

The Great War and the Use of Video Games as Historical and Educational Resources: A Conversation

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Iro Filippaki and Stefan Aguirre Quiroga exchange their views on the potentiality of video games as historical and educational resources in the study of the First World War.

Stefan (S): What kind of key historical facts are presented in these games and what impact do they have on the narrative (and therefore the creation of collective memory)?

Iro (I): Both games have different relationships with the facts of the Great War, strictly speaking. *STA* references the muddy landscape, the inexperience of soldiers, and the ambiguous role of doctors. True, it would be a bit of a stretch to read anything more in *STA*, as it is comedic shooter, but it is interesting to see that even the ridiculed aspects of the game rely on accepted collective memory. *VH* is different; it clearly has an educational purpose and the developers seemed to want to share a less discussed aspect of the Great War, as they have included collectible items and fact cards that, upon collection, pause the game and give factual information to the player. In both cases, for reasons that lie beyond narratology and enter the realm of game design, the game narrative is perhaps inevitably a mixture of collective “official” memory and fictional, highly stylized narration.

S: *VH/STA* are different from *BFI* in many aspects. Both *VH/STA* are comedic, highly stylized games in which the player is reminded by the aesthetic choices done by the game producers that they are indeed playing a video game. For example, *STA* has a great deal of “goofy” and fantasy elements such as the case of scimitar wielding monkeys attacking the player. *BFI* on the other hand tries to be as realistic as possible in its visual representation. In your opinion, how does this affect the creation of an affective memory? Does “realism” or attempts at realism makes it

easier for a gamer to “buy into” affective memory?

I: I view affective memory as irrelevant from realism when it comes to gaming. I think that gamers are attracted to “realistic” gameplay for entirely different reasons than they would be attracted to a stylized game, such as *STA* and *VH*. This is why I see affective memory as dependent on tropes rather than the realism of gameplay: *STA* and *VH* might not be realistic aesthetically, but because they are metafictional, the affective response that they invite is one tied to real values passed on through collective memory: nationalism, brotherhood, the absurdity of war, the inevitability of death, the importance of remembering.

S: An affective contract requires the gamer to consent to being represented by the character. What happens when the gamer rejects the character for reasons beyond the chronotopes? How does this affect memory?

I: This is another reason why *STA* and *VH* produce such strong affective responses: the player must to a certain extent identify with the character, otherwise the choices that must be made in the games will not make sense to the player. Case in point: the last scene of *VH* shows the death of Emile by execution. Emile is a French farmer who becomes a prisoner of war, and accidentally kills an officer after he commands the squad to charge, an attack which would lead to certain death. In this last bit of *VH*, the player must lead Emile to face the French firing squad to be executed; interestingly, the player must use the game’s controls to literally take Emile to his inevitable death. If the player chooses not to do that, the game won’t finish. At this point, the soundtrack, landscape, and general atmosphere of the game conspire to evoke a specific affective response—I nearly didn’t finish the game because of the affective intensity, and this is something that keeps being brought up by the gaming community, too! It is clear then, that remembering a story that was sadly all too common in the Great War (more than 900 French soldiers were executed for treason between 1914 and 1918, for example) means that the player would carry the re-memory of that event as something that happened to them: it is like re-remembering, and adds another dimension to collective memory of facts that generations have not experienced first-hand.

I: I am interested in the relationship between power and memory. Considering that memory is somewhat becoming a commodity through First World War gaming, how do you think memory could be more inclusive?

S: We must first recognize that the dominant collective memory is used to exclude minority narratives not deemed to “fit into” that memory or that pose difficult or uncomfortable questions that might disturb the current state of that collective memory. By acknowledging soldiers of color and including them in a collective memory of the First World War, you must also acknowledge the European powers participation in colonialism and slavery. You must acknowledge painful truths about the past that involve the forced conscription of colonial soldiers to fight in Europe, the fact that the war resulted in no African, Middle Eastern or Asian colonies being freed but rather the switch of one colonial master with another and that the reason as to why some soldiers of African

descent in the British, German and American army desired to fight was to prove their masculinity and their rightful claim to be seen as an equal, something which they were ultimately denied before, during and after the war.

The agency of soldiers of color need to be reinstated. These soldiers need to be moved from the periphery, away from the notion of being an “Other” and be integrated in the dominant collective memory. In practical terms, it means not only acknowledging the existence of a soldier of color like British soldier Frank Dove, but also showing him driving a tank in the battle of Cambrai 1917 alongside a white crew. To do that requires an act of self-disempowerment on behalf of the dominant part where popular depictions and mythical historic icons are reshaped into something new and inclusive. To do all of this also requires looking beyond a national collective memory due to, as Mycock writes, “the complex transnational dynamics of First World War commemoration” and understand how other nations, former colonies in many cases, see their own place and meaning in the dominant narrative (Mycock 161).

I: The historical war seems to be claimed by different races and genders. Is there anything that differs in the fictional war of gaming? Does ownership of memory change?

S: In the cinematic single player campaign mode of *BFI*, called “War Stories”, the ownership of memory change in terms of national memories (one story centers around an Italian soldier, another about an Australian soldier, etc.) and in one case, the male ownership of memory is challenged by having a Bedouin soldier being represented as woman during the Arab Revolt. Unfortunately, the white mythic space remains unchallenged in her story due to the involvement of the white heroic leader in the form of T.E. Lawrence, “Lawrence of Arabia”, and the omnipresence of this white, male presence in the missions. This unfortunately recalls prior popular depictions of Arabs being dependent on the will and motivation of British officers during the Arab Revolt.

The memory and presence of soldiers of African descent in the single player is inconsistent. From the moment that the player looks at the cover of *BFI*, depicting an African-American soldier, the white ownership of the memory of the First World War is challenged. This same image welcomes the players as they reach the welcome screen. The first story in the single player mode partly deals with African-American soldiers in the segregated 369th Infantry Regiment, famously known as “The Harlem Hellfighters”. All the other “War Stories” consist of several parts in which the main character is fleshed out and a narrative is followed. In the case of this story, there is no plot or main character to follow. It consists of one, short part. The only thing the player is told is that “you are on the frontline” and that you are “not expected to live”. What follows is a series of segments as one African-American soldier is killed after another. Although a name is shown on a black screen after every death, the character of the soldiers you play as is never explored nor touched upon. The agency of these African-American soldiers dies with their bodies. This is a strong contrast with the other stories where all main characters are given a narrative and an agency. This follows the tradition of the white mythic space where soldiers of color are anonymous, their bodies disabled and their agencies denied. The ownership of memory, although challenged on the basis of gender, therefore remains white in the narrative portion of the game.

S: What I have come to realise through my own research of First World War games, is that affect (positive or negative) often contests with historical fact. Additionally, as per formalist Hayden White, history is a narrative just like any other. What is your response to that? Do you think that affect gains ground over fact because of the importance of commemoration? How are historical accuracy and game accuracy related? Could game inaccuracy reveal historical accuracies?

I: In my own research of what users have written in message boards, official and non-official, on the topic of inclusion in *BF1* would conclude that affect does gain ground over fact. These users do not “buy into” the collective memory depicted by *BF1* since it goes against the white mythic space of the First World War and the notion of a “white man’s war”. These individuals therefore argue that it is disrespectful and insulting to include soldiers of color due to these preconceived ideas of what the historical First World War should look like. It is undeniable that these statements are based on white supremacist thinking. Statements that the inclusion is “anti-European propaganda” (zarthos), “a disservice to the europeans [sic] that gave their life [sic]” (HugeTrumpGuy), and that “[t]he justification for blacks and women has very little to do with historical accuracy” (KublaKharter) shows how grounded the affective defense of the white mythic space is in racism and misogyny.

Furthermore, one question remains: Are those who defend the white mythic space of the First World War truly interested in historical accuracy? As I have shown, their arguments in regard to the presence of soldiers of color are historically incorrect. It’s revealing that those who argue that the inclusion of soldiers of color is historically inaccurate do not point out the multitude of historical inaccuracies in uniforms, equipment, weapons, vehicles or in the overall narrative of the game. One particularly egregious inaccuracy is the widespread use of experimental and prototype weapons in the game, most of which were never used in the war, produced in small numbers or never passed the prototype stage. Yet this is not something that these users focus on and in some cases, their inclusion is defended. A representative example can be found in a comment where a user argues that including prototype submachine guns is immersive while including Afro-Germans is not (snakeheadinvade). This further strengthens the argument that the real reason behind the backlash against inclusion in *BF1* is not based on perceived historical inaccuracy but rather on an affective racist response in the guise of historical inaccuracy.

I: Where do you see posthumanism relating to today's memory?

S: Due to the complexity and variety of the memories of the First World War in the nations that fought it, I do not believe that posthumanism holds much relevance just yet. As I have shown, gamers in *BF1* do not negotiate their “place and identity in the collective memory” but instead defends their place and identity, their white mythic space, against intrusion from collective memories belonging to the “Other”. If, as you say, that “Great War games may function as live memorials through which the collective memory [...] [is] placed in the hands of the gamer”, then I fear that this collective memory would remain a white mythic space. As I’ve previously pointed out, the gamer must accept the

collective memory offered by the game. If that does not happen then the gamer make the choice not to partake in shaping the game's collective memory, seeing the "real world" collective memory as more valid. This leaves open the possibility of the creation of different collective memories existing in one game which in turn would belong to separate spaces within the fictional war of the game. Furthermore, the multiplayer of *BFI* has little to no affective chronotopes that could bridge any gaps between these spaces. The possibility therefore of uniting different collective memories in a shared posthumanist collective memory seems unlikely at the present time.

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