



Video games as medium in the formation of popular memory

The representation of the First World War in Battlefield 1

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HISTORY BACHELOR THESIS

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Introduction

Birds are chirping, a soft music reminding you of the 20's is playing, and a crisp morning light shines on a bed as the virtual camera slowly moves to the person sleeping in the bed. The lyrics of the song continue 'Stars shining right above you, night breezes seem to whisper...' as a hand touches the shoulder of the sleeping person, who is yanked awake. Yet when he opens his eyes he is not in bed, but finds himself right in a battlefield, uniform and helmet on, mud smeared over his still bewildered face. He is pulled up by another soldier who screams for help 'Somebody!', while the fights rage around the soldier still standing still in the battlefield, the music deforms and fades away. Through texts on the screen the player is informed that the game he will be playing is based upon the events of the First World War, a war in which 60 million soldiers fought in, and which according to the text changed the world forever. The player is then told that 'What follows is frontline combat. You are not expected to survive.' Where after they are hauled back into the chaos of the battlefield, forced to fight for their character's life.

This is the start of *Battlefield 1*, a game developed by EA DICE, and published by Electronic Arts on October 21, 2016. The game takes place in the setting of the First World War that lasted from 28 July 1914 to 11 November 1918. Through this, the player can almost directly experience the events of the war, through the avatar he plays. By representing the historical First World War, the game plays a role in the so-called crystallization of the memory, the fixing of an image in the popular memory of the First World War, meaning the way the war is generally perceived by people.¹

This is not the first time the war has been represented through the medium of video games. The first game concerning the war was *Red Baron*, a flight simulator released in 1990. After this, over 60 games have been released on this subject. Yet in the research of the popular memory of the First World War, not much attention has been going to this medium yet, as media like film, literature and poetry are preferred. The reason for this is that the video games are a relatively young medium still in development. Their situation is comparable with that of the medium of comics in 1980. Back then, the representation of the First World War, a serious topic connected to words like terrible, hellish and piteous, could not be done by comics, that were meant to be fun, lighthearted and for children. Both the War and the medium were too constrained by the interpretations of what the subject would be.² Yet now, comics have developed themselves to meaningful and important contributions in the representation of the First World War.³ Computer games are still in this development. They have increased in popularity, with some games even outgrowing their cinematic counterparts. While often seen as only an entertainment medium, meant for children and social outcasts, they have grown in artistic recognition and with that gained a wider audience. Meanwhile as a way of growing up, games

¹ Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity', *New German Critique* 65 (1995), 130.

² Chris Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games* (Sussex 2015), IX.

³ Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, X.

have started to take up more serious subjects. The sudden rise of games also concerning themselves with the First World War can be an illustration of this.⁴

Due to the perception on the medium as entertainment and for a specific audience, its role as a medium of historical representation remains debated. A main criticism towards the genre of video games in general is directed to its violent content, as this would be a source of aggressive behaviour in video game players.⁵ This is a criticism mostly significant for the genre *first-person shooters*, to which *Battlefield 1* belongs. This genre is known for its violent content as it is a shooter, meaning that the essence of the game is to shoot the enemy. Specifically for these games, there is according to Esther MacCallum-Stewart, an associate professor at the division of Games and Visual Effects at Staffordshire University, a consensus among critics that the representation of war through computer games is necessarily false, due to the narrative constraints of the genre, such as gameplay.⁶ This adds to the debate on whether video games are expected to give a historical accurate representation of an event at all, or whether they are judged by their entertainment value.⁷ Bruce Shelley, designer of the strategy game *Age of Empires III*, says on the purpose of games as a historical accurate representation that creating this: ‘would not only touch on areas we’d rather not deal with, in the end it just wouldn’t be any fun.’⁸ Although there are some games that are made for educational purposes and look for a true historical accuracy, most historical games are meant as a simulation of the past in which the player can experience history.⁹ In such a simulation, this historical accuracy is often neither the goal for game designers nor the expectation of the players of the game. What they want is called *authenticity lite*, meaning a representation that captures the spirit of how people believe the war was, not the actual historical facts. This authenticity is shaped by accurate maps, uniforms, weapons and other details, not the actual event.¹⁰ The importance of video games lies according to William Uricchio, an American media scholar, not in the particular rendering of the past but by the process of simulation that thrives on the interaction of the player.¹¹ The importance of the interaction of the player with the past presented to them by a game is stressed by Annette Vowinckel as well: ‘Its thrill seems to lie in the mere possibility of influencing historical (or, for that matter: parahistorical) events

⁴ Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, X.

⁵ Ibidem, XI.

⁶ Ibidem, XI.

⁷ Ibidem, 3.

⁸ Ibidem, 7.

⁹ Kevin Schut, ‘Stategic Simulations and Our past: The Bias of Computer Games in the Presentation of History’, *Games and Culture* 2 (2007), 229.

¹⁰ Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, 8.

¹¹ William Uricchio, ‘Simulation, History, and Computer Games’, in: Joost Raessens en Jeffrey Goldstein. *Handbook of computer game studies* (The MIT Press 2005), 327.

while the question of who would win or lose which war is of no importance whatsoever.’¹² By showing this influence the player can have on past, the past is shown as dynamic and broadens the historical consciousness.¹³¹⁴

This tension between a medium seen as entertainment, representing a serious subject as the First World War, is illustrated by the critical comment Battlefield 1 received on announcing that the game would represent the First World War. An article on the game was titled ‘A first-person shooter set in WW1 is maybe not the best idea’.¹⁵ This comment does not so much refer to the mediums potential of a historical accurate, but more to the fact it specifically represents the First World War. The representation of this famous historical event has proven to be problematic for the medium of the videogame. The historian Adam Chapman analyzed the then existing games related to the First World War on their engagement with popular memory. He concluded that of the 54 games, only 18 of them attempted to engage with the popular memory of the war, meaning the way the war is perceived by society. The main reason for this is that the war is a serious and emotionally charged issue, with a controversial and often contested memory surrounding it. In representing this war, game developers risk bringing something sensitive into the game, leading to the game being perceived as distasteful and inappropriate. Therefore, videogames often take story or content decisions that omit images and historical elements that can be associated with difficult parts of the war, as for example the fights in the trenches. This thesis will look at why this subject of the First World War is so difficult to represent for specifically the medium of games. Therefore, the analysis will focus on two aspects of the medium that make it differ from other media and that specifically pose a problem in representation of the war: it’s playful character, and the necessity of an enemy in its narrative. These aspects will be further introduced later in this thesis. By critically reflecting on the way Battlefield 1 deals with the representation of the war, this thesis will shed light the way the character of the medium influences the historical representation it produces, and its potentials and drawbacks in this representation. With that, this thesis will answer the question on what the representation of the First World War by Battlefield 1 tells on the position of games as a medium in the formation of popular memory.

To answer this question, the first chapter will Analyze the role of media in the formation of the memory of the First World War, and look at what characteristics distinguishes the medium of video games in its representation. Through the analysis of the memory of the First World War, it will be shown why this war is a treacherous subject to represent. Following on to this, the second chapter will analyze how the image of video games as a playful medium clashes with the serious and sensitive

¹² Annette Vowinckel, ‘Past futures: From re-enactment to the simulation of history in computer games.’ *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung* (2009), Vowinckel, 327.

¹³ Vowinckel, ‘Past Futures’, 331.

¹⁴ Schut, ‘Strategic Simulation and Our Past’, 219.

¹⁵ Jake Muncy, ‘A First-Person Shooter Set in WWI Is Maaaybe Not the Best Idea’ (version 5th of May 2016), <https://www.wired.com/2016/05/battlefield-1-wwi/>, (2nd of February 2017).

subject of the First World War, and how Battlefield 1 incorporates these dark themes in its playful environment. After this, the third chapter will look at how the lack of a clear 'good' and 'bad' narrative in the war poses a problem to the presentation through video games, as the medium needs a specified enemy to remain playable. Through this analysis, this thesis will conclude on how the medium of video games can play an important role as mediator in the formation of popular memory.

Chapter 1. The mediated memory of the First World War

Battlefield 1 is of course not the only example of a medium that represents the First World War. One cannot escape the amount of literature, poetry and film that have originated from this historical event in 103 years' time. By now, many of us have not directly experienced the War, but remain an image of the war through its representations. In fact, the people who did directly experience the war are starting to disappear. This indirect remembrance of the war is what Marianne Hirsch defines as *postmemory*. She describes this concept as following: 'The relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right.'¹⁶ In this remembrance, the role of media is of specific importance as most of the people who directly experienced the war have disappeared the memory of the First World War is mostly, and will eventually be entirely depended on the transferring of memory through media. Therefore, this chapter will analyze the role of media in the formation of the postmemory of the First World War, and look at the specific character of the medium of video games in this formation. By analyzing the popular memory of the First World War, it will be shown how this memory remains very sensitive to represent as its popular memory is very controversial and shifting in its representation, and the history of the war is painful due to its dark character and uncertain history. Looking at this sensitive memory in combination with the medium characteristics specific to video games, this chapter will conclude on what aspects of this war could pose a problem in the representation of the First World War, when represented through the medium video games.

The formation of memory

Mediated memory

Remembrance in postmemory is different from a direct remembrance as it exists more out of flashes of imagery than a consistent image.¹⁷ Comparable to the memory of an individual, the capacity of the memory of a society, a cultural memory, is limited by constraints such as focus and bias, as well as psychological pressures that cause painful or incongruent memories to become hidden. Due to this, an important aspect of remembering is forgetting, making cultural memory highly selective.¹⁸ In this selection process, popular media such as literature, poetry, film, television and video games play an important role. Cultural memory is shaped through circulation and repetition through these media. According to Aleida Assmann it is 'built on a small number of normative and formative texts, places, persons, artifacts, and myths which are meant to be actively circulated and communicated in ever-new presentations and performances.'¹⁹ This does not imply that every medium will represent the same

¹⁶ Marianne Hirsch, 'The Generation of Postmemory', *Poetics today* 29 (2008), 103.

¹⁷ Hirsch, 'The Generation of Postmemory', 109.

¹⁸ Aleida Assmann, 'Canon and Archive', in: Erll Astrid (ed.), *Cultural Memory Studies* (Berlin 2008), 97.

¹⁹ Aleida Assmann, 'Canon and Archive', in: Erll Astrid (ed.), *Cultural Memory Studies* (Berlin 2008), 100.

image. Each media has its own way of remembering, and influences the memory that is created.²⁰ Jay Winter notes as well that a cultural memory does not mean that everyone shares common memories. His criticism is directed to the medium of film, but it fits video games as well, as both media share the same visual aspect so influential to memory. When watching a film, the individual viewer always brings its own memories and historical narratives that will shape their interpretation of the message. A medium therefore does not “carry” cultural memory, but serves as a mediator ‘in which the overlaps and elisions between our understanding of history and memory are performed again and again’.²¹ In this, fictional media such as books, films, and also video games, have the power to shape, what Astrid Erll calls, the ‘collective imagination of the past’.²² These media are very strong in their way to crystallize certain images of the past, which will be set in cultural memory.²³

Video games as medium

Astrid Erll talks of fictional media that shape the collective imagination of the past, to these media the medium of the video game can be added as well.²⁴ As each medium has its own specific characteristics and with that its own way of remembering, it is important to see what aspects distinguish the medium of video games from other media. Due to its visual strength, the medium is very capable of crystallizing certain images in popular memories. As both film and games share this same visual aspect, video games are often perceived and researched just as films. Yet games do differ strongly from film, the most important difference is that the player is not just a spectator, but becomes an active participant as it is invited into the world it is presented to, and is therefore directly involved.²⁵ This applies mostly to the genre of *first-person shooter* to which *Battlefield 1* belongs, because as the name already implies, the game is played entirely in first-person, allowing the player to become unified with a character in the game. The experience created by playing a video game has become comparable to that of reenactment.²⁶ Reenactment can be defined as a ‘body-based discourse in which the past is reanimated through physical and psychological experience’.²⁷ In this way, historical reenactment differs from reading historical literature because it offers an insight rooted in the body, instead of an intellectual engagement.

²⁰ Astrid Erll, ‘Cultural memory Studies: An Introduction. Towards a Conceptual Foundation for Cultural Memory Studies.’ In: Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (eds). *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (Berlin/New York 2008), 389.

²¹ Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (London 2006), 199.

²² Erll, ‘Cultural memory Studies’, 389.

²³ Erll, ‘Cultural memory Studies’, 389.

²⁴ Erll, ‘Cultural memory Studies’, 389.

²⁵ Schut, ‘Strategic Simulation and Our Past’, 229.

²⁶ Vowinckel, ‘Past Futures’, 328.

²⁷ Brian Rejack, ‘Toward a Virtual Reenactment of History: Video Games and the Recreation of the Past’, *Rethinking History* 11 (2007), 412.

Due to this direct involvement, the narrative in a game is different as well. Because the player is not a spectator, the reading of the narrative is not, like in literature, a passive activity but actively done by the player, as they are also a participant in the events narrated and can influence the story.²⁸ Other than text, a game can also use aspects like music, art-style and gameplay to let the player become part of the game and experience the world.²⁹ This experience created through narrative, visual aspects of the game and music are all a very personal experience as the player is directly participating in this. Because of this, the player is often the center of the game and of most important person in narrative. This could also lead to an expectation that the narrative presented to the player, or the world in general, needs to be pleasant as the player experiences this vividly and should not be discouraged to continue playing.³⁰ Although the perception of games as only an entertainment medium is very cramped, the active involvement of the player does force the medium pay attention to be pleasant to play.

Popular memory

The memory that these video games, and other media like film, television and literature create is called popular memory, a term that finds its place in the tension field between ‘memory’ and ‘history’. Whereas popular memory is defined as: ‘what people in general *believe* took place in the past’, the writing of history is often placed on the opposition of memory and perceived as what historians ‘judge to have *actually* taken place.’³¹ Often, popular memory is approached somewhat negatively as it is very selective in what is represented, people are more emotionally attracted to the past that fits the most to their expectations, making it less objective.³² Michel Foucault placed popular memory primarily in cultures that had no script yet.³³ While Maurice Halbwachs opposed memory and history, in which he perceives the first as meaningful, subjective and identity related, and the latter as scientific, neutral and objective.³⁴ Yet Astrid Erll criticizes this debate and adds that history itself is also just an interpretation of sources, and is selective as well by shaping a narrative. Often historiography encounters problems constructing a complete image of the past, as many sources are lacking or opposing.³⁵ She sees history as one thing that is settled under the wider umbrella of *cultural history*, which she defines as ‘the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts.’³⁶ Under this umbrella, popular memory is also settled, and is part of the continuous re-construction and re-

²⁸ Ernest Adams, *Game writing: Narrative skills for videogames*. Ed. Chris Mark Bateman. (Boston 2007), 7.

²⁹ Adams, *Game writing*, 9.

³⁰ Adams, *Game writing*, 9.

³¹ Paul A. Cohen, *History and Popular Memory: The Power of Story in Moments of Crisis* (New York 2014), XIII.

³² Cohen, *History and Popular Memory*, XIII-XIV.

³³ Sue Harper, ‘Popular Films, Popular Memory: The Case of the Second World War’, in: Martin Evans and Ken Lunn (eds). *War and Memory in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford 1997) 164.

³⁴ Erll, ‘Cultural memory Studies’, 7.

³⁵ Erll, ‘Cultural memory Studies’, 7.

³⁶ Erll, ‘Cultural memory Studies’, 2.

presentation of the past, as it is not static, but dynamic.³⁷ The power of popular memory lies in that these are the shared beliefs that influence social behaviour and the cultural identity of nations.³⁸

This thesis will work with popular memory, and the media that are part of it, as an important aspect on the shaping of how the past is perceived. Popular memory is indeed not fully accurate in its representation, yet its strength does not lie in its accuracy, but its possibility on shaping a common perception on the past, that unites people in their beliefs. This applies to the medium of video games all the same. The perception on history as scientific and objective, and memory subjective and emotional is of importance to the perception of games as a medium, and the criticism the medium receives. Definitely when the medium is perceived as an entertainment medium, the opposition can grow between the scientific history and subjective memory. Yet as mentioned before in the introduction of this thesis, historical accuracy is not what is expected of the medium by its player, and it is also not its goal. The strength of the medium lies in representing the past in a vivid way by actively including the player, and let them experience the past they perceived from far away, personally.

The dynamic memory of the First World War

The memory of the First World War is a perfect example of the role media have in the formation of memory. In his book, Dan Todman speaks of the evolution of the memory of the First World War. He does not only speak on the modern memory, but also on how the war was perceived in 1914 and onwards. The reason for this is that memory is not static, but dynamic. Right after the First World War, the number of different perceptions was limitless, over time, some perceptions disappear, and some became more common and clear through mediation.³⁹ This crystallization by media is strengthened by each representation that centers on aspects already connected to the First World War, as that is another confirmation of the validation of this memory.⁴⁰ The position of these central aspects is also strengthened by the fact that if one would choose a theme less clearly connected to the First World War, it often is not recognized as a First World War film, book or game, and will not reach as much public as others that do connect to these central themes.⁴¹ Through this, Dan Todman was able to distinguish what he calls four thematic ‘myths’: mud, death, donkeys and futility. He defines these ‘myths’ as as a ‘belief about the past held by an individual but common to a social group.’⁴²

Yet, although this crystallization sets a few common thematic myths in the popular memory of the First World War, its overall memory remains inconsistent. Every representation adds to what

³⁷ Erll, ‘Cultural memory Studies’, 7.

³⁸ Dan Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (London 2005). XIII.

³⁹ Todman, *The Great War*, 221.

⁴⁰ Todman, *The Great War*, 40.

⁴¹ Todman, *The Great War*, 41.

⁴² Todman, *The Great War*, XIII.

Chris Kempshall calls a ‘cultural hall of mirrors’, in which its popular memory is a collaboration shaped by endless reflections and reinterpretations. This constant shifting image makes the First World War such a difficult subject to represent, and what makes it more difficult is that many representations are in fact contractionary to each other, and to history.⁴³ An example of this is that death is often a very central theme in the popular representations of the First World War.⁴⁴ Yet 88% of, in this example, British soldiers returned alive from the First World War, and in fact, many of these men never experienced the horror of the trenches.⁴⁵ Simultaneously, the men who came home from this war are remembered as not wanting to speak of it ever again and hide their feelings behind a stoic mask. Yet an endless amount of poetry is written by men who said they experienced the war themselves.⁴⁶

This uncertain memory of the war that is constant shifting makes it a very sensitive subject in representing as well and could raise criticism when not done carefully. An example of this is the ‘reality TV’ series *The Trench* by BBC, in which 24 volunteers relived the experiences of the trenches in the First World War. This program was heavily criticized and seen as a ‘devaluation of humanity’ as it was not perceived respectful to compare a little discomfort to the horrors of the War.⁴⁷

This sensitivity is not only due to the uncertain and constantly shifting memory of the war, but also due to the history of the war itself. Although in reality many soldiers returned home from the front instead of dying in battlefield, it was for most countries the first big war they were in. The comparative huge losses of lives still made an impact as many people experienced the loss of a family member, and it therefore characterized the war experience.⁴⁸ This is reflected in popular memory, as most World War 1 fictions have death as a central theme, as very often the main character, or all characters eventually die.⁴⁹ Not only were the lives of people who lost relatives touched, also the lives of everyone who did survive the war, as they had experienced death up close and were left traumatized by the horrors of the war, which were mostly connected to the trenches. This is also a central theme in popular memory, the war neurosis and shell shock reflecting the traumatic experiences left on the soldier.⁵⁰ These soldiers brought their experiences home again in the shape of *war stories*, to the

⁴³ Kempshall, 3.

⁴⁴ Todman, 44.

⁴⁵ Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, 3.

⁴⁶ Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, 3.

⁴⁷ Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, 5. In this page he refers to: MacCallum-Stewart E. quoting Flic Everett ‘A phoney war’ in *The Manchester Evening News*, 14 March 2002, in ‘Television Docu-Drama and the First World War’. Available from: <http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/ptb/www/War2/stewart%opaper.pdf>.

⁴⁸ Todman, *The Great War*, 45.

⁴⁹ Todman, *The Great War*, 44.

⁵⁰ Claudia Sternberg, ‘Framed (by) Memory: The popular mnemonics of the First World War in the *Unknown Soldier* (Carlton TV, UK 1998) and *Distant Bridges* (UK/USA 1999)’, *History of Warfare*, volume 48: British Popular Culture and the First World War. 309.

people at home who never experienced the war themselves. These stories would shape the perception of the war to them as one of death, horror and trenches.⁵¹

After the war, the period of grieve was especially painful as there was so much uncertainty, many that died on the battlefield were never identified, or buried where they died instead of brought home to their families for a funeral.⁵² Along with the huge losses of the war and the impact it left on its generation, the uncertainty of its history painted the war as a tragic and pointless war. Compared to the Second World War, the First did not have a clearly defined enemy that could be viewed as really bad. Therefore, there was no specific ‘good’ and ‘bad’ side of the war. This lack of a moral higher goal in the war strengthened the tragedy of the loss of lives it has caused as they had died for seemingly no good reason.⁵³ The way the battles had been fought added to the feeling of senselessness, as it focused not on winning ground and stopping the enemy from fighting, but was forced by the deadlock of the trenches to focus on letting the enemy lose as many men as possible while keeping as many man alive of your own. This lead to many losses, and few victories.⁵⁴ Both the painful identity of the war, with its huge losses and traumatic experiences that were brought back to home, as well as the uncertain morals of the war all added up to a certain feeling of futility, that made the memory of the war even more painful as it could not be justified.

This sensitivity of the memory of the First World War, due to its inconsistent image and its difficult history as a mournful war, with uncertain morals to justify its losses, turns the War into a treacherous subject to represent. Each medium has its own characteristics that define its representation, and the possible problems it can encounter. For the medium of the video games, the most defining characteristic is that of the direct and personal involvement of the player through reenactment. This puts the player at the center of importance, they should enjoy the experience, which turns the game into a playful medium, that is perceived as fun, and should be able to retain the interest of the player. This playful image could clash in its representation with the serious, and most importantly mournful identity of the First World War that plays its part in the painful memory of the War. The following chapter will therefore look at how this playful character could pose a problem to the representation of the First World War in games, and how Battlefield 1 handles this in its representation. After this, the third chapter will concern itself with the lack of a defined ‘good’ and ‘bad’ side, that makes the memory to the War so sensitive. Because of the direct involvement of the player, a game cannot risk putting the player in a playable position on the ‘bad’ side, as this could be perceived as unmoral. Representing a war in which this ‘good’ and ‘bad’ side is uncertain, could pose a problem. Therefore,

⁵¹Todman, *The Great War*, 49.

⁵² Todman, *The Great War*, 47.

⁵³ Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, 30.

⁵⁴Todman, *The Great War*, 126.

this chapter will look at the uncertain morals of the War and its influence on the playable positions and the overall representation in Battlefield 1.

Chapter 2 – “Never Again” reenacted back to life, once again

One of the most defining characters of video games as a medium is that of reenactment. This aspect of the medium makes representation more powerful, as the player is directly and personally involved in the experience. At the same time, it can also pose a problem for the representation through the game when connecting to darker and more controversial themes. A game gives the player the opportunity to be someone else and step out of their boundaries, without specific consequences. For a day, one can be a highly-trained soldier, a helpful medic or possibly fight at the “wrong” side of war. This playing with controversial themes can be called ‘dark play’. Jonas Linderoth and Torill Elvira Mortensen treat dark play as a broader concept in their book *The Dark Side of Game Play*. They define *dark play* as: ‘By “dark” we thus refer to content, themes, or actions that occur within games that in some contexts would be problematic, subversive, controversial, deviant, or tasteless. “Play” simply refers to the fact these matters occur in a game, which means we make no statements about whether or not the participant perceives these games as playful’.⁵⁵

This balancing between play at the one hand, and a darker serious subject at the other can be problematic for the representation of a historical subject. As the previous chapter concluded, the First World War is due to its controversial and inconsistent memory and its painful history a sensitive subject to represent. Specifically, the perception of the war as a horrifying and mournful event makes the memory to be defined as dark. Yet as a game, the player’s experience is of central importance, this experience should remain pleasant to hold the attention of the player. This focus could risk letting the entertaining aspect of the game overrule the serious subject, which could lead to the perception of placing the First World War in a playful environment as tasteless.⁵⁶ To place such a subject in a ludic frame, can be dangerous as elements can be viewed in a wrong way, and become trivialized. This raises the question in what way *Battlefield 1* incorporates the dark theme of the First World War in its playful environment. This analysis defines two perceptions on the war that make the memory of the First World War dark themed; the image of the horrifying experiences on the Battlefield, and that of the war as a tragedy. But to analyze *Battlefield 1* well, the game structure of itself will first have to be laid out and analyzed.

The structure of *Battlefield 1*

Battlefield 1 has two game modes, distinguishing between single player and multiplayer. In the multiplayer mode, the player can group up with friends to fight in a team, the fight is often focused on gaining an objective. Instead, this analysis will focus on the single player mode, as the aspect of

⁵⁵ Mortensen, *The Dark Side of Game Play*, 5.

⁵⁶ Adam Chapman, ‘It’s Hard to Play in the Trenches: World War I, Collective Memory and Videogames’, article from: <http://gamestudies.org/1602/articles/chapman> (June 10th 2017).

reenactment is most clearly defined in the campaigns, defined as “War Stories”, this option offers. The campaigns seem to be the foundation on which the multiplayer mode continues, as the teams available to play correspond with the parties featured in the campaigns. Therefore, researching the campaigns will give an insight in the multiplayer mode as well.

The fact that the campaigns are shaped as war stories is of crucial importance. The stories are told first-person; therefore, the narrator is also the character that experienced the events in the campaign. This narrative element makes the campaigns strong in their reenactment. But of even more importance is the fact that this first-person narration also entirely decides the perspective of the stories. These stories were the ones that were brought home to be told to friends and family. Therefore they would prefer showing the heroic side of war, while still including enough narrative, balanced with hope, sacrifice, redemption and heroism to make the story enjoyable.

Yet this of course does not give for a very neutral perspective on the war. The narrator is preferring a side in war, and of course preferring a way the stories are told. In fact, one of the campaigns, Friends in High Places, plays with this thought in its narrative. The campaign starts off with a gambler, that steals a plane and flies under the British flag to fight the Germans. Yet throughout the campaign, the character betters himself and in the end; finds redemption, turning him into the hero of the story after all. Yet at the very end of the campaign, the character says: ‘Things get mixed up in wartime though and you’ll probably hear other versions’ continuing telling his story from another, less heroic perspective. Finishing with: ‘But don’t listen to any of that. What you heard from me is the truth. I wouldn’t tell you if it wasn’t, would I?’ while mischievously smiling at the camera. This reference made in the campaign to the trustworthiness of these stories is an ironic tease towards its own narrative. Throughout this analysis, it is therefore important to keep in the narrative perspective of the campaigns in mind.



I wouldn't tell you if it wasn't. Would I?

The game seems to aim on showing the diversity and grand scale of the war through its diverse campaigns. With this it can show many different perspectives on the war. This diversity and grand scale is already stressed in the beginning of the introduction campaign: ‘The war covered the globe. Old empires and new worlds. Old ways and new ideas. All of mankind fought. A hundred big ideas marched off into the war to end all wars.’

There are five campaigns: Through Mud and Blood, in which the player takes the role of the British Daniel Edwards, the new driver of the Mark V tank “Black Bess”, in the Battle of Cambrai taking place in the Fall of 1918, where it is their goal to penetrate German lines to reach the French town of Cambrai. In Friends in High Places, the player becomes an American pilot through the

character of Clyde Blackburn, fighting under the British flag against the Germans in the Spring of 1917. In *Avanti Savoia*, the player becomes Luca Vincenzo Cocchiola, a member of the special Italian Arditi unit in the Fall of 1918 in the Dolomites in Northern Italy. While attacking key Austro-Hungarian positions, Luca looks after his twin brother Matteo. *The Runner* features the Gallipoli Campaign of 1915, in which the player takes up the role of the Australian message runner Frederick Bishop, while storming the beaches of Gallipoli to fight the Ottoman empire. *Nothing is Written* in which the player becomes Zara Ghufuran, a Bedouin rebel working with British Intelligence officer T.E. Lawrence, also known as Lawrence of Arabia. Together they fight in the Spring of 1918 against the Ottoman occupation of the Arabian Peninsula.

Each of these campaigns show a different territory to fight in, and a different kind of combat, either featuring tanks, airplanes, boats, horses, or being a normal foot soldier. While most of the characters played are not actual historical figures, it does give the player a personal experience on the frontlines. The stories focus on the emotional experience of the character in the war, and therefore gives the player an experience of what it was like to fight in that war, as they can connect with the character played

Confrontation

In its representation, *Battlefield 1* seems to deal with the incorporation of the dark theme of the First World War in two ways. The first way is that of confronting the player with the darkness and seriousness of the subject. This is an interesting tactic as most First World War games deal with the problem of placing the difficult subject in a playful environment by simply omitting certain images and historical elements, to not touch the subject too much. *Battlefield 1* seems to have taken the opposite strategy. The introduction campaign, *Storm of Steel*, throws the player right into the very horrors the War is known for, to experience the influence of flame throwers in the battlefield, to fight with a tank that can explode anytime, to deal with the dreadful gas attacks, and in the end, see everybody die as an entire burning airship crashes down on the battlefield. It does not avoid showing the war at its worst. The narrator adds to this by saying ‘let me tell you, it was no adventure.’ Continuing later with ‘instead of adventure, we found fear, and in war the only true equalizer is death.’ Making clear that the campaigns of the game are not focused on an adventurous kind of gameplay, but show the war through the mournful war stories told by the soldiers. Through the personal experience of playing the protagonist in the story and experiencing the horrors of the war, the player is actively involved in experiencing that the war was in fact not fun, but a horror. Throughout the game, the narrator continues noting that the war was a horror, saying things like ‘it was consuming us all, and there was no end in sight.’ By making this clear, the game shows its intentions on telling a serious story, therefore asking for respect by the player on the subject. It also asks for respect by highlighting the importance and grand scale of the war, informing the player that ‘*Battlefield 1* is based upon

events that unfolded over one hundred years ago. More than 60 million soldiers fought in “The War to End All Wars”. It ended nothing. Yet it changed the world forever.’

Another part of the confrontation of the horror of the War is the inclusion of death in the introduction campaign, which starts with the note that ‘The following is front-line combat. You are not expected to survive.’ Continuing to place the player in a raging battlefield, ruthlessly showing the death of four characters the player gets to be. Each time the character dies, the virtual camera zooms out and zooms in on another part of the battlefield, giving the player another chance to play. With this, one of the central themes of the memory of the First World War is added to the game, as dying in the War is often closely connected to the tragic and pointless War it is presented as.⁵⁷ Yet this is not a thing a game normally can do. This is where the medium particularly differs from other media such as literature or film, as the audience does not patiently watch, but is actively involved in the narrative. Therefore, the player’s progress is dependent on the survival of a single character. When the character dies, there are only two options: to let the player get back into the game, disturbing the narrative, or ending the player’s opportunity to play, and disturbing the game experience.⁵⁸ In all the other campaigns, the player can continue playing when their character dies as they are returned to the battlefield again to continue playing. Yet in the introduction campaign, when the character that is played dies, the story of this character ends. The player can then continue fighting with another character, but has to accept that they cannot continue with the previous storyline. This personal experience of death is something only a game as medium can achieve, as the player is directly involved with the lifeline of the character. It therefore adds to the experience of the War.

To underline the seriousness of the war, and the way its horrifying character impacted the soldiers fighting in it, *Battlefield 1* gives the theme of the traumatic experiences of the War, often a central theme to the popular memory of the First World War as well, a central place in its storylines.⁵⁹ The beginning of this thesis described the start of the introduction campaign, *Storm of Steel*. In this, the main character is woken up by a hand, but when he opens his eyes, he is suddenly stood on a raging battlefield. As horrible scenes of combat continue around him, he remains standing bewildered and looks devastated into the virtual camera.



The same traumatic flashback is incorporated in the campaign *Through Mud and Blood* as well, which entirely takes place in the French trenches, at the Western front. Fighting in the trenches,

⁵⁷ Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, 19.

⁵⁸ Chapman, ‘It’s Hard to Play in the Trenches’.

⁵⁹ Sternberg, ‘Framed (by) Memory’, 309.

the game cannot escape showing the horrors of the war that are so closely connected to it. In the images below, it is shown how the protagonist, Edwards, first looks at his gloved hands while in a car waiting, when suddenly he is dragged back in the battlefield, looking at his blooded gloves. The virtual camera zooms out to show the scenery full of fire and death surrounding Edwards, while he looks horrified into the camera. The last two shots are at the start of the campaign included, but are in fact the end of the campaign, showing the traumatic ending Edwards experienced.



By incorporating such a defining and serious aspect of the effects of the horrors of the war on its participants, even after the war was over, it once again underlines how the war was in any way not a pleasant experience, and should be taken seriously.

Battlefield 1 does not only seek to confront the player by showing the horrors and its consequences of the war, it also shows the emotional impact the war left on the ones left behind. The campaign Avanti Savoia, is entirely centered on the story that Luca Vincenzo Cocchiola tells his daughter on his birthday. The story is of his twin brother Matteo, who he lost in the War. The campaign seems to ignore all the facts on who the enemy is, the goal of the mission, or how it all

ended, it all seems irrelevant to the narrator and protagonist of this story. While most of the campaigns contain a certain aspect of heroism or sacrifice, here is only tragedy and a sense of futility. The campaign ends with Luca mourning: ‘He never got older, and here I am, still. Who decides such things?’ The ending credits mention that ‘Families were changed not only by those they lost but also by those who returned.’ This confirms the earlier mentioned aspect of the war that made it so sensitive, not only did so many die, the survivors returned home with tales full of sadness, bringing the pain back home as well. By including the information on how the War affected families as well in the end credits of the campaign, the game takes up an informing role again on how the War was a serious and influencing historical event.

In this underlining of the seriousness of the subject, the design of the campaigns plays a role. The danger of adding such a serious storyline in a campaign would be that the gameplay meant for the player to take part in would undermine the narrative, letting the campaign lose its meaning and possibly accomplishing the opposite of showing the seriousness of the War. Yet in the campaigns in *Battlefield 1*, the greater part remains cutscenes with narrative, through which narration predominates gameplay. Through the use of a dominating narration and the personal involvement of the player that is so central to the medium of video games, the medium has the possibility to ask for respect on the subject.

The aim to highlight the seriousness of the War as a subject is something that is reached in almost every campaign, yet one campaign highly differs from the rest in this aspect. The American campaign *Friends in High Places* focusing on the air fights in the war has a much lighter attitude. This is mainly due to the self-assured and humorous protagonist, Clyde Blackburn. The protagonist speaks very lightly of bombing targets as a pilot, and starts off with a joking attitude. This campaign could definitely be perceived as a less respectful way of dealing with the subject of the First World War, and therefore become a trivializing aspect of *Battlefield 1*. The reason for the different perspective this campaign offers could be that it features airplanes, therefore literally distancing itself from the horrors the War was remembered by. This is something often seen in games featuring the First World War, by distancing itself from the subject, the game avoids taking up sensitive subjects and become trivializing.⁶⁰ This is most likely the reason that, of about 80 games published featuring the First World War, at least 25 are airplane simulations, with the game *Red Baron* being even the first game concerning the War, to be ever published. The influence of distance becomes clear when the airplane crashes, and Blackburn and his companion find themselves in the trenches. The overall scenery changes from light colours to only grey and black, and the red of burning surroundings, while the protagonist also changes into a wearier attitude. This is also where the Blackburn has to choose between leaving his companion behind to die, and survive himself, or take the risk to save his companions life, risking both their deaths. When Blackburn later returns to the skies, he remains

⁶⁰ Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, 14.

weary after the confrontation of the horrors below. This confrontation in the campaign could be interpreted as a confrontation to the player as well, as the game might seem fun and adventurous, yet the War was in fact a horror, shown in the campaign. Yet the start of the campaign remains a risky representation as it does not show the same respect the other campaign do towards the subject.

Lightening up the mood

While the game seems to focus on the one hand at confronting the player with the horror and sadness of the First World War, most of the narratives are, while showing horror, infused with themes of sacrifice and heroism. This is the second way of dealing with the incorporation of the dark theme of the First World War. This heroic aspect of the narratives is understandable from the narrative perspective of the War Stories that the campaigns take shape off, as discussed before. Yet it also serves to lighten up these stories, and make the narrative more pleasant to experience. Simultaneously, it is a way to give the player a feeling of empowerment, therefore increasing a pleasant game experience.

As shown before, death is incorporated in the campaigns, yet not all deaths are presented as a tragedy as in the Avanti Savoia campaign. In the campaign The Runner, Frederick Bishop meets a young recruit Jack Foster. Initially, they do not start off very well as the young man is still naïve, while Bishop is an experienced and older fighter who sees Jack as just a nuisance. Yet throughout the



campaign Bishop starts to value Jack more, in the end so much that he lets Jack and the other soldiers escape the fort they are attacking, while he heroically continues fighting to have their back. In the end, the protagonist gets shot by a gun, but not before seeing the shot of a light gun back at the ships, which he instructed Jack to fire when he got back safely. The scene ends as shown below, with the character smiling satisfied at the light flare. Because of his sacrifice, the protagonist becomes the hero of this story, while simultaneously letting the narrative end on a positive note, as his sacrifice would be worthwhile.

This theme of sacrifice has been important since the end of the First World War. The futility paradigm, as was introduced in literary texts in late 1920's and became decisive for the genre of the

First World War Film, was barely recognized right after the war.⁶¹ To call a war that had just been fought and took so many lives futile, did not give solace to the ones remaining. Therefore, the rhetoric of sacrifice and redemption got a stronger place in memory, to justify the losses the war had caused. This made fighting in the war somewhat more heroic.⁶² Even now, the theme of futility is ruled out by themes of sacrifice like that Frederick Bishop, and many others in the campaigns. For example, the sacrifice of the general of Edwards in *Through Mud and Blood*, by blowing up the tank while still in it, to kill all the enemy soldiers surrounding it, makes him a hero. This also makes the naming of each character that died in the introduction campaign of relevance: by showing their names, they are remembered through their sacrifice, so that their deaths were not in vain. By weaving in this theme of sacrifice, and with that making the survivors as well as those who died into heroes, the horrible aspect of the deaths in the campaign, while representing the huge losses the War had suffered, are soothed by a theme of purposefulness, which makes it less painful and problematic to represent. A critical note on this heroic portrayal of the protagonist, is that this lets the narrative lose its neutrality in representing the War, therefore, the chapter will elaborate on this problem. This is not a tactic specifically bound to the medium of video games, as it is a common theme in both film and literature as well. But the heroic representation of the protagonist and other main characters in the narrative is something that does characterize the medium video games. This is because of the personal involvement of the player, who is connected to the character they play by taking his role, in a way becoming this character as they control the movements of the character and decide its future. Many games use this personal involvement to give the player a feeling of empowerment: by turning the character they play into a hero, the player himself becomes a hero as well.⁶³

In its representation of the First World War, *Battlefield 1* has two ways of incorporating the dark theme of the War in its playful environment. By confronting the player with the very horror, consequences and tragedy of the war, the game explicitly highlights the seriousness of the subject, and the importance of the war. This way the game avoids trivialization by making clear in what way the storyline has to be interpreted, therefore making the line between play and seriousness less vague, and taking some of the danger in representation away. *Battlefield 1* accomplishes this call for awareness of the seriousness of the subject and the sorrow connected to it by use of the campaigns. Through the personal involvement in these campaigns of the player taking the role of the protagonist, the player experiences the pain of the war. This experience is balanced by a strong narrative that does not get overruled by the gameplay, so the meaning of the message can be made clear. It is important to note that not every game is designed in similar fashion, and will have other ways of narration, or have no

⁶¹ Winter, *Remembering War*, 310.

⁶² Todman, *The Great War*, 152.

⁶³ Adams, *Game writing*, 9.

narration at all. Yet this greater role of narration in the campaigns offer a lot of freedom in adding a deeper meaning to the game, in which the message does not become trivialized by gameplay. The second way of incorporating this dark theme of the War is by balancing the horrors of the war with lighter themes of sacrifice and hope. These two themes are woven into most of the campaigns, and make the representation of the War less horrible, as the sense of purposefulness soothes the losses of the war. The heroic presentation of the playable position is common in the medium of the video game, as it is also often used to give the player a feeling of empowerment. Therefore, it can prove a tactic many games apply to represent the War while remaining an attractive game to play. By highlighting the seriousness of the subject of the First World War, while balancing this dark theme with lighter themes like sacrifice and heroism, Battlefield 1 incorporates the dark theme of the War without trivializing it, while not losing its appeal to the player.

Chapter 3– Representing a clouded past as a clear sky

While the horrors of the War remained strong in its memory, it was not the only thing making the war a sensitive subject. Many wars had been fought already, and the Second World War following this war knew its own horrors and death just as well. Yet the aspect that made the memory of the war so sensitive lies elsewhere. At the time of the War, and now even after decades of research, the reason for the start of the war, and of each country joining in the fight, remains shrouded in controversy.⁶⁴

Compared to the Second World War that followed, the First World War did not have a clear ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ narrative, and missed a clear goal to fight for. This gave rise to the earlier spoken of feeling of futility connected to the war, but also now poses a problem in the representation of the War.

As spoken of before, the field between history and (popular) memory remains full of tension as they are often opposed to each other, while both contributing to remembrance. Yet the difference of presentation between the two remains of importance. Whereas historical research is often based on finding incongruities in history and show its dynamic qualities, popular memory is shaped by the expectations of the public, and films or games are not able, and not meant to show incomplete stories. This is something that applies to all popular media, yet because of the direct involvement of the player in this narrative, the medium of video games encounters a more specific problem. The lack of a certain enemy that is seen as ‘bad’, poses a problem to the playable positions of the game as well. Under playable positions is understood the roles a player of the game can take in. As *Battlefield 1* is a *first-person shooter*, the player becomes personally involved in the game in a way that resembles reenactment, making the connection between the player and the position they take in the narrative very direct. In *Battlefield 1* the player can choose between many different roles, ranging from medic caring for the wounded, or a pilot attacking enemy soldiers from a distance. Yet due to the uncertainty of who the good and who the bad guy is, the game risks to being perceived as tasteless, as fighting an enemy without a specific moral is a slaughter, and would let players re-enact inappropriate roles.⁶⁵ Due to this, the game is bound to specify an enemy, yet while doing so, it could problematize its position as mediator by pointing out a good or a bad side in history. Simultaneously, the campaigns are the foundation of the multiplayer mode, as each country represented in the campaigns are playable positions in this mode, also the countries that are enemies in the campaigns. Therefore, if the game would portray the enemies in the campaigns as ‘bad’, the playable positions in the multiplayer mode could become endangered.

To see how *Battlefield 1* deals with this problem, this analysis will look at how both sides are represented: the side of the enemy in the campaigns, and the playable positions in the game itself.

Although the countries portrayed in the campaigns do not all share the same enemy, they do share one thing in common; they are not enemies of each other, as they are all part of the so called Western

⁶⁴ Todman, *The Great War*, 122.

⁶⁵ Chapman, ‘It’s Hard to Play in the Trenches’.

front. Because of this the game risks seeming to be still taking a side in the remembrance of the war after all, which could stir up criticism. The game seems to try to solve this by an aim for a neutral position in its representation of the War, by not pointing out a specific ‘good’ or ‘bad’ side. Yet in the presentation of the playable positions, the heroic character of the War Stories endangers this neutral position.

Aim for neutrality

Battlefield 1 tries to solve the problem of an unclearly defined ‘good’ and ‘bad’ side by taking a neutral aim. It does so in several ways, one of them is by letting each campaign center on only one nationality. Due to this, the game avoids choosing who the ‘bad’ guy is in the entire war, and only specifies the enemy to that country, which is historical accurate. Simultaneously, all the stories start in medias res, placing the player amid the war, with a clear mission and goal. The campaign shows a clear path to what should happen, making it irrelevant to know the complete picture and therefore avoiding the problem of filling in an unknown history. Chris Kempshall notes in his research on First World War games that a common way handling the problem of the uncertain history of the War is by leaving gaps in the narrative, to let the players’ imagination fill in the blanks.⁶⁶ Battlefield 1 does the same thing through its campaigns, but also does not end up with an uncomplete narrative by the specific focus of each campaign.

The second way of reaching neutrality is by not clearly defining the outcome of the War, or only highlighting the positive outcome of the war for both sides. After each campaign, the end credits tell of the war continuing after the specific fight the narrative featured, yet it leaves the outcome of that battle, and the whole war, in the open. It does not define a winner and a loser. Only two campaigns do reveal a definitive ending, that of The Runner and Nothing is Written. In The Runner, the Ottomans are the enemy of the Australians, fighting under the British flag. While the Ottomans are the enemy in Nothing is Written as well and portrayed as evil, The Runner has a different perspective. When the campaign ends, the end credits mention that after a battle that continued nine months on, the Ottomans win their fight. They are in this not presented as bad, but portrayed positively by adding that it was a hard-won victory for the Ottomans. The end credits stress the many lives they sacrificed, and the goal of their sacrifice: defending their homeland, as is seen as “their right”. Therefore, their battle is shown as good and worthwhile. This is confirmed again when the credits mention that of the founding of the Republic of Turkey by those who fought for their home country, emphasizing the positive outcome of the war. Simultaneously, the Australians and those of other nationalities that fought with them as well under the British flag, are not negatively approached as those who lost the war. The special cooperation between the Australians and New Zealanders, and the influence the tales of heroism and comradeship that followed the war had on their nationalities is highlighted, therefore still focusing on

⁶⁶ Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, 22.

the positive outcome of the war. Through this, both sides are neutrally portrayed, no opinion is given on who should have won the war, only that both sides have fought hard, and the positive outcome of both sides is stressed.

Yet one of the campaigns does choose a specific side in the outcome of the war, this is the campaign of the Arab rebels fighting against their historical oppressors, the Ottomans, in Nothing is Written. Not only does it not neutrally mention the outcome of the war, it also chooses to not portray the enemy neutrally. In all the campaigns, neutrality is also achieved by letting the enemy remain completely faceless. They are not present in the cutscenes, and otherwise they do not have a specific identity. By remaining faceless, the enemy is there not portrayed as specifically bad, letting the game remain its neutral status. The difference in portrayal is striking, as in the campaign The Runner the Ottomans are the enemy as well, yet they are specifically positively portrayed, as just described. Yet in this campaign, the Ottomans become specifically portrayed as evil. This is clearly illustrated by the cutscene below. In which an Ottoman general looks down menacing on the protagonist, Zara, who he is about to kill.



Nowhere else in the game is the face of an enemy to be seen this clearly, and nowhere does the game take such a strong stance on a side of the war. The reason for this can be explained by the earlier mentioned uncertain history of the War. Whereas the origins of the War remain unclear, the war between the Ottomans and the Arabs predated the First World War. The game mentions that the Ottomans were the “historical oppressors” of the Arabs, making clear that this is something in which the enemy is clear, and has been clear for a long time before the war. This shows that when the history of the war is uncertain, the game takes distance and chooses neutrality, yet when the facts are certain, the game can easier take a side. Still, this is a risky move in the campaign as it weakens the neutral aim of Battlefield 1 in the presentation of the First World War.

As a game, Battlefield 1 needs to specify an enemy to remain playable, and not let the actions of the player become unmoral. Therefore, the game does specify enemies, but does this specifically to each country, to not risk pointing out a common enemy defined as ‘bad’. By taking a neutral stance towards who is the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ side in the war, the game takes no political position in the historiographic debates on the First World War, and also does not endanger any of the playable positions in the multiplayer mode. Yet this could also mean that the actions of the playable character are not completely justified, as the enemy is not specifically ‘bad’. Still, as the stories are told from one perspective, this is not really the case. Although the game aims on a neutral representation, it also means it remains vague on defining what is good and bad, which could lead to the player filling in the gaps as was mentioned before. Therefore, the enemy of the playable position would still be ‘bad’, as it is the enemy, and it needs to be fought according to the campaign. Although this lets the neutrality aim become somewhat lessened, it is respectful on how the game itself does not take a side, and this could save it from criticism.

The playable positions

The aim for neutrality is continued in the representation of the playable positions. In fact, in the introduction campaign, which focuses in its narration specifically on the role of the soldiers in the war, does not highlight the heroic side of the soldiers but the human side.

‘But behind every gunsight is a human being. We are those people. We are the jaded and we are the naïve. We are the honorable and the criminal. We are the bound-for-legend and we are the lost-to-history. We are the knights of the sky, the ghosts of the desert, and the rats in the mud. These are our stories.’

In this, they stress the human side of the soldiers, they are not just puppets on the battlefield. Every statement is contrasted, as it says they are the honorable, and the criminal. The campaigns will not only show heroes, it recognizes that many of the soldiers were not entirely good either. Meanwhile, the campaign shows the humanity of the soldiers in a scene in which two enemy soldiers end up standing face to face with each other, gun directed to shoot. Yet when a sunbeam breaks through the rainy clouds, the soldiers both lower their guns in defeat and do not proceed in fighting each other.



Interestingly, this is also the only moment in which both the playable character's face and that of the enemy are shown in a neutral fashion. They both share the same look of defeat, both presenting the horror of futility of the war the introduction campaign aims on showing.



Between these two images, it is hard to distinguish the playable character and the enemy nothing but their uniforms differ them from each other. They are both the same as they share the same humanity. By highlighting the human side of the soldiers, the game contains a certain neutral perspective on the playable positions. Both sides are human, therefore they can be good, but can also make mistakes.

Nonetheless, the aim for neutrality is easily lost in the campaigns following the introduction. This is because these stories are still told by a specific perspective, as they are War Stories. Therefore, the themes of sacrifice and heroism are as mentioned before weaved through the narrative of the campaigns. The heroic character of these narratives is also as explained before due to the medium video games itself, as it often uses this narrative to give the player a feeling of empowerment. The same themes contribute in the portrayal of the playable positions, specifically the theme of heroism, to which sacrifice is closely connected. The heroic aspect of the representation is underlined by the closing message from the team of Battlefield 1, dedicated to those who served. It ends with 'When this

is all over and the war is won, they will remember us. But until that day comes, we will stand, we will look death in the eye, and we will fight!

Only one campaign risks placing the player in a controversial role, that of Clyde Blackburn in *Friends in High Places*. The character starts off as a gambler, who lies and steals his way through the Western front. The character is not shown positively, he is arrogant and tends to joke on inappropriate moments. He is in fact a criminal, but through the campaign he becomes a hero by doing good deeds for the war. In the campaign, his true nature is challenged as he promised his companion to bring him back whole, but when the moment comes he wants to leave him to die on the battlefield. The companion says: 'But you promised to get me back in one piece. What about medals? What about being heroes?' to which Blackburn replies with 'I'm no hero.' Yet in the end he does change his mind and saves his companion, while risking his own life. The campaign ends with Clyde Blackburn saying: 'And that's my story. A selfish man who risked his own life to save another, and in doing so, found he was saved himself.' This lets a controversial role, through a story of redemption, turn into a role decent to play, and once again portrayed heroically.

This overall positive representation of the playable positions lets the representation of the First World War become less neutral. Although this is a very logical step, as the stories are all War Stories, it lets *Battlefield 1* still positively portray one side of the war as all countries, and therefore all playable positions, are part of the Western Front. *Battlefield 1* has announced that the game will bring a new side of the war to the game in its expansion later in 2017: the Russian army of the Hussars. With this, the game makes a start with also representing the Eastern front in its portrayal, and could reach a more neutral image in which the protagonist is indeed portrayed as good, leading to the consensus that both sides were good, or at least, not bad.

Due to the personal involvement of the player, the medium of video games is forced to specify an enemy to let the playable position not become unmoral. Yet due to the campaigns as the foundation of the multiplayer mode of the game, the enemies cannot specifically be portrayed as 'bad'. The game has to specify enemies to remain playable, so therefore it does so while trying to represent each country neutrally. By doing so, and letting the player fill in the gaps, the playable positions are not endangered and the game does not risk criticism on taking a stance in a historiographical debate. Yet it loses this neutral position in displaying the playable positions, as it is also specific to a game to place the player in a heroic role. Hopefully, *Battlefield 1* can make a turn in this with the addition of the Eastern front in its portrayal that is promised to come later in an expansion. Although neutrality is not completely retained by *Battlefield 1*, its aim for neutrality is special for the representation of the First World War, as most media are not forced by their playable positions to not specify a 'good' and 'bad', they often do take a side in the war depending on the perception of the portrayed country. Yet through the diverse campaigns and their different perspectives on the war, the game could broaden the perception of the player on the First World War, and with that broaden their historical consciousness.

Conclusion

The First World War has been represented over and over again by different media throughout the past 104 years, with each representation adding to the popular memory to the war, and each medium leaving its own trace, shaping the image of how people believe the past would have been. Even though many stories are opposing each other and the representations are not 'historical accurate', they hold their importance as they are what shape the perception on the past in a postmemory. By representing the First World War, Battlefield 1 adds to this postmemory and takes part in the formation of the perception on the War. The war remains a treacherous subject to represent, as it has an inconsistent image, and a difficult history as a mournful war, with an uncertainly defined enemy to justify its losses. When represented through the medium of video games, the image of the medium as a playful medium, could influence the representation of the War as putting such a serious subject in a playful environment could lead to the trivialization of the subject. Battlefield 1 deals with the incorporation of this dark theme in two ways. Through the use of narrative and the personal involvement of the player, the game highlights the seriousness of the subject of the First World War. The horrors of the war, shown to confront the player on the subject, are balanced by themes of sacrifice and heroism, simultaneously empowering the player by participating in a heroic role. By highlighting the seriousness of the subject of the First World War, while balancing this dark theme with lighter themes like sacrifice and heroism, Battlefield 1 incorporates the dark theme of the War without trivializing it, while not losing its appeal to the player. Doing so, the game can catch the attention of the player, and call for an awareness on the subject of the First World War. Due to the personal involvement of the player, games are also forced to define a specific enemy to not let the playable position of the player become unmoral. Yet in a war without a specific 'good' and 'bad', defining an enemy becomes difficult. Because of this, Battlefield 1 holds on to a neutral representation on the countries of the First World War. Although this neutral stance is weakened by the preference of the Western Front as subject, and the heroic portrayal of the playable positions, the aim of neutrality in Battlefield 1 is interesting. This is not what most media have to do, as they do not experience the same problem of playable positions. Yet Battlefield 1 achieves through its aim for neutrality a representation of the War that shows its diversity in countries and perspectives, and shows that there was no specific 'good' and 'bad' side in the War. This broadens the perspective on the war and the historical consciousness of the player.

Due to the personal involvement of the player that distinguishes the medium video games from all other media, Battlefield 1 achieves a representation of the war that both calls for awareness to perceive the subject of the War as a serious, and sensitive memory, and broadens the historical perception of the player on the war. This involvement of the player is the specific strength of the medium in the formation of popular memory, as it includes the audience, and does not only tell history, but let them experience it personally. The representation of the First World War by Battlefield

1 proves that the medium of video games is capable of the representation of a serious subject, and can add to the popular memory of the War by letting the player experience the war, and with that, broaden their historical consciousness.

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