VH*

In that sense, *VH* stands in direct opposition to the sensory overload of mainstream first-person shooter war games such as *Battlefield 1* (2016): in this and other commercial war games, killing enemies produces gratification through sound, image, and winning points, but in *VH*, the reward is of affective and memorial essence. Equally but inversely, the image of epic heroism and pathos is directly contradicted in *STA*: whereas in *VH* the

heroes are self-righteous and driven by values, in *STA*, the main hero (bearing the player's name) is ridiculed and is often literally caught with his pants down (Fig. 5). Bathos is the main trope of *STA*, with awkward nudity and sexual innuendos interrupting the battle. Even the communication that takes place between the main character and his superiors is full of bathetic elements: the "hero" undermines every order he is given by responding in an ironic or sarcastic way, his words often placed in parentheses.



Figure 5: A bathetic moment in *STA*

It is this shift to affect that counters what Kate McLoughlin terms the trope of the 'adynaton' in war literature, namely the preoccupation of narrative with the ineffability of war. McLoughlin states that, as 'the mother of all diversionary tactics, adynaton not-writes about war by making not-writing its very subject' (152). The affective exaggeration (pathos and bathos) in both games distracts from language that directly describes war and questions linguistic necessity to form collective memory. If we consider that affect designates the extent to which a body is able to do something or not (Spinoza in Deleuze 49), then affectivity in war gaming counters the trope of the adynaton: etymologically, adynaton means not able, and thus affective images address this inability or adynamia. Affective production relies on a one-way repetitive practice in *VH* and *STA*, not only in terms of the player's repetitive movements, but also in terms of characters' behavioural patterns. Each character in *VH* is characterised by a repeated pattern. This becomes an almost ritualistic experience through which memory is performed and simultaneously informed. The most poignant example of this is found in *VH*, in Anna's story. Anna is a nurse who is looking for her father, a scientist who has been abducted by the German army. For the most part, her interaction with other characters is to save them (Fig. 6). These actions are repeated in various ways, and the fact that these are not at all hard puzzles to solve, once more points to the affective aspect of the game: it is not what you do or say that matters, it is what emotional effect it has. Similarly, *STA* deals with repetition in a bathetic way: speech bubbles containing phrases that point to the ennui-filled repetition of trench war and gaming alike ('What was I doing here again?' and 'Déjà Vu!') speak to the war memory as that which, having been discussed in abundance and yet not at all, warrants a different approach.

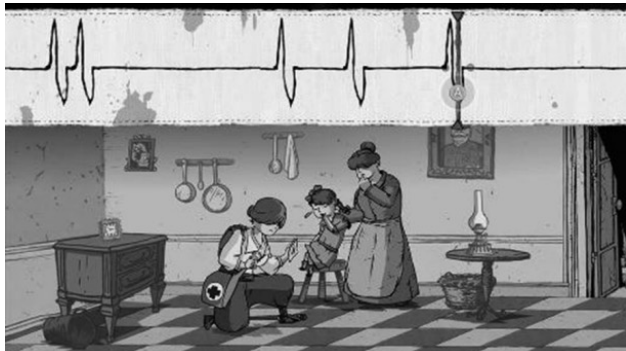


Figure 6: The player performs a series of repetitive actions within *VH*, so that Anna can save the bombed civilians and the narrative of the game can progress

Repetition is not the only trope that enables war gaming's affective scenes of collective memory; the latter is shored up through Bakhtinian chronotopes—in fact, the entire game is a series of chronotopes, both in its visual presentation, but also in its content. For Mikhail Bakhtin, through textual chronotopicity, time is experienced as ‘palpable and visible; the chronotope makes narrative events concrete, makes them take on flesh, causes blood to flow in their veins’ (Bakhtin 9). In the same vein, virtual chronotopicity does not only provide a visual representation of collective memory events, but also invites the gamer's embodied participation and affective response. In *VH* the family- idyllic chronotope serves to briefly show what was before the war (Fig. 9), and what may be reconstituted after the war ends; in *VH* and *STA*, the chronotope of the threshold reflects the characters' moving in and out of doors, tunnels and windows in order to get to the next stage of history (Fig. 7); the Bakhtinian chronotope of the road becomes the chronotope of the trench (Fig. 8), where improbable and game-changing encounters take place, such as Freddie meeting and saving middle-aged captive Emile in *VH*, or *STA*'s protagonist meeting his sidekick, Buddy (Fig. 10). In each case, the chronotopes are integral parts of each game, that help advance the storyline, and justify the character's/player's actions.

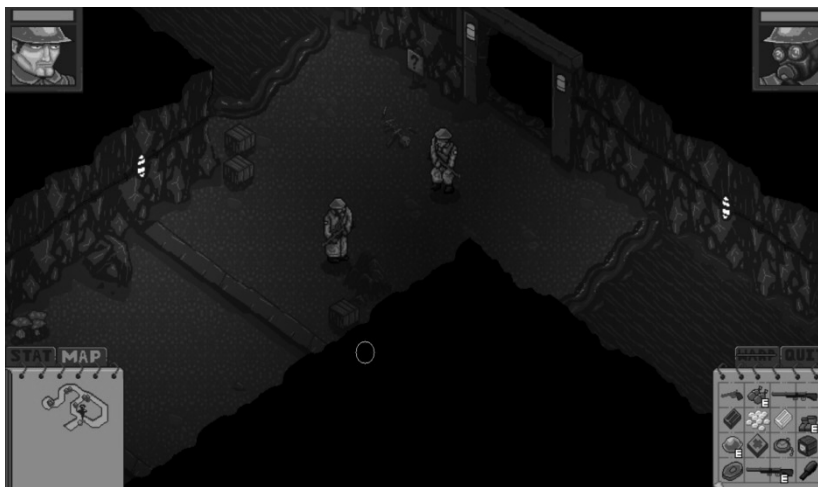


Figure 7: The chronotope of the threshold in *STA*



Figure 8: The chronotope of the trench

Figure 9: The idyllic chronotope



Figure 10: *STA*'s protagonist meeting Buddy in the trenches

*VH* and *STA* employ affective repetition and virtual chronotopicity to shape collective memory, thus entering the realm of posthumanism: 'becoming-posthuman [...] is a process of redefining one's sense of attachment and connection to a shared world, a territorial space: urban, social, psychic, ecological, planetary as it may be' (Braidotti, 2013: 193). In that way, war gaming may perform what traditional monuments of unknown soldiers fail to do, namely to trigger an affective response that rejects the ineffability of war experience, revisits historical facts, and revisualizes war memories. Even as a regular feature of game design, the constant revival of the characters in the game narrative and the fact that nothing is really lost if you lose ('That was close' is what *STA*'s protagonist articulates every time he is brought back to life, while in *VH*, every time one of the protagonists are hurt or close to dying, the player switches to a different character), speak to posthumanism's fluid identities. Although this 'disembodied immortality' has been criticised (Hayles, 2008: 5; Kempshall 2015), it can be seen as willingness to affectively bring to cognition the war tragedies that collective memory attests to. Both games reinforce the idea that war facts may be definite and grim, but the way to remember them does not have to be either. The universality of repetition and chronotopicity are called in *VH* and *STA* to produce an affective idiom that counters the trope of the adynaton in the representation of the Great War and introduces the collective memory to the age of posthumanism.

## Notes

1. For a stimulating discussion on the relationship between ludology and narratology, see Henry Jenkins, 'Game Design as Narrative Architecture,' in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 118-129.



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