

Battlefield 1 and war video games: Old lies for a new generation

By Carlos Delgado
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The video games industry has grown tremendously in recent years. The industry claimed \$91 billion in revenue in 2016 alone, eclipsing worldwide ticket sales for the film industry, which were worth \$38.6 billion that same year. According to a report by the Entertainment Software Association, there are an estimated 1.8 billion video game players worldwide. In the United States, four out of five households own a device used to play video games, and 42 percent of Americans play video games three hours or more per week.

The numbers rise even further for young people. According to the Pew Research Center, 72 percent of US teenagers play video games, including 84 percent of teenage boys.

The rapid spread of the video game phenomenon, the impact it has had on young people and the various artistic and technological issues involved are all topics that deserve further analysis. One aspect of this phenomenon deserves special attention, however: the proliferation of propagandistic war video games.

Recent years have seen a deluge of video games set in real or imagined war zones. One need only peruse some of the titles to get a sense of the material: *Gears of War*, *Warface*, *Sniper: Ghost Warrior*, *Rising Storm: Vietnam*, *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon*, *Sniper Elite*, *Verdun*, *Medal of Honor*, *Bulletstorm*, *Total War*, *Hearts of Iron*, *Homefront*, and the particularly dreadful *Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare*.

These games span a variety of genres and platforms, but they are virtually united in their glorification of militarism and conflict, their fetishistic (one could say pornographic) obsession with military hardware, and their enthusiastic support for the ugliest and most naked forms of chauvinism. A number of games have players invading and waging war against targets in the Middle East, North Korea, Russia and elsewhere.

Increasingly, the war planners at the head of the state are using video games as direct propaganda devices. The US Army has developed a game, *America's Army: Proving Grounds*, which it uses as a virtual recruitment tool. The

makers *Call of Duty* franchise are known to have close ties to Pentagon officials.

One of the highest-selling franchises of war video games is the *Battlefield* series, developed by Swedish game studio EA DICE and published by Electronic Arts. The series' various entries have depicted, among other things, a US invasion of Iran, a war between the US and China, and a "war on drugs" where the player assumes the role of a police officer armed with military-grade weaponry.

The newest entry in the series is *Battlefield 1*, set during the First World War. In the best of circumstances, any video game attempting to treat such a conflict would be faced with tremendous historical and artistic, not to mention technological, difficulties. As it is, *Battlefield 1* presents a highly romanticized version of the war, replete with hundred-year-old lies about the war's nature and the actions of the various countries involved.

Like previous *Battlefield* games, *Battlefield 1* puts players in control of a character through a first-person perspective, in order to better facilitate the aiming and firing of weapons. The single-player component of the game is centered on five main "war stories": "Through Mud and Blood" depicts a British tank crew breaking through German defenses during the 1918 Battle of Cambrai; "Friends in High Places" follows an American pilot battling German dogfighters; "Avanti Savoia" depicts an Italian offensive to seize an Austro-Hungarian fortress; "The Runner" follows an Australian message runner during the Gallipoli Campaign in Turkey; "Nothing is Written" centers on a young Bedouin woman battling Ottoman forces alongside T.E. Lawrence (aka Lawrence of Arabia).

In terms of narrative, the stories are poorly done. There is a significant disparity between the painstaking effort put into the technical-visual aspects of the game and the shoddy, slapdash quality of the writing. Despite purporting to depict an array of people from different parts of the world, fighting in battles far flung across the Eurasian continent, the characters end up being indistinct and practically interchangeable.

Occasionally a character will comment, briefly, on the horrific circumstances of the war, but such talk is quickly superseded by the need to race to the next military objective. The war itself is never questioned, merely accepted as some kind of tragic, yet unavoidable occurrence, like a natural disaster.

Whatever flimsy characterization exists centers almost entirely on personal and familial relationships. The heavily armored protagonist of “Avanti Savoia,” who mows down Austro-Hungarian soldiers by the dozens, is racing to save his twin brother from enemy fire. The tank crew in “Through Mud and Blood” must set aside their personal squabbles and join together to fend off the enemy. The effect is to reinforce the notion that the soldiers (who, in the single-player narratives, are all on the Allied side of the war) are “heroic,” even if their heroism is linked to personal relationships rather than national or political objectives.

Insofar as the stories ever hint at any larger reality, it’s always to reaffirm the essential “goodness” of the war. The grizzled Australian officer in “The Runner” chastises a young soldier for seeking fun and adventure in the “hell on earth” of Gallipoli, but the closing onscreen message claims that “For the first time, Australians and New Zealanders fought under their own flag. Tales of heroism and mateship were pivotal in forging their national identities.”

As for Lawrence of Arabia, who represented the interests of British imperialism on the Arabian peninsula, he is depicted as a charming, handsome and courageous young leader with the best interests of the oppressed Arabs at heart. The closing message claims that he “remains a figure of controversy,” and notes without comment that “The war for oil continues to this day.”

The gameplay itself is mostly shrill and repetitive. Players gun down hordes of faceless enemy soldiers, race to an objective, capture it, and repeat. Occasionally there are “stealth” sections where players must sneak about undetected, which are somewhat more tense and interesting. For variety’s sake, the game designers include sections in tanks and airplanes, but the loud, continual mayhem has a numbing effect.

The combat manages to be both highly violent and strangely sanitized. Soldiers erupt in gouts of blood upon being shot, but there is nothing that approaches the disturbing descriptions of dismemberment, starvation and disease from Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

The game designers put a far greater effort into building the game’s visual landscape, which, it should be said, is technically stunning, reflecting the tremendous advancements in graphics technology that video games have made in recent years. The player will traverse, at various

times, forests blanketed in thick, soupy fog where the hazy outlines of soldiers patrol like ghosts; muddy, ruined fields teeming with rats, where rows of blackened tree trunks stick out of the earth like gravestones; bright, punishing deserts stretching off into the horizon with scorched sand dunes and shimmering heat waves.

Yet, even these flourishes have the effect of imbuing the war with a romantic character. The visual splendor, the orchestral soundtrack and the virtual landscapes all reinforce the notion that the war was something remarkable, epic, even beautiful, despite (or because of) the tremendous loss of life.

The multiplayer component of the game, where players from around the world fight each other over the Internet, is a bit more interesting. Players divide up into randomly assigned teams to battle each other in various different game types.

The games are occasionally exciting, largely due to the antics of the other players. When one turns on the in-game voice chat, one can hear a variety of languages, accents and dialects. Despite *Battlefield 1*’s fetishization of nationalist war, the actual player base intermingles internationally, with players from all over the world joining each other’s teams and playing side-by-side.

Though a violent video game isn’t exactly the healthiest atmosphere for social interaction, this reviewer generally found the other players to be friendly young men and women, interested in talking to one another and learning about life in each other’s region or country.

Conspicuously absent from *Battlefield 1* is any mention of the Russian Revolution, the event that ultimately brought the war to an end. In fact, the game hardly mentions Russia at all. This will change this fall when EA DICE releases a downloadable add-on for the game entitled “In the Name of the Tsar.” This add-on, timed to coincide with the centenary of the October revolution, will have players fighting on behalf of the Russian Empire.

Though the developers have not yet announced a game mode where players are instructed to slaughter Bolsheviks, at this point it would hardly be surprising.

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