Life on the Battlefield: Reframing the Domestic Experience of War in *This War of Mine*

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Abstract. This chapter considers the ways that feminist war games disrupt the procedural biases played out through the mechanics and narrative of traditional war games. Eschewing the masculine power fantasy, *This War of Mine* shifts its experience of war to the margins of the battlefield. House examines how the game's ludo-stylistics invert the emotional suppression of the classic *Kriegs-Spiel* to reframe popular conceptions of war by focusing on the lives of civilians in a war-torn city and engendering empathy for those Judith Butler calls "un-grievables." Through this example, House argues that feminist war games can enable players to envision war from the margins and empower them to imagine a world without it.

1 Introduction

Writing in the 1980s amid debates concerning the admittance of women into combat positions within the armed forces, Genevieve Lloyd challenges the conventional notions of the inherent masculinity of war – rhetoric adopted even by some feminist peace groups at the time – by explicating the conceptual relationship between war and citizenship in Western philosophical thought. She posits that war as it is conceived allows men to transcend self-interest and fear of death in order to attain a higher, sublime form of selfhood that must be, as this line of reasoning goes, intrinsically masculine:

> The masculinity of war is what it is precisely by leaving the feminine behind. It consists in the capacity to rise above what femaleness symbolically represents: attachment to private concerns, to 'mere life'. In leaving all that behind, the soldier becomes a real man, but he also emerges into the glories of selfhood, citizenship and truly ethical, universal concerns. (Lloyd 75)

Throughout the roughly 30-year interim between Lloyd's chapter and this one, there is ample evidence of these ideas continuing to shape the social construction of gender through representations of war in media. Narratives of war in video games, for instance, typically focus on the hyper-masculine experiences of war, presenting the player with a power fantasy in which they assume either the role of the hero single-handedly combatting an onslaught of enemy forces or that of a master tactician strategically deploying

troops from the perspective of the General-god, all in the pursuit of an ideologically-righteous goal. These depictions of war frame life as existing in one of two ways: either as a subject who exists to inflict death upon others or as objects to be killed.

This War of Mine, a 2014 game inspired by real events such as the siege of Sarajevo, breaks from this tradition of heroic individualism. In it, players assume the collective role of a group of civilians trapped within a fictionalized war-torn, besieged city who must work together to survive their precarious situation. To create as authentic an experience as possible, 11 Bit studios, the game's developer and publisher, researched survivors' accounts of armed conflicts such as the Bosnian War (1992-1996), the First Chechen War (1994-1996), the Kosovo War (1998-1999), the Syrian Civil War (2011-ongoing), and others (Kwiatkowski 2016, p. 693). These accounts emphasized the extent to which people relied upon closely knit groups to survive living within war zones, and the developers chose to underscore this communal aspect in the gameplay (Ibid., p. 694). Players control a group of characters with unique backstories, personalities, and skills, such as being a good cook, a skilled trader, or a fast runner, who must work together to survive for a randomly determined amount of time until a "cease fire" is declared. Because they represent the often-unseen ramifications of war, these characters epitomize what Judith Butler (2010, p. 31) calls "ungrievable lives," or "populations [that] can be forfeited, precisely because they are framed as being already lost or forfeited," and the game's "perma-death" mechanic underlines the precariousness of their lives. Once a character dies, they are gone for the remainder of the game, and their absence makes survival for the group that much harder. Through its narrative and representation of domestic responsibility, *This War of Mine* reframes the experience of war from a hyper-masculine glorification of violence and death to a meditation on communal survival and the challenges of non-violence in the face of violence.

Frames are a particularly useful metaphor for discussing this game's depiction of war, as its environments are presented in the style of a dollhouse-like cutaway. Characters are often literally framed within their domestic roles as the player deploys them to cook food, construct beds and tools, or scan radio frequencies for news from the outside world. The destabilization of life in a war-zone disrupts traditional gendered notions of the division of domestic labor and social order. Likewise, characters are framed within their individual narratives, beginning with a backstory of their lives before the war and developing throughout the game as players navigate the difficult decisions they're presented with and contend with the consequences of those choices. In this reframing of war from the battlefield to the realm of "mere life", *This War of Mine* enables players to consider the human subjects that are often excised from the frames imposed by traditional portrayals of armed conflict.

2 [Image]ining War

War, in the popular imagination, is a quintessential rite of passage into manhood, and this idea is reinforced through most depictions of war and the military in popular culture. Images of the stoic commander boldly and decisively leading his men to battle and of brave, loyal soldiers dutifully holding the line are for many the perfect ideal of

masculinity. Although many portrayals attempt to depict the horrors of combat, war remains a privileged space for boys to be tested and for men to achieve glory.

Participating in a war, or at least the *fantasy* of participating in a war, takes on a meaning that is somewhat divorced from its geopolitical causes. It becomes not unlike a team sport in which one seeks to best the other team through steadfast teamwork and individual heroics. In their book *Reel Men at War: Masculinity and the American War Film*, Donald and MacDonald describe the significance of sports and war on the construction of masculinity through a discussion of the shared code of behaviors between both activities. Both privilege teamwork, of course, and emphasize trusting others to do their job as well as sacrificing oneself for the good of the collective, or "taking one for the team." Similarly, maintaining a dispassionate and professional temperament while undertaking one's duty is not only imperative to success, but to being a real man as well. Emotion taints rational thinking, as this line of reasoning goes, and in order to win, one must act as boldly and decisively as a man. Winning is characteristic of masculinity while "male norms classify losing as lacking sufficient male hormones …, and it is classed as equal only to the female" (31-32). Thus, to maintain one's maleness, it is imperative to win at all costs.

Emotions, then, are an obstacle to be overcome on the path to manliness and victory. In a chapter on the history of maps in wargames, Anders Engberg-Pedersen writes that such games can be thought of as emotional technologies, or "a means to manage and train the emotions for the actual experience on the battlefield" (60). To illustrate this process, he begins with an account of the presentation to the Prussian army of *Kriegs-Spiel*, a wargame played upon a topographical map on which players "could practice the complex skill of moving their corps across an actual terrain at both a tactical and strategic scale" (60). Surprised by its evident utility, one general reportedly proclaimed, "That is no ordinary game, that is a war school" (59). Engberg-Pedersen posits that by "inviting players to project themselves into the representation, the map … constructs a simulation that transforms passive spectators into active agents and allows them to live vicariously a life of passions and emotions across the flatness of its surface" (Ibid., p. 60). It allows the player to experience the emotions of the battlefield through simulations of randomness and danger that must be overcome through measured reasoning. Military tactics, maneuvers, and contingencies can be premeditated, taught, and trained for in advance, "thereby transform[ing] warfare into a rational endeavor subject to simulation, planning, testing, and control" (Ibid., p. 65). As Engberg-Pedersen explains, "the wargame is a technology for keeping violent emotions flat and reducing their intensity: fear is tempered, emotional heat reduced to coolness" (Ibid., p. 70).

Engberg-Pedersen ends the chapter with a discussion of two contemporary projects: STRIVE (*Stress Resilience in Virtual Environments*) and VRET (*Virtual Reality Exposure Therapy*). These projects immerse "users in a virtual combat zone and expos[e] them … to a traumatic incident such as the death of a child or the loss of a comrade … to offer an emotional inoculation …. to gradually lower the emotional response" (72). The potential of digital games as emotional technology is unprecedented because they render immediate the violence and stress of war that prior media have only been able to present indirectly through the user's imagination. Although much has been said on the ability of the affective power of games to strengthen interpersonal relationships,

Engberg-Pedersen warns that the effectiveness of these new wargames at eliminating our innate fears of war may one day "remove a dimension of human experience that is fundamental to preventing that war becomes anything other than the action of last resort" (73).

Indeed, most video games about war glorify the battlefield by offering players the opportunity to embody the hero in a militaristic power fantasy. The *Call of Duty* franchise, for instance, allows players to virtually take part in World War II, the Vietnam War, and fictionalized versions of modern wars through the point-of-view of an army-of-one, blasting through enemy troops to secure a checkpoint or rescue someone. These types of games reinforce the hyper-masculine values traditionally associated with war by allowing players to enact them. When teammates are present, they are typically relegated to little more than decoration – the AIs are designed to appear to be fighting alongside the player, but usually just fire wildly in the general direction of the enemies. The glory is reserved for the player who must move from behind cover to brazenly advance on the enemy and to accomplish the objective against seemingly great odds. Ironically, the immediacy of these images of war may actually undermine our ability to form lasting, meaningful readings of them. Jan Mieszkowski argues that our contemporary mediascape, in which anyone from a drone pilot to a bystander to can capture and upload images of conflict that can then be viewed by virtually everyone on Earth, is double-edged. While its democratization circumvents authoritative discourses of the "theater of war," its proliferation also potentially separates images from their original context. Cell-phone footage of IEDs exploding may be recontextualized as a viral internet video, for instance, that one sees repeated on morning news shows. Mieszkowski posits that through this contextually-isolated method of spectatorship:

> a curiously self-reflexive public discourse has emerged in which the stories being told about warfare focus as much on the unique ways in which its audiences process -- or fail to process -- it as on the violent events themselves. Whereas previous generations worried about the dangers of aestheticizing warfare and treating mass destruction as a beautiful phenomenon, today we are more at risk of aestheticizing the technical prowess of our communicative media…. (194)

Mieszkowski contends that our ability to view war directly has not resulted in any greater understanding of war, but rather has caused an increasingly sophisticated scrutiny for what looks (and thereby is) real in our war media. Furthermore, any "experience" of war derived from games like *Call of Duty* is yet another step removed from this process of what Mieszkowski calls "the spectacle of the spectacle" because these games are representations based on prior representations that are themselves based upon those first-hand, subjective viewpoints of a phenomenon that is practically unrepresentable (Ibid., p. 194). Yet when presented with a verisimilitudinous virtual representation of the storming of Normandy's beaches on D-Day, it is tempting to bestow upon the experience a level of gravitas equivalent to that of the actual events in the

minds of players. With the potential to change how we perceive the experience of war that these emotional technologies present, perhaps more effort should be made to portray a wider range of discourses than might and glory.

3   Reframing the Image

Images of war are framed not only within their context, but by the subjects that capture them. These embedded perspectives can easily be mistaken as a sense of objective immediacy, or an unconstructed reality. In her book *Frames of War*, Judith Butler discusses how these representations establish norms for the "recognizability" of life, that is, how those norms enable us to recognize a being as a life or as not-a-life. Butler claims that, in this way, all life is precarious because of the dependency on others to recognize one's life as life and, furthermore, the conditions for that recognition are constantly shifting. Yet, rather than finding common ground in this shared condition of precariousness, "each body finds itself potentially threatened by others who are, by definition, precarious as well" (31). This inevitably leads to:

> a specific exploitation of targeted populations, of lives that are not quite lives, cast as 'destructible' and 'ungrievable.' Such populations are 'lose-able' or can be forfeited, precisely because they are framed as being already lost or forfeited; they are cast as threats to human life as we know it rather than as living populations in need of protection from illegitimate state violence, famine, or pandemics. Consequently, when such lives are lost they are not grievable, since, in the twisted logic that rationalizes their death, the loss of such populations is deemed necessary to protect the lives of 'the living'.

To illustrate these embedded frames, Butler writes of the use of "embedded reporting" during the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq as an example. During this time, journalists were allowed to accompany military units under the condition that the military could dictate what was to be reported. Thus, the military created its own narrative of the war by establishing the frames around which U.S. civilians understood the actions undertaken by the military and the deaths on both sides that resulted from those actions (64). Just as the abstraction of the rules of war in a wargame function to temper the emotions of one in the midst of battle, these established parameters of representation propagandize emotional responses to the acts of war for those back home.

    This formulated, yet fragmented perception of war correlates with Angela Davis' (19) claim of the "unrepresentability of war in the United States," which has not seen a war within its own borders since the mid-1800's. To live as a civilian in modern America, then, is to have only a mediated knowledge of war that is always situated elsewhere – a knowledge framed through distance and entertainment and news media. Davis argues that in order to redress this often incomplete knowledge, we need to emphasize

"certain habits of perception, certain habits of imagination"(26) that empower us to "remake the world so that it is better for its inhabitants" (20) into a world without war. One small step on the road to this utopian idea may be to rethink our use of the emotional technology of the wargame.

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

This War of Mine is unique to the wargame genre because it reframes the experience of war by moving away from the soldiers fighting in battle to focus on noncombatants' struggle for survival. The title alone suggests a personalization of global conflicts – it removes the experience of war from geopolitical affairs and places it squarely in the realm of everyday life. Initially released in November 2014 by 11 Bit Studios, the game has garnered a reputation for its ability to put players in uncomfortable situations that asks them to endure the precariousness of living within a battle zone. It does this through the genre of a survival strategy game, where players take on the role of a group of civilians as they attempt to survive in a war-torn city by scavenging for food, medical supplies, and materials to improve their shelter. Players must often make decisions that affect not only the player-characters but also the various NPCs that they encounter, such as stealing food from neighbors to feed themselves. As one reviewer said of the game, "it's not much fun to actually play. It'll make you feel terrible about your actions at almost every turn. But in spite of all that, there is something so essential about this gaming experience that I urge you to give this game a try" (Lange). This turn away from the goal of producing "fun" entertainment to instead edifying players through perspectives other than their own perhaps situates *This War of Mine* closer to didactic wargames such as *Kriegs-Spiel* than to *Call of Duty*.

Interestingly, where the map of the *Kriegs-Spiel* provides an overview of its game space to teach aspiring generals to control their emotions, the close-up and intimate play space of *This War of Mine*, situated as it is within the domestic realm, enhances its potential for emotional realism. Although the gameplay strongly resembles real-time strategy (RTS) games, the change of the player's point of view from a bird's-eye-view to ground level reframes their perception of their actions from the general on the battlefield to the denizen of the domestic space – they cease deploying units to secure resources and begin to enact a collective in its pursuit of shared goals. The game's space, presented from a side-view angle, allows a close proximity of the characters and the shelter they share. The designers modeled the characters on real people, using photo-realistic images on the character tabs and animating their movements with motion-capture. These design choices demonstrate the impetus to "humanize the experience of war. Players' resources were named *our things* instead of the typical *inventory* found in other war games. Also, the character's health status was displayed with the terms of affect (i.e., sad, depressed) instead of a numerical indication" (de Smale et al. 14). Ideally, the "realisticness" of the game decreases the instrumental, strategic model of gameplay for players. So, while players may still call on a character to complete a task much like one would deploy a squadron in a RTS game, they may be less likely to reduce her worth to a utility in the playspace. Players remain

narratively associated with the point of view of the collective that itself depends on the interpersonal relationships within it. This group coherence is reinforced through the game's systems, such as when sadness affects a character's ability to perform various responsibilities, and its semiotic domain, as described in the quote above.

Despite this resistance to the player's abstraction of game rules, the designers still very much privilege emergent stories created through the player's interaction with the game's systems over a plot-driven narrative. Gameplay is divided into two phases, day and night. During the day, players are confined to the house by sniper fire and must use this time to attend to characters' basic needs, such as eating, resting, and treating wounds. Kacper Kwiatkowski, a writer and story designer on the development team, explains that the limited "choice of activities available for the player during this phase reflects how the lives of people during such events [are] frequently reduced to minimal, primitive forms, where even satisfying basic human needs becomes a challenge" (696). From these challenges arise narrative details that slowly start to form a story. For instance, if a player's group is running short on food, decisions must be made as to who will be fed and who will have to wait for more food to be found. As characters go without food, their behavior (and playable actions) may begin to change; they may start moving more slowly, or it may take them longer to complete tasks. Hunger may be compounded by fatigue and/or sadness, which will exacerbate the effects. In this phase, players must attend to the characters' physical and psychological needs, and both success and failure at these tasks will result in narrative moments. During the "night" phase, players may choose to send characters out of the safety of the shelter to scavenge for supplies, assign them to guard the shelter, or allow them to rest. Kwiatkowski highlights the importance of the emergent narrative to the player's experience:

> A freedom to make one's own decisions is an essential part of the game experience and affects most of its aspects. The player decides whose needs come first among the group. They choose the places to visit for supplies and the way in which they acquire them. It is possible to approach other characters in a variety of ways, including trading, violence, scaring them off, helping them, or just ignoring them. The game does not prompt the player to do one thing instead of another. (697)

This ambivalence of the game's system to the decisions of the player underscores its usefulness as an emotional technology. Rather than presenting the player with the arbitrary "sliding scale of morality," the game acknowledges the impossible situation that the characters find themselves in – there rarely are right answers in this world, and that is very much the point. Players must make whatever decision is available and live with the consequences, weighing the morality of their actions for themselves.

An example of this occurred in a recent playthrough of mine. The well-being of my group was quickly deteriorating after having not been able to find food for several days. I decided it was worth the risk to send Katia, a reporter before the war who is

skilled in trading, to a military-controlled supermarket to scavenge for supplies. She was sure to find some food, and with everyone nearing starvation, what choice did I have? During the excursion, Katia was shot by an armed soldier and severely wounded. Although she made it home, she was unable to return with food, so the trip had been in vain. Lacking the necessary medical supplies to treat her, I chose to send Bruno, a former professional cook and my only other survivor, to the home of an elderly couple I had encountered earlier in the game. On the first trip, I had decided to leave the couple alone, leaving their food and medicine behind. This time, however, I could not afford this kindness. As the elderly man begs for me to leave his wife's medicine, Bruno quickly snatches what he can and returns home to Katia. As Bruno walks through the door, I learn that we are too late; Katia had died while Bruno was away. Bruno, now alone, is distraught at the death of his comrade and haunted by the memories of the elderly couple pleading for their lives. His status changes to "Broken", and after two more days, he hangs himself. Game over.

This vignette is an example of the sort of hard questions this game asks of its players. When in an impossible situation, what would you choose to do? In this playthrough, the precariousness of my characters' lives reframed the lives of the elderly couple as forfeit, despite the earlier decision to treat them as fellow survivors who should be left alone. Rather than prescribing this morality lesson to me, the procedurality of the game's mechanics allowed me to come into the situation myself that would lead to my undertaking of this impossible problem. The game functioned counter to typical wargames like the *Kriegs-Spiel* – instead of flattening the emotional responses to war, it expands them, causing the player to reflect on decisions made in terms of their human impact.

5   From the Ashes of War

In her book *Tactical Media*, Rita Raley (98) discusses the efficacy of games and digital media to disrupt nationalistic, networked accounts of war through their ability to depict "the experience of atrocity 'over there'". She argues that these virtual experiences "have acquired a representational authority, and the cultural knowledge they produce has the authority of the real" (70). This representational authority can be particularly problematic when ascribed to masculine power fantasies of war, such as if a player's political ideology becomes informed primarily through their experience of playing a *Call of Duty* game. The framing of these super-soldier simulations, often encased within a 1st-person perspective, crop any emotions that do not fit into the fantasy, such as fear, guilt, or doubt. Moreover, they prohibit consideration for lives or experiences on the periphery. These games present themselves as objective perspectives while simultaneously projecting their own interpretation onto the depicted images.

This War of Mine represents a break from these traditional representations of war by shifting the focus away from the hypermasculinized glory of the battlefield to the mundane realm of "mere-life." This reframing confronts the objective immediacy that often goes unquestioned in popular portrayals of war by offering alternative narratives of wartime experience. The game achieves this reframing in large part through a

reconfiguration of the wargame's play space – by substituting an area of domestic co-operation for the arena of armed conflict. In this space, the actions of the characters are framed within the context of precarity, not heroics, and players must adopt a playstyle that matches this situation. Unlike other strategy war games, *This War of Mine* resists the player's abstraction of the game's rules and systems. It accomplishes this through design choices that encourage players to empathize with the characters rather than viewing them as deployable units. Finally, players are afforded the ability to make meaningful choices through their interaction with the game's systems, and these choices and their consequences build the narrative of the game and strengthen the player's emotional connection to the characters.

By situating its play space within the domestic realm while society at large collapses outside, *This War of Mine* allows its mechanics to disrupt preconceived notions of the structures of power. Players assign tasks to characters based not on traditional gendered divisions of labor, but by the aptitude of the characters to carry out the task or by simple necessity whether that be caring for children, engineering a filter for rainwater, or the manual labor of removing rubble. This act of communal survival, of simply continuing to exist, interrupts the inevitability of patriarchy as the de facto social structure as an inherently political act. This experience is one that only a feminist wargame could provide – a reframing of the experience of war through a disruption of the masculine and feminine spaces of life to lead us to consider new ways of living.

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