Review - This War of Mine

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11 bit studios, 2014

A grey-scaled sketch of a ruined building and a wall displaying the graffitied message 'Fuck the War' serves as the opening image of the gritty computer game *This War of Mine* (TWoM). It is representative of the game's sombre tone, enhanced by melancholic background music and sporadic gunfire. TWoM is a delicately drawn, two-dimensional, point and click game in which the player is in control of ordinary civilians in a warzone. The one key aim – survival.

Elements of Pogoren, the fictitious city in which the game takes place, resemble Sarajevo during the Bosnian war. About 5,000 civilians died during the Siege of Sarajevo, the longest siege in modern warfare, lasting nearly four years. Those who were trapped in the city had no tap water or electricity; they were constantly threatened by sniper fire and cut off from the outside world making food, fuel and medicine scarce. TWoM presents players with an insight into the difficulties ordinary citizens face trying to survive these conditions.

Each day is spent in an abandoned, damaged house which serves as a shelter from the elements and the dangers outside. The days are spent reinforcing this shelter, collecting water, cooking, brewing moonshine, crafting makeshift furniture and other essentials as well as the occasional comfort to make survival possible and, occasionally, slightly more bearable. When night falls, the shelter must be guarded. It is also possible to send someone on a scavenging trip to different parts of the city in the hope of finding valuable supplies or a potential trade. Even at night there is a risk of running into sniper fire or getting on the wrong side of a gang or solider.

Each of the characters has their own personal story, which is revealed throughout the game, along with different strengths, weaknesses, and worries. Marko, for example, a fireman before the war, has not seen his wife and two children for over three years. He is a valuable scavenger due to his ability to carry a lot back to the shelter. Emilia is a former lawyer and a coffee addict, good at boosting the morale of the others in the shelter.

Survival requires the careful management of scarce resources, such as fuel, medical supplies, food and water. This is often made more difficult by the potential for illness and injury, harsh winters and nightly raids on the shelter. There are cases when it might be more effective to let the characters go hungry for a day or two, allowing time to gain the extra resources required to make a more nutritious meal, or, instead of using fuel required to cook it might be used for heating or making moonshine. Some of the scenarios provide moral as well as strategic challenges, testing how far the player is willing to go to ensure the civilians' survival and comfort, or to put it more cynically, to complete the game. A character may have the opportunity to steal vital food and medical supplies though they belong to defenseless elderly neighbours or to fight or even kill other scavengers, militia members or soldiers.

The moral element is one of the most thought-provoking features of TWoM. When playing the game, our decision to save food rather than give it to a desperate, homeless man, played on our minds and affected the choices we made later in the game. Actions taken by one character also impact on the survival as well as the morale of the rest of the group. Helping a neighbour carry their injured brother home through potential sniper fire or helping them fix their shelter during the day can boost spirits or spark consternation. Characters may express their sympathy or desire to

help those they live with when they are ill or wounded. TWoM does not shy away from the harsh and often forgotten realities of living through war. For example, depression may set in making it difficult to get the character to engage in any activity, even eating. Ultimately, if unresolved, depression can result in suicide.

The format of the game encourages players to self-reflect and empathise with the uncomfortable situations the characters face (see Toma 2015) and so, presents a novel way of gaining some understanding of a civilian's perspective. It should also be noted that the game may not be as rewarding for those who prefer a more aggressive approach or are less empathetic or engaged with the moral elements of the game.

Although the creators did not intend for the game to act as a history lesson of a particular conflict, they did want the player to feel the pointlessness of war and to be able to resonate with civilians in conflict (Noack 2014). Despite the game's Eastern European feel, the conditions are arguably similar to those experienced recently in parts of Iraq, the Ukraine or Syria as well as the more historical setting of Warsaw during World War II (Hall 2015). Incorporating elements of recent conflicts into the game was a conscious approach by the developers. The game was tested by people who had experienced war themselves. One tester, Emir Cerimovic was nine years old during the Siege of Sarajevo. In the game's launch trailer he describes what it was like and tells the viewer that "it might happen to anyone. War always happens at somebody's doorstep."

Popular culture has been acknowledged as "a valuable site for opening up new ways of interrogating theory" (Robinson 2015: 450) and the number of studies examining popular culture and IR is slowly increasing (see the Popular Culture and IR blog on E-IR). However, in articles for E-IR, Grondin (2014) and Hitchens (2014) argue that popular culture is still dismissed by many IR scholars. Ciută (2015: 1) goes as far as calling this neglect "unsustainable and counterproductive". Computer games are one of the most prolific and lucrative elements of popular culture, yet it still remains almost completely left out of IR discourse. The few existing studies that *have* considered computer games tended to focus on first-person shooter war games. This is perhaps a reflection of the number and popularity of this particular type of war game, which tends to feature the player as a soldier (Toma 2015; Watson 2015) and in which civilians are usually portrayed as bystanders (Noack 2014) or remain altogether absent (Robinson 2015).

Considering the nature of these games, it has been suggested that some of them may act as "tools for conveying particular political messages" (see Hitchens 2014). For example, Leonard's (2014) research suggests that certain war games carry a message supporting US imperialism and the War on Terror. Others argue that certain games support the idea of American exceptionalism (Robinson 2015) or contribute to the 'military-entertainment complex' (i.e. the links between gaming, the weapons industry and the military) (Der Derian 2001).

TWoM stands in contrast with traditional war games by putting the civilians' (both, female and male) experience at the forefront. Its interactive format provides a method that is both creative and alternative in its depiction of the civilians' experience of war. It is exactly this side of war that is often overlooked in many forms of popular culture as well as IR discourse, which needs to be addressed. TWoM is a useful source for future IR analysis of popular culture. Indeed, the anti-war undertone to the game gives it the potential to function as a counter pedagogy of war (Toma 2015: 212). Byrd (2014) even suggests that "one could easily imagine it being incorporated into the classroom to function as an interactive supplement alongside books like 'All Quiet on the Western Front' or 'Dispatches'".

In order to complete TWoM, at least one of the civilians must survive the war, which is of an unknown length with variable and unpredictable difficulty throughout. The game is extremely engaging and, in a strange sense, enjoyable. Our experience of finishing a game of TWoM did not result in the usual satisfaction you would expect. Instead, it left us pondering the misery caused by war, and the pointlessness of the suffering created by it.

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