

Chapter 6

War and Play: Insensitivity and Humanity in the Realm of Pushbutton Warfare

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ABSTRACT

This chapter argues for a game design ethic for war game production and the development of games that produce a more realistic and conscientious critique of warfare, defined as antiwar and conscientious war games. Given the medium's preponderance toward narratives and simulations of military conflict, there are surprisingly few works that seriously examine its consequences. This chapter surveys and critiques several existing antiwar and conscientious war games and examines design problems associated with exploring antiwar narratives. It concludes with an exploration of areas in which both new antiwar games can be developed and existing war games can be modified to produce conscientious messages about war. Artists and designers should have a vested interest in producing antiwar games to both enrich the medium and improve society by inspiring audiences to seek alternatives to conflict.

INTRODUCTION

Ludic wars are black and white—1s and 0s. They shallowly depict war as a necessary and normalized struggle (King & Leonard, 2010, p.102) between good and evil without questioning the nature of that depiction or the mechanism that communicates it. The presence of such narratives becomes problematic due to lack of dialectic—voices countering or questioning this overarching

statement and its monolithic moral system are rare, particularly when compared with propagandistic recruitment tools such as *America's Army* (2002). Whereas film's John Rambo has his *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), videogames have no voice to put the pain of soldiers and tears of widows into context. How can we hope to investigate these problems in games of pushbutton warfare where the basic underlying mechanics enforce military objectives enacted by firepower and strategy? How can the value of human life be calculated and the gravity

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of one's actions understood when the only two outcomes are win and lose, 1 and 0?

Miguel Sicart (2009) defines games as ethical because they contain values embedded in their systems either by accident or design that affect player experience. It is therefore important for designers to understand the effects of decisions made during the design process. Such a philosophy is concerned with how users interact with a system, whether by limiting a game's number of save slots to one on a *Pokemon* cartridge or how a game's rules, or mechanics, define how its moral and ethical systems are framed for players. The purpose of design ethics is therefore to consider user experience and the effects of decisions made. Thus, an ethics of design for war games involves the awareness of the effects design decisions have on the models, interpretations, and moral systems of war that players encounter and generate through play experience.

It is ethically important for game designers to consider such issues because as creators of products that may be consumed by audiences measured in the millions, designers control the moral structure of works that have the potential to positively or negatively influence player perceptions about warfare. War is prevalent in games because conflict is both inherent to games (Crawford, 2003; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004), and violent conflict is easy to depict (Crawford, 2003). War games—that is, games depicting war—are important morally because their value systems shape how audiences understand and frame military conflict. This in turn may influence how audiences understand real-world conflicts and react to new conflicts developing in contested spaces.

We should establish a design ethics for war games by developing antiwar games and reflecting their lessons in war game design. Doing so will help designers express their values regarding war and present players with opportunities to enact constructive and reflective dialogue within those systems.

This chapter investigates the ethical systems of games about war and how they may be re-structured as a dialectic and human response to military conflict. Through a historical comparison and analysis of representations of war in games with those of conscientious and antiwar games, this chapter seeks to define methods for integrating antiwar messages to provide a more complete image of war that remains compelling enough to engage players while addressing problems in antiwar rhetoric.

WAR GAMES

Games have depicted war for centuries in nearly every genre from the combat vehicle simulator (*Army Battlezone*, 1981) to card games (*Echelons of Fire*, 1995). They may be specifically about war, as in a military first-person shooter (FPS) such as *Medal of Honor* (1999) or like Chess may only abstractly represent conflict. War games may depict historical wars, speculative future wars, fictional wars, or the wars of fantasy and science fiction; the wars may be abstract or naturalistic. Even a game of Tic-Tac-Toe can be considered a fierce battle of territorial control and all the militarist and colonialist narratives it implies. With the invention of *kriegsspiel* in the early 19th Century, games have also been used as simulations and training for warriors, and most recently as recruitment tools, a history concisely described by Ed Halter (2005).

War games present simplified artificial warfare in a safe environment for the sake of entertainment or simulation. Their rules, or mechanics, are usually limited to operating a weapon, battlefield strategy, and logistics of resource management. From Checkers to *Call of Duty*, war games enable participation in fictional combat and little else, presenting false or over-simplified representations of warfare that paradoxically conflict with reality while simultaneously advertising realism. Identifying these characteristics, even if not in

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