Self-reflection and morality in critical games. Who is to be blamed for war?

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Abstract

'This war of mine' is a critical game depicting the war experience from a civilian's perspective. As a game, it relies on its interactivity in order to offer the player an immersive experience. As a critical game, it challenges design conventions while also encouraging self-reflection. 'This war of mine' proposes interpretations of both real life and play in an ethical and realistic manner. We show the means it employs as a medium for sending a message: its content, rhetoric, presentation, as well as the debates that it stirs. Thus, as games are played in a cloud of comments and reviews, we also explore the collaborative process of moral learning in 'This war of mine' and we discuss the game's efficiency as a medium in delivering an ethical gameplay experience.

Keywords
Critical games, ethical gameplay, collaborative knowledge, procedural rhetoric

Introduction

Unlike other media, considered 'passive', games invite players' interaction. Interactivity is a core property of games, and if players do not have enough scope for acting, they may not consider it a game anymore. These actions take place in a space of rules that define winning and losing moves; also, they often take place in a fictive world, in which actions acquire an additional meaning (such as 'killing', 'asking', 'giving', 'running' and so on).

Games can be persuasive through their procedures, using what Ian Bogost (Bogost 2008) names procedural rhetoric. Game affordances make certain actions

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possible, while others are restricted. Following the affordances and the story of a game, the players learn how to play, what the rules are, and thus they ascribe meaning to their actions. By judging the results of their actions, players may consider that they played well or not, and they may continue to follow these rules or change their approach. Through its procedural rhetoric a game renders a player's actions as successful or not and they orient a player's decisions while delivering a certain type of experience.

The game as a space of rules may, through its procedurality, make use of certain types of ludicity or "the degree to which the game allows play" (Conway 2010) to deliver diverse kinds of experiences to players. These types of procedurality can be placed on a continuum from hyper-ludicity, where the players either are given or obtain by themselves an advantage like a superpower, or a special weapon, to contra-ludicity (Conway 2010), when the game is difficult to play, the players lose an advantage or are constrained to make a difficult choice which may lead to frustration, but may also stir competition and a profound engagement with the game. A good game is often considered to be a game in which the constraints and the players' advantages are balanced (Juul 2010; Conway 2010).

In games that open a fictive world, players become co-authors of stories through their gameplay. The stories in games may open up a space for moral decisions – and many games rely heavily on creating ethical dilemmas for characters and for players (Zagal 2009), situations of difficult choice. Moral dilemmas thus rely both on the design of the game and its ludicity and the players' capabilities and skills, along with their interpretation.

Besides creating opportunities for choice, games contribute to ethically relevant actions in other ways, too. They may propose descriptions of characters or actions that imply ethical values or judgments. Also, games allocate success or failure for certain choices, thus implicitly encouraging certain courses of action through the use of rhetorical procedures. Games may support ethical reflection by creating 'wicked problems' that defy computation, or, alternatively, may discourage such involvement by creating computationally tractable choices (Sicart 2009; Sicart 2010).

Thus, games can be morally relevant (Sicart 2010), as a medium which offers players a time and place for making decisions and reflecting on them, judging themselves and others by the way they play. At a higher level, games can 'modulate' actions in the real world (Rughiniş 2012), offering players experiential metaphors that shape their understanding of daily life situations (Rusch 2009).

As we will see, games have the power to determine certain ways of play and engagement from the players, but they are also dependent upon the players' interpretation practices. A game may be fun or not, easy or difficult, art or product, and these attributes seem to be related to each other in the gamers' discourse.

Games stir moral reflection not only through gameplay per se, but also through what Consalvo terms the game 'paratext' (Consalvo 2007): the rich cloud of forum discussions and game reviews which is part and parcel of experiencing a game for many players. These are veritable sites for collaborative learning, as players debate not only

technical aspects, such as game walkthroughs or bugs, but also attempt to formulate the meaning of the game and the lessons to be learned (Marinescu Nenciu & Rughiniş 2015).

The paper is structured as follows: in the next subsection we present our research questions and methodological approach. We then discuss our findings, and the final section concludes the paper.

Research questions

By playing the game and analysing online discussions and game reviews of '*This war of mine*' (TWOM) (11 bit studios 2014), we explore players' *collaborative process of moral learning* occasioned through gameplay. We are interested both in the role of the game in shaping ethical discussion, and in the properties of game communities and magazines as communication media with an influence on the emergent debate (Marinescu Nenciu & Rughiniş 2015).

Image 1. This war of mine. A first look at the gameplay

The main questions addressed in this paper are:
- How does the game encourage moral reflection? What aspects of its narrative and its affordances introduce ethical judgments, or require ethical choices?
- How do players formulate and discuss moral issues in game reviews?
- How do people react to critical games and to realistic war games? How do they engage with the game and what kind of experience do they report afterwards?

More than looking at games and the interpretive practices of the players through which they come to make sense and give a certain meaning to their gameplay experience, we ask ourselves what do violent games or war games teach players? What are they good for?

We focus on the content of a critical war game and we pose a question which Mark L. Sample also addressed regarding virtual torture – can this game become a counter pedagogy (Sample 2008) of war?

Methodology

TWOM is a critical game as it approaches war from a civilian's perspective. There are a few aspects regarding the game rules and its rhetoric which are important to discuss when analysing its capacity for delivering an ethical gameplay experience. By looking at the content of the game and how it forces the players to deliberate, choose and, thus, how it encourages them to reflect on their own actions, we show how ambiguity is used as a resource to create ethical gameplay. We also bring the players' perspective on this ethical gameplay experience by analysing their reactions in online discussions, showing their own reflections after getting involved with the ethical reflections stirred by the game.

We are interested in looking at the ideological potential of the game and we take into consideration its critical approach. Thus, we focused on the comments which relate to these aspects, but we also took into consideration the comments which ignored the distinction between critical or art games and mainstream games, as we will further show in the findings section.

We take a look at the procedural aspects of the game, focusing on the possibilities that the game through its affordances may offer to the emerging story, or how they constrain the player's actions, while delivering a certain message.

The main method we used for this research approach is content analysis. We analysed This War of Mine from the perspective of the player, thus one part of our analysis is the result of playing the game. We also analyse the comments of other players. When playing the game we noticed how the game procedures lead to a certain rhetoric. There are also instances that are part of the narrative of the game, which by forcing the player to strictly manage time and resources create moments of difficult ethical choice. After taking note of these aspects in the game, we also analysed elements of the paratext, the trailer on the official website, descriptions, reviews and the comments of players on the official website of the game and on some of the most well-known gaming websites and communities: the Kotaku, Steam, PCGamer and IGN.

We investigated all the comments that players posted in their reviews on the mentioned websites until the 12th of March 2015, and placed them into categories, creating a typology. As it stems from the elements of the game paratext, especially from the trailer on the official website of the game, This War of Mine is stated clearly to be a game played from the perspective of the civilian, as opposed to the mainstream war games, which are played from the perspective of the soldier. The game is making a clear statement about wars and positions itself as a realistic and critical war game.

Starting from this statement, we wish to investigate how players react to the game, if they take into consideration the critical approach of the game, and if so, if they appreciate it or not, how they relate to this type of ludicity. We also show how people

whose comments do not refer to this critical approach to war and what they focus on in their comments after playing the game. After creating this typology we focused on the debate between the players who appreciated the critical approach of the game and the ones who didn't and on their argument.

Findings

'This war of mine' is a point and click game in which the player controls three characters fighting for survival during wartime. The characters have needs that must be fulfilled in order for them to stay alive. The actions of the characters are directed towards satisfying these needs, which are both physiological and psychological. In this survival game the psychological and physiological needs are hard to fulfil, thus forcing the player to choose between them. Ambiguity is used as a resource for creating difficult decisions, as the player does not have all the necessary information for finding the best strategy until replaying. The game does not offer the option of saving one's progress. Should they risk to starve, or steal from an old couple?

When playing the game we noticed that some of the game constraints put pressure on the player to make decisions which contribute to the emerging narrative of the gameplay. The game informs the player regarding their characters' needs. They may be hungry, sleepy, injured, or depressed, and depending on the fulfilment of these needs, the characters may live or die, they may be more or less efficient in the activities that they engage with. These needs are closely related to the time management of the game. During the daytime the characters may work, eat, sleep, while at night the player may only control the character that is going for scavenging in the nearby places. These constraints turn small everyday decisions in life and death decisions, leading to the rhetorical procedure of a survival game. The message that the game thus sends is that life is difficult during wartime and details regarding time and resources management become to have a high importance for civilians, that food and safety may turn common people into killers or victims. The narrative component of the game together with the procedural rhetoric based on the games' affordances creates difficult choices for the players.

There are a lot of surprising things that may happen at night with the characters that remain at home and the player cannot control this either. Characters may be robbed or killed during night time, they may be asked for medicines by innocent children, they may get into situations that they could not anticipate. Here the narrative elements supports the procedural rhetoric in creating difficult choices for the players. As the story develops, the players may have to decide whether to rob an elderly couple because their characters are starving, and some of them may get into depression and kill themselves. The player may decide not to rob them and still die, but of hunger instead of depression.

Ambiguity is created first as the player has no sign or indication that their decisions may lead do the decrease of their psychological well-being. After the player makes a decision that leads to a character feeling depressed, the player may change their strategy, taking into consideration both physiological and psychological needs. For

example, one may kill some of the people they meet at night when scavenging for supplies. One may do it as a last chance to survive, when the members of the team are starving or when they are very sick, and think they made a compromise: they kill someone, but they get to survive. The game may then surprise them, as after killing someone their teammates may feel depressed and even die.

Moreover, played from our perspective, we noticed that after being instructed by the procedures of the game and the effects of our deeds that psychological needs may be crucial in this game, we found ourselves making moral decisions as we expected them to be the correct winning strategy. However, we then found out that these moral decisions do not always pay off. As in real life, in TWOM we knew we may feel bad after doing something wrong, but we may never know if the good deeds will be rewarded. As Sicart also stresses, the ambiguity which steals the gamer's ability of calculating the results of their deeds is important for creating ethical gameplay. [3] For example, giving the last medicine to the mother of two children coming to ask for help may as well never bring any reward in the game. Nonetheless, we felt pressured to make 'the right decision' as a wrong deed may have unexpected results too, pushing a character into depression and death, although their physiological needs were satisfied. Therefore, we could see how the procedures that we learned by playing the game – you need to hurry and take any resources you find in order for your characters not to die – combined with the narrative elements of the game – you lost time and resources by going to an elderly couple's place and you have the possibility to rob them, will you do it? - created a moment of difficult ethical choice.

Image 2. This war of mine. The background story
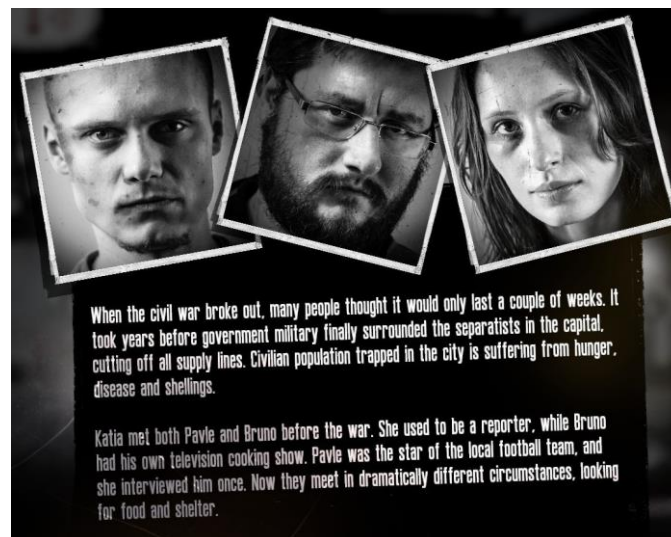
By introducing hazard, the game is stole the sense of control we as players expected to have, making our playing skills as well as our strategical calculations useless in some situations. We were thus challenged to reinterpret our choices and actions, in light of retrospective wisdom which is partially informed by chance. We may say that

TWOM makes use of contra-ludicity to deliver a realistic war experience, thus sending a message: the war is not a game. Moreover, as it delivers a both realistic and frustrating experience, the game proposed a continuous re-evaluation of our deeds, the message of the game turning to be more relevant than our skills as players.

Compromises do not always work. Good deeds are not always rewarded and bad deeds do not always saved our team. Therefore, although there are plenty of rules regarding time, satisfying physiological and psychological needs, character interaction and ethical choice, the design of the game does not permit a clear winning strategy. There is no possibility of saving a game in case you fail, thus we invested a lot of time in this game as failure is *permanent* (Juul 2010). The game makes use of *punishment* (Juul 2010) to deliver a message, by determining us to either lose a lot of time in real life to play the game, or feel helpless for failing and losing the game along with the time invested in playing it, as when restarting the game, the characters and their skills and backstories change. The time management practices are also consistent with the general message of the game, which is to be taken seriously, as it delivers a realistic experience: in life, you cannot save or replay, nothing stays the same, time passes and it takes everything with it.

The game oriented us as gamers toward considering how we felt about our actions, how these actions affected us as persons, for the results of our decisions in the game and their effect on the characters may not be anticipated. The game has thus a strong moral component, mostly as by playing it we learned that we must take responsibility for our actions, regardless of what the future brings. In this sense, we may say that the game makes use of hazard, ambiguity, time as resources to create difficulties. Difficult decisions encourage self-reflection and an honest and down-to-earth experience as a civilian during war.

Games are usually designed and promoted by a team of people, which also orient the understanding of the gameplay experience. We may thus understand more about the message of TWOM by looking at its paratext. This way, we also overcome our own experience as players and explore other points of view.

For instance, by observing the presentation of the game – its official website, the launch trailer (11 bit studios 2014), the introduction – we may notice the fact that the game is sending an explicit message: "In war not everyone is a soldier." Even the name of the game, 'This war of mine', hints at a personal take on war. In the trailer, it is suggested that the game is based on the memories of Emir Cerimovic, a person who took part in the siege of Sarajevo in 1992. He did survive the Bosnian war when he was a child, but the game is not based on his memories. He was asked to test the game together with John Keyser, who served in Iraq. (2014) In the trailer Emir Cerimovic speaks about a mundane view of war: "It may happen to anyone. War always happens at somebody's doorstep."

There are also other trailers, for example the one on Steam (Anon n.d.) in which the difference between civilians and soldiers is emphasized: "For soldiers, war is about victory. For us, it was about getting food." TWOM proposes a different approach to war

trying to create a realistic experience, which is different from most games, which focus on trained soldiers.

As Carly Kocurek argues, "War is commonly justified, or even glorified, as a defensive practice at the very least, as well as a means of preserving certain ideals or even proving national vigor." TWOM can be considered a critical game for countering the mainstream war ideologies which appear in many games. The game does not make use of its detailed graphics and atmosphere to offer a violent experience, it does not make use of violence in an entertaining way, but it delivers a saddening and profound experience of war, famine, murder, suicide and failure, bringing the player closer to its victims, which are similar to them, thus having the potential for becoming a counter pedagogy of war.

Aside of the direct experience of the game and the clues that the team offers as guidance in interpreting it, the game is received in a gaming community and surrounded by a cloud of reviews and comments that, on one hand, help one interpret the message of the game or learn how to play it, and on the other hand, participate in giving meaning to the game and deciding its value. We now take a closer look at how gamers reacted to this game and how or if they related to its ethical dimension.

In order to approach the ethical dimension of the game and the means through which it is achieved, specifically when discussing one's gameplay experience, we focus on a few questions:

> Considering the fact that the game is clearly presented in its paratext as a critical war game, do players formulate and evaluate the critical and realistic approach proposed by the game or not? In particular, do they report their experience as a moral one, and if so, how do they relate to this kind of gaming experience? Do they take into consideration and do they appreciate the opportunity for reflection or the critical approach of the game? What are their reflections based on their experience as players?

Firstly, we may find that moral choice is relevant for this game and that some of the players noticed how the results of a player's actions may not always be the expected ones. In his review on PCGamer, Rob Zacny gives an example of opposition between expectations and results regarding moral decisions:

> "Things get especially tricky because your survivors don't just care about surviving – they care about how they survive. When food stocks ran low, and I was faced with a choice between trying my luck at a bandit base or stealing from an isolated, elderly couple in the northern part of the city... I stole from the old folks. [...] In the morning, he [Marko] brought his haul back to the compound. What I didn't count on was the fact that it would send everyone into a depression. Marko seemed hardest hit, sliding into a "depressed" state while everyone else dipped to "sad." Nor did I realize that bad morale can cause a tailspin. Until this, Bruno's cigarette habit had been easy to ignore as I traded away our smokes for "important" stuff like raw materials and herbs. But now Bruno was sullen and frustrated, and complaining constantly about how he just wanted a smoke. Marko, meanwhile, shuffled through the day. Everything took longer as my survivors simply lost interest in working together. They fell to arguing. Once characters "break," they won't do anything at all. Talking people out of their depression takes the better part of a day, and may not even work. Getting drunk is a

more promising route to restore equilibrium, but it also takes a lot of time and consumes liquor, which has huge potential as a bartering tool." (24 November 2014) In some cases, the character may even commit suicide after killing someone.

Image 3. A character committed suicide

Secondly, it seems that some players don't only judge the ethical aspect of their choices in relation to their performance as players, but also reflect on their personality as people and show their regrets.

Harrier 32 comments to the review on Kotaku (Anon n.d.):

"I've been completely sucked into this game. The moral dilemmas it presents over the simple act of getting food can be devastating. […] While playing I was determined to do the right thing. I lasted 33 days before a combination of a lack of food, freezing temperatures, and sick two roommates led me to rob an elderly couple blind. Still regret that." (18 November 2014)

Another player (11 bit studios 2014) describes their gameplay experience as revelatory:

"Entered a building with other people. The building's description had said "Danger" which meant hostiles. Bandits. I grabbed my knife and was ready for those bandits. […] My friends needed food, and these bandits were killers. They deserved what they got. I grabbed food, supplies, and another bandit showed up! I fired at them with the shotgun, and they dropped with a gurgling scream. One bandit ran after me! Surely they had a knife! No… she ran past me to the man's corpse. She was crying. She called me a murderer. I fired again and she dropped.[…] I looked outside toward the other building, and between the two.. a garden someone built? One guy had mentioned they

were running low on meds. This…. no.. it couldn't be. It just couldn't be! This wasn't… this wasn't an abandoned building being picked clean. This was another group's safehouse. These people are…. were…. survivors! …and "I" was the bandit."(Grimno, 14 November 2014)

Regarding the critical approach on the game, after reading the reviews on Kotaku, Steam, PCGamer and IGN along with their comments, we found that there are certain themes which are addressed when the game is evaluated: its affordances, storyline, difficulty, the assumed politics behind the game, and its realism.

As previously mentioned, some of these dimensions, especially the constraints and the resulting difficulty, seem to be intentionally used in order to convey through procedural rhetoric (Bogost 2008) a specific meaning, while also being consistent with the explicit message of the game "In war, not everyone is a soldier".

Players who engaged with self-reflection tried to justify their morally wrong actions. Evan Narcisse, in his review of TWOM (Anon n.d.), chose to end a lot of his sentences where he justifies his decisions which he describes as *cowardly* with "Yeah, but war does that to a person". In conclusion, he adds:

> "This War of Mine's developers have lived through a war like the one inside the game. And their creation, if only in the smallest way, made me understand the kinds of choices, consequences and emotions that run through those that do. I was aghast at how quickly my empathy eroded in a video game, which made me more cognizant of its fragility in real life. It's the kind of game that could potentially change the way you watch the news, treat others or cast a vote in an election."

It seems that after judging their own actions players sometimes discuss the meaning of the game and the world that it represents. As Evan Narcisse did, a player may interpret the difficulty of ethical decisions in the game as a sign that the game is making a point about "real life".

In order to continue presenting ways of making sense of the gameplay experience, we must mention the fact that not all players relate to the ethical dimension of the game. As we will further see, some of them chose to treat TWOM as a game despite its realistic approach, while others critiqued the game for not being fun.

Among the players who did not choose to reflect upon their decisions and to relate to the game's critical approach, we found two types of discourse, both pointing at a view of games as entertainment: the ones who saw it as boring, failing to entertain them, and the ones who saw *the game* in TWOM and reached for its playfulness despite its realism. Siraj Munir Samsudin (November 19) can be placed in the first category, as we can see in his comments on PCGamer (Anon n.d.): "Finished it. The ending was bland and also when you finished it and try to play again, it feels kinda boring." He seems to judge the game by its playfulness, without relating to ethical dilemmas. We named this type of discourse Type 4 (Fig 1).

Fig 1. Critical or fun. Types of discourses in players

Here is an example from the second category, (Anon n.d.) consisting of gamers oriented towards the playability of TWOM:

> "This game is hard at first, but after the first 1-2 playthroughs, you begin to view the game not as a depressing, almost futile effort, but instead as what it is (a game). You'll find that the learning curve actually is very forgiving and if you can get past the first few spirit-crushing defeats, you can begin to improve your skills dramatically. Read up on essential tips to scavenging, feeding survivors, and combat, and you will find that the game actually is not hard at all. It just takes time to gain a solid knowledge of the game where it becomes fun to play." (Calvin Qian, 10 January 2015)

Calvin sees the emotional component of the game as something that a player should overcome in order to be able to play well, thus for them the game cannot reach its ethical scope (Type 3, see Fig 1).

Also, another example in which ethics are not an issue and the game is approached as *just a game* is the discourse of Agoaj adgagag (Anon n.d.), who describes their experience without self-reflection and without any emotional involvement, possibly in a playful manner when underlining the importance of killing "every single soldier":

> "my second run was something like this:
> 1) get food
> 2)create a LOT of cigarettes.
> 3) trade them for ammo.
> 4) kill the guard tower guy at the military outpost to get the assault rifle
> 5) start play "Shoot at EVERY SINGLE SOLDIER YOU SEE" mode."(19 November 2014)

Online communities may be a place for interpreting and sharing gameplay experiences. Thus, some forms of interpretation also turn into critical approaches. After analysing how gamers may give meaning to the game and position themselves towards their ethical choice and the game as a medium which facilitates certain decisions, we may now turn to more critical statements and how gamers judge TWOM.

Some players appreciate the game as critical, or as a medium for delivering a message, while opposing its realistic approach to the superficiality of popular war games.

One of the players who appreciated the critical approach of the game describes their experience in a comment on Steam (11 bit studios 2014) (Type 1, see Fig 1):

> "They're wounded, dying – my people need this more than they do. And that is what This War of Mine does most effectively. It shows you the cost of war – body, mind, and soul. I've read plenty of great anti-war novels, seen plenty of great anti-war films. This War of Mine joins Spec Ops: The Line in a growing, prestigious genre of anti-war games. It speaks for the most silent, unrepresented victims of war unflinchingly, sincerely. It reveals the cost of war; not with the over-the-top set pieces and faceless macho protagonists, but with quiet moments."(Spirit, 18 November 2014)

Moreover, the ones who deplore the clear winning strategy invoke the attributes of play and playfulness, while the ones appreciating the opportunity of reflection argue that the game is very realistic and well done, as the game is depicting a real war with real difficulties. Some also appreciate the difficulty coming from the lack of consistency and the game's hazard.

Depending on the type of engagement with the game, TWOM is described and appreciated both as a realistic and critical depiction of war and as a game. After exploring all the possible options, we focused on the players taking two major positions: the ones addressing the game through a realistic frame and the ones who want to play a game for the fun of it. The comments of the players appear in a medium which makes collaborative learning possible, and thus, these players make use not only of the game and its paratext, but they also react to other players' opinion when giving meaning to their gameplay experience and when judging the game. Some of the reviewers and commentators not only exchange tips on how the game may be played, but also encourage self-reflection and even point out the fact that a good game should make you suffer, while others focus only on what a player should do in order to play successfully, or state the importance of fun in games, as opposed to realism, which is sometimes considered as "difficult" and less consumer-oriented. As we can see, the gameplay experience does not only rely on the affordances of a game as players engage with it and have an important part in fabricating their own experience. Contra-ludicity may be useful in delivering a realistic war experience, when players interpret it as such. Other players may look for the fun of a game, for a hyper-ludic procedurality, and be discouraged by the game's difficulty, while others may applaud its coherent, successful critical approach to war and its pedagogical potential.

In one of the discussions on the playfulness or fun aspect of games, jaguar_claw (November 25) comments on IGN's review of TWOM "Remember when games used to be fun?". They later added that "It looks more like a chore than an activity for fun." The commentators arguing for the lack of fun in the game underline its resemblance to reality "I agree. Plus, I already make life and death decisions." (KinoDaKonquerer, 25 November 2014). This last comment shows the fact that the player does see the realistic and critical approach of the game, "life and death decisions", but does not appreciate it (Type 2, See Fig 1).

Image 4. Would you rob the elderly couple?

On the other hand, the ones appreciating the experience offered by the game either say that the previously mentioned commentators don't know what fun is, "Games are still fun, you just forgot enjoying them.", or that fun is a subjective matter. Others underline the fact that "Not all games are necessarily 'fun', but some are experiences worth having nonetheless. Some books are 'chores' to get through, but when all is said and done, you're happy you read them." This answer supports the statement of critical games, whose similarities to other media – movies, books – is encouraged as long as it helps the artist send a message or deliver a unique, realistic, or revelatory experience.

Another discussion on the fun character of the game starts with a complaint as the game is played in an Autosave-only mode (Fig. 2). Here, fun is opposed to difficulty, which has two meanings: practically difficult to play/to win and constraining – not addressing the needs of the player, but favouring the designer's intent to send a message by making the game difficult.

Hodor_from_Hodor	"This game would be ruined with manual saves though. People would save scum the way to survival. They also put the difficulty as a con whereas that seems to be a plus for games like dark souls. It is supposed to be difficult."
TheGrandPuppeteer	"Ruined for you perhaps, in which case you wouldn't use it. If people are choosing to do it then that is the way they want to play/find the most enjoyable."
Hodor_from_Hodor	"Well they can't choose to do it...it isn't an option. thank god."
TheGrandPuppeteer	"Yes, thank god people can't play the game the way they want to play it."
Hodor_from_Hodor	"I believe the game should be played the way the dev intended...that's why I hate cheats in games..."
TheGrandPuppeteer	"So if a game is boring the way the dev intended it to be played but can be made fun by some other means, you think the player in question should just stop playing, rather than have fun?"
PsiloCube	"Pick a new genre of game then, it's very deliberate by the devs that quick save isn't available. imagine DayZ without perma death... same deal."
TheGrandPuppeteer	"The player's fun/satisfaction should be the priority imo."
PsiloCube	"No, the game play should be and is the priority."
TheGrandPuppeteer	"Games are made for consumers so no."

Fig. 2. Discussion on the TWOM review, IGN, November 25 – December 9, 2014 (Anon n.d.)

These different conceptions regarding whose preferences should the game reflect – the players or the artist – are similar to the differences between games and art and their apparently different targets, referring to them as public in one case, and consumers, in the other. It seems that the relationship between the artist and their public differs from the one between the designer of a product and its consumers. Critical games and art games stamp on the line between these two and, thus, draw diverse critiques from players judging them both as art and as games.

Conclusions

Games as interactive media prove to be efficient in sending a message through elements of procedural rhetoric: some actions may lead to success or failure, thus the game may construct one's deeds are moral or imoral, efficient or inefficient. Games are not played in an isolated context. Therefore, the online community also has an important role in constructing the meaning of a game and in judging its ethical approach.

Moreover, critical games may encourage self-reflection and a change of perception, by using an unexpected approach and introducing ambiguity in the outcome of a player's actions. On the other hand, they may also discourage players who aim at playing games for their fun.

By analysing the rhetoric of TWOM, we saw that the game proposes an alternative way of viewing the war. This can be seen in its content (the game rules and the narrative component) which we started our analysis with, while it can also be seen in the presentation of the game and the reaction of players and reviewers. By using the perspective of a civilian instead of the one of a soldier, and by introducing hazard into the game, TWOM is argued to be more realistic and to take war seriously, differing from popular shooters. We therefore argued for its potential as a counter pedagogy of war.

The meaning of a critical game can also be achieved through collaborative learning, as the players can review, comment, and share their gameplay experiences, and discuss the meaning of the game. Gamers may find ethical choice important in TWOM, and take the game seriously, or play it for fun. They may also achieve a collaborative meaning of what fun should mean and what games should or should not be like. Games thus rely not only on their designers and artists but also on their players to encourage reflection and a certain type of experience. However, whether appreciated for their critical approach or not, in online communities games become visible and the people's interpretations inform each other, these collaborative knowledge sites becoming crucially important in the visibility of critical war ideologies.

Traditional gameplay may sometimes be broken or used as a resource by critical designers who want to send a message on how game could model real life, and how real life actually is for them, or for people who are less visible, silenced, as civilians usually are. Wars are not fun, thus they may not always be fun in games either. This critical approach informs our view of the affordances of games as a medium to tackle serious life (and death) issues. By diminishing its playfulness the game thus may be used as art, and may be inspiring, informative, or useful in encouraging or discouraging certain kinds of

attitudes towards war. Through collaborative interpretations taking place in diverse gaming communities, both critical and conservative positions become visible and continue to improve both games seen as art and games to be consumed as a form of play, thus contributing to the diversity of voices and experiences in important areas of life.

Image 4. "In war, not everyone is a soldier"
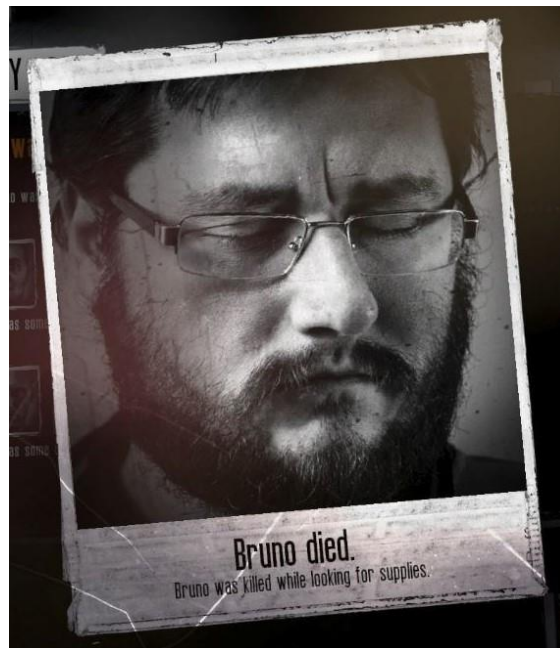
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