

# Depicting the Despicable

World War I in contemporary video games

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## Introduction

In November 2018 it was 100 years ago that the last whistle blew over the battlefields of World War One, also referred to as the Great War, and with it, the armistice took effect. This put an end to a four-year-long conflict that introduced the world to the horrific possibilities of the modern age. It is a conflict that is still alive in pop-culture today. In *To End All Wars* author and historian Adam Hochschild ponders why this war is still alive in the memory of twenty-first century society. One of the reasons he offers is the disparity between what people thought the war would be and what it came to be.<sup>1</sup> Historian Jay Winter, in his introduction to *The Great War and Modern Memory*, argues that we as a society, need filters to be able to comprehend war. “[War] is simply too frightful, too chaotic, too arbitrary, too bizarre, too uncanny a set of events and images to grasp directly”.<sup>2</sup>

These filters, or frames, do more than just enable us to grasp the realities of war: they distort them. It is important to understand exactly how these frames represent a war. This is mainly because, as literary scholar Martin Löschnigg points out, these representations of war are “telling and showing us as much about the period in which they were produced as about the reality and significance of the past military conflict”.<sup>3</sup> Thus when we interact with the contemporary representations of the Great War, we are reaffirmed in our own ideas of what the War was. To further show the importance of understanding how stories frame the Great War, consider the idea of a ‘prosthetic memory’. This is a concept put forth by historian and art-historian Alison Landsberg. According to her, “Mass culture makes particular memories more widely available, so that people who have no “natural” claim to them might nevertheless incorporate them into their own archive of experience”.<sup>4</sup> This means that these stories about the Great War, which are strongly influenced by our contemporary ideas of what war is, become part of the prosthetic memory of the people who hear it. This is why we need to study the frames that are being used in popular media about the Great War.

Because of the growing academic appreciation for the medium of video games, and my personal interest in them, I have chosen to analyse video games. This medium also adds a dimension to the stories that are told, for in video games the stories are not passively consumed, but acted out. Theatre scholar David Mason wrote about the difference in emotional response between video games and other, more passively consumed, forms of art. In his article “Video Games, Theatre, and the Paradox of Fiction” Mason argues that because video games are becoming bigger, more cinematic and more complex, the emotional investment of the player deepens.<sup>5</sup> This is not only because of the complexity, but more importantly because of the control over the main character of a video game.<sup>6</sup> The emotional investment is so strong that Mason concludes with: “Doing may, in fact, be being”.<sup>7</sup> What Mason’s argument means is that the effect of prosthetic memory could be

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<sup>1</sup> Hochschild, Adam. *To End All Wars*. P.xvi.

<sup>2</sup> Winter, Jay. *The Great War and Modern Memory*. P.X.

<sup>3</sup> Löschnigg, Martin. *The Great War in Post-Memory Literature and Film*. P.11.

<sup>4</sup> Landsberg, Alison. *Prosthetic Memory*. P.9.

<sup>5</sup> Mason, David. “Video Games, Theatre, and the Paradox of Fiction”. P.1111.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem. P.1118.

<sup>7</sup> Idem.

greater when the story is consumed as a video game, rather than through a more passive medium, for instance, a book.

### *Case Studies*

I have selected three video games for my thesis. They are all narrative-driven, or have a narrative-driven 'game mode' within them. I have excluded games that focussed on large-scale military narratives, stories of entire armies for instance. This basically means that I have excluded all strategy games. This is because I wanted to focus on the stories of the soldiers in the trenches, not the generals far behind the lines. I have also chosen contemporary games: games that came out within the centennial of the Great War. The first game I chose was *11-11: Memories Retold* (2018). The game has a very unique art style that was animated by Aardman Animations, the studio that is most famous for the claymations of *Wallace and Gromit* (1989-2008) and *Chicken Run* (2000). For *11-11* they chose to animate the game as if it were an impressionist painting. It is the most recent game of the three and was created by DigiArts under the direction of Yoan Fanise. He also directed the second game on my list: *Valiant Hearts: the Great War* (2014). *Valiant Hearts* was released onto most contemporary platforms: PlayStation 3 and 4, Xbox 360 and One, PC, Android, IOS, and the Nintendo Switch. The other two games are only released on PlayStation 4, Xbox One, and PC. The last game is *Battlefield 1* (2016). This game has sold over 25 million copies worldwide and still has an active multiplayer community.<sup>8</sup> It was developed by EA Dice under the direction of Stefan Strandberg.

Using these case studies I will answer the question: How do contemporary narrative video games frame the memory of The First World War? In order to answer this, I will combine the fields of memory studies and game studies. Within the field of memory studies, I will rely on "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire" by historian Pierre Nora. His definition of memory and history will be the foundation for this thesis. He explains that "[Memory] remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, [...]. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer".<sup>9</sup> These three games are a reflection of the contemporary memory of the Great War. In his article, Nora also writes about how places can become places of memory, a location to reflect upon an historic event. In my thesis I will elaborate on how video games become a 'lieux de mémoire', and in turn how this memory will cement itself in the player as a 'prosthetic memory'. Since these games are all animated, I will also draw on *Animated Documentary* by film scholar Annabelle Honess Roe. She argues that there are three categories for animated documentary; based on what the animation is communicating to the viewer. I will use these categories to define the role that animation plays in these games. Lastly, for the field of memory studies I will draw upon *The Great War in Post-Memory Literature and Film* by Marin Löschnigg, and on *The Great War and Modern Memory* by historian Paul Fussell with an introduction written by another historian: Jay Winter. These two books analyse the way in which the Great War is depicted in film and literature, which will allow me to contextualize the games within the traditions of memorializing the war through 'fictional' narrative.

Within the second field of study, game studies, there will be a division between two

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<sup>8</sup> Author Unknown. (2019) "Battlefield". *Fandom*.

<sup>9</sup> Nora, Pierre. "Between History and Memory". P.8.

specialties: history and emotion. Video game scholar Adam Chapman did an extensive study about historical engagement within all games that had something to do with the Great War. His study allows me to identify traditions within the memorialisation of the Great War in video games. Historian Chris Kempshall also wrote about the First World War in video games, but he focussed on the problems that developers run into when they memorialise the Great War in their game. His study helps to identify of the reasoning behind certain decisions the developer made to avoid controversy. David Mason, James Paul Gee and Espen Aarseth all write about the emotional responses that video games evoke. Espen Aarseth, head of the Centre for Video Game Research in Copenhagen, wrote about the differences between readers of literature, and readers of ergodic literature, which includes video games. He wrote about the unique role that reader, or player, has within the text. David Mason wrote about the way people view stories, as if they were real events, especially when they act them out in a game. These studies about emotional response to video games all reinforce Landsberg's theory about prosthetic memory and it's applicability in the field of game studies.

I will break my question down into two parts. In the first part I will analyse the filmic elements of the games, the animation, and story. I will examine how *Valiant Hearts*, *Battlefield 1*, and *11-11*, incorporate death into their games. Since death is both an important and sensitive subject in war games, and it is one that all three of the games have to deal with. By analysing the framing of death, we can define the frame that these games use to present the War. How do these games frame the death of a soldier who is important to the story? And how, if at all, do the games show the corpses of allied soldiers? In the second part I will incorporate the element of gameplay into the equation. What does gameplay add to the experience of the story? And what does gameplay add to the memorialisation of video games? These two, the filmic and the gameplay, are rarely combined in one study, especially when there is a focus on memory studies.

## Chapter 1: The (meaningless) sacrifice

### The filmic elements of World War I games

#### 1.1: *The art of war*

The first thing the player sees of any game is the art style. It sets the stage for what is to come. That is why I want to discuss the art style of the three games. I will focus mainly on *11-11* and *Battlefield 1* because they represent both ends of the spectrum, but I will briefly mention *Valiant Hearts* as well. *Battlefield 1* has realistic graphics, which means that the game looks as close to the real world as possible. *11-11* is the polar opposite: it has an art style that looks as if it were an impressionist painting. Both of these art styles tell the player something before they have started the story.



Figure 1: *Battlefield 1*. EA Dice. [https://gameranx.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Battlefield%E2%84%A2-1\\_20161021185425.jpg](https://gameranx.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Battlefield%E2%84%A2-1_20161021185425.jpg)

Since *Battlefield's* graphics are as close to filmed footage as possible, the animation is what Honess Roe calls mimetic substitution.<sup>10</sup> This means that it simply replaces filmed footage when that is unavailable. The unavailability can have multiple reasons: the subject no longer exists in the form you wish to present it, or a more technical limitation. For video games it is mostly a technical limitation. Once you hand control of the main character over to the audience, there are too many options to put on film. This does not mean that all animation is mimetic, but graphics with a purely realistic aim such as *Battlefield 1* are. These graphics give the player the idea that everything about the game will be realistic. Since *Battlefield 1* is based on historical events, the expectation is that it will be a realistic representation of those events, complemented by graphics that mimic “filmed footage, and its attendant presumed direct relationship with reality”.<sup>11</sup> This means that the stories that *Battlefield 1* tells are immediately more believable because of the art style.

On the other side of the spectrum is *11-11: Memories Retold*. The animations are

<sup>10</sup> Honess Roe, Annabelle. *Animated Documentary*. P.36.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem. P.42.

done by Aardman Animations in an impressionistic style. The game generates the world around the player as if it is being painted as they move through it. Right from the start the player can see that this game was never supposed to look realistic. This means that it is not a mimetic substitution, so it has to fit into one of the other two categories that Honess Roe describes. It can either be non-mimetic, which means that the art style adds something to the story,<sup>12</sup> or evocation, which means that the animation puts into image that which is hard to put into words.<sup>13</sup> I believe that *11-11: Memories Retold* falls within the category of evocation because of the combination between title and art style. Specifically the 'Retold' part of the title suggests that the story is not told by someone who was there, rather it is told by someone who has heard it from someone who was there. The moment a memory is retold, the details almost certainly fade. The art style reflects this. Between 2014 and 2018, because of the centennial of the war, we see an uptick in memorialisation of the Great War within pop-culture. But this is happening at a time when all the people who actually fought in the war have passed away.<sup>14</sup> Their stories are now retold by a post-generation, a generation of people who have never experienced the war themselves, just as the title *11-11: Memories Retold* suggests.



Figure 2: 11-11: Memories retold. DigiArts/Aardman. <https://www.game.co.uk/en/11-11-memories-retold-2502380>

Figure 2 shows one of the few 'battle'-scenes. Harry, the player controlled character, follows Major Barret through no man's land to take images of him. We see Harry squatting, while Major Barret poses in the light surrounded by his unnamed soldiers. We see no man's land behind him, but there is little detail visible. The ground is not in focus, rather more of a blur of colours, and the soldiers are only recognisable because of their uniform. In the game the details of the battlefields seem to have faded slightly. It does not look the same as it did for the soldiers who were at the front. They would have seen every detail, from the terror on the faces of their comrades to the blood-stained mud. But as the title suggests: when stories

<sup>12</sup> Honness Roe, Annabelle. *Animated Documentary*. P.40.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem. P.148.

<sup>14</sup> Author Unknown. (2012) "Last surviving veteran of First World War dies aged 110". *The Telegraph*.

are told and retold, those details fade. Everything that is not essential to the story fades into the background. What remains is a belief of how the war was. Most soldiers lose their identity, they simply become bystanders in someone else's story. They join ranks with the enormous amount of unknown soldiers, whose graves can be found in almost every graveyard of the Great War. The game shows this by animating most soldiers without a distinct face. The facelessness, or the anonymity, of the soldiers is not a new phenomenon, as Chris Kempshall wrote: "The Unknown Soldier is a cornerstone of the First World War in popular memory".<sup>15</sup> This is why *11-11: Memories Retold* should be counted to the category of evocation. The animation is not a simple replacement of live action, which would make it mimetic, nor does it only aid the story, making it non-mimetic. Instead it communicates something to the audience that is difficult to put into words.

In figure 3 we see the cartoon art style of *Valiant Hearts*. It aids the story by making the violence less graphic, which makes it more accessible to a wider audience. Furthermore it makes the story seem more universal by turning the characters into archetypes instead of specific human beings. This supports the story, but it does not communicate something bigger in the same way that *11-11* does.



Figure 3: *Valiant Hearts: the Great War*. DigiArts. <https://arcadesushi.com/valiant-hearts-the-great-war-review/>.

### 1.2: The death of the individual soldier

Having analysed the first impressions the player has of the game, the art style, I will now turn to the narrative. In order to make the analysis more focused I have chosen the way in

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<sup>15</sup> Kempshall, Chris. *The First World War in Computer Games*. P.22.

which these games frame death. Because by analysing an element that these games all have in common, I can more accurately do a comparative study. First, the death of a soldier with an identity, namely the main character or a soldier that is important to the story. Second, a soldier without a personal identity, a soldier that is merely part of a collective entity. In the tradition of World War One memorialisation, especially in pop culture, there seem to be two distinct modes to frame a dying soldier. The first we see in, for instance, *Lions Led by Donkeys* (1927, P.A. Thompson) and *In Stahlgewittern* (1920, Ernst Jünger). It is the hero's sacrifice; a soldier sacrificing himself for the good of his comrades, his country, or even humanity as a whole. The other is apparent in works like *Im Westen Nichts Neues* (1928, Erich Maria Remarque) and *To the Slaughterhouse* (1931, Jean Giono). They present the war in its entirety as a senseless, meaningless slaughter. Soldiers do not die for a cause, they just die. *Battlefield* and *Valiant Hearts* fit into these two traditions, respectively. I will elaborate on how *Battlefield* presents the sacrifice and *Valiant Hearts* the meaninglessness of death. *11-11* presents death as something else. For the creators of the game, death is the catalyst for more death, if the player lets it.

I will start by analysing *Battlefield 1*'s war story 'The Runner'. The story follows older Australian war veteran Frederick Bishop as he lands on the shores of Gallipoli with the ANZACs.<sup>16</sup> He storms the beach surrounded by young soldiers who are eager to fight the Ottoman Empire. In the end he sacrifices himself in order to let the young soldiers retreat before the entire beach is shelled by ANZAC artillery. Bishop storms a fort by himself to cover their retreat, fighting off dozens of Ottoman soldiers. He is wounded by, what seems to be, the last Ottoman soldier in the fort. He smiles as he gazes toward the beach where the signal is given that the young men have made it back. Then he dies. Because of his death, many young Australians get to return home. That this bravery and sacrifice is shown in an Australian soldier is no accident. Of the five war stories in *Battlefield 1* Bishop is the only Australian and the only main character that does not survive his story. This is because the idea of sacrifice and heroism on the battlefields of the Great War became an important element within the nation building myth of Australia and New Zealand.<sup>17</sup> Philosopher Ernst Renan wrote in 'What is a Nation?', "A nation is therefore a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future".<sup>18</sup> The First World War is used in Australia's and New Zealand's nation building myth as that sacrifice in the past. For the other countries that fought in the War, this is not the case because they use another struggle as their 'sacrifice that one has made in the past'. Not only does *Battlefield* show the sacrifice made, but, through the gameplay, makes the player re-enact it.

*Valiant Hearts* shows the player the death of Emile, who elaborates on the cause for his execution in a letter to his daughter. He accidentally killed an officer in an attempt to stop the slaughter of soldiers in a battle he was fighting. He is quickly arrested and later executed. His actions did not stop the slaughter, nor did his execution do anything to stop the war. His death was completely meaningless.

When in *11-11* Harry, the player-character, arrives in France, he walks around in an encampment of the British army behind the lines. One of the German prisoners of war is executed after Harry takes a picture of him. Later in the game, Karl, the German character

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<sup>16</sup> ANZAC: Australian and New Zealand Army Corp.

<sup>17</sup> Löschnigg, Martin. *the Great War in Post-Memory Literature and Film*. P.10.

<sup>18</sup> Renan, Ernest. "What is a Nation?" in *The Collective Memory Reader*. P.83.

controlled by the player, finds the picture and recognizes his son Max. Furious, he returns early from his leave to get his revenge on the man who killed his son. The player gets to choose how the story ends once Karl finds Major Barret, the man who shot Max. Many of the options result with the death of either Karl, Major Barret, Harry, or all of them. The death of Max leads Karl down a road that probably results in only more death. Karl, who up until that point in the war has refused to kill anyone, is now on a mission to kill in order to get his revenge.

Through not presenting the death of Max as a sacrifice nor as a meaningless victim of the trenches, *11-11* breaks with the conventional way of discussing the dead soldiers of the Great War. That this death and the ensuing revenge lead to more death, is not the message that every player will see, because the player controls the outcome of the narrative. The player can choose not to fulfil Karl's wish for revenge, but let him forgive the man who killed his son. Shortly before he dies, which happens in most possible endings, Kurt writes a last letter to his wife: "Don't weep for me, Katrin, for I do not deserve your tears. [...] I did what any father would do. I would make the same choice again. There is little point in pretending otherwise."<sup>19</sup> This is why the motif of death and revenge leading to more death does not feel as a break with tradition. Kurt makes the choices he makes as a father, not as a soldier. Viewing a soldier as more than 'just' a soldier is what breaks the tradition of the Great War Narratives.

With the strong emphasis on the sacrifice a soldier makes in death, *Battlefield 1* presents the war more heroic than either of the other two. *Valiant Hearts* is much more downhearted. The death of Emile is a pure waste of life, nothing is accomplished with it. *11-11* uses the death of Max as a catalyst for hatred and revenge. This not a new motif, but it is quite unusual in narratives about the Great War. Of course there are more people who die in these games, but these are the people with stories and identities, who were pivotal to the story. In the next part I will take a closer look at the collective soldiers, the soldier without any personal identity.

### 1.3: The death of the collective soldier

The reason the death of these faceless soldiers is interesting to study is because of a study by video game scholar Mathew Thomas Payne, which concluded that contemporary military First Person Shooter games (FPS-games) tend to avoid showing the bodies of U.S., or allied, soldiers.<sup>20</sup> Seeing the bodies of allied soldiers, especially of U.S. soldiers, leads to controversy and negative emotions within the United States,<sup>21</sup> because allied soldiers are always shown to be individual people. This makes their death feel more meaningful. Paul Fussell experienced this first hand when he was fighting in World War Two, and in his academic career in the literature about World War One: "'We' are all here on this side; 'the enemy' is over there. 'We' are individuals with names and personal identities; 'he' is a mere collective entity".<sup>22</sup> It is much easier, and in games a lot more fun, to kill nameless and faceless goons, than it is to see characters that you identify with die all around you.

The only FPS, out of the three games that I have selected, is *Battlefield 1*, which, unsurprisingly, adheres to the study done by Payne. The number of fallen allied soldiers is

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<sup>19</sup> Kurt in *11-11: Memories Retold*.

<sup>20</sup> Jorgenson, Kristine. "The Positive Discomfort of Spec Ops: The Line". P.3.

<sup>21</sup> Idem.

<sup>22</sup> Fussell, Paul. *the Great War and Modern Memory*. P.82.

shockingly low. In *Battlefield 1*'s war story 'The Runner' there are a few wounded ANZAC-soldiers in the fort, but almost no dead ones. This is strange considering it is one of the only war stories in the game where the allied forces have to retreat. An army would only retreat because the battle is, or with certainty will be, lost. This means that there would have to be casualties. The lack of fallen ANZAC soldiers therefore must have been a deliberate choice made by the developer in order to make the player feel more powerful and limit their discomfort. There is no lack of Ottoman soldiers, the enemy of the ANZACs at Gallipoli, that are being killed, mostly by the player. This implies that the problem is not with death in general. But even the Ottoman corpses disappear after a little while, meaning that when the player returns to areas where they have previously killed dozens of soldiers, their corpses seem to have vanished into thin air. This means that the player is not only spared the discomfort of seeing allied corpses, but they are also not confronted with the consequences of their own actions. *Valiant Hearts* and *11-11* are both games that make the player control soldiers on both sides of the front. This means that there is no 'enemy' in the game. The corpses of the axis-powers soldiers are just as discomfoting as the corpses of the soldiers of the allies. In contrast to most narrative war games, *11-11* and *Valiant Hearts* humanize soldiers on both sides. This leads to a lack of collective 'them' that the player can slaughter without feeling discomfort.

#### 1.4: The limit of filmic elements

The way in which *Battlefield 1* circumvents any discomfort the player might feel in order to enhance the heroic elements in its war-story 'The Runner', is something that translates perfectly to the other 'war stories' as well. The main focus of *Battlefield 1* is the heroic and adventurous elements of the Great War, much in the same way the war was presented to the many young men who went to fight in it. Austrian author Stefan Zweig captured these feelings about war perfectly when he was quoted saying: "[War] had become a heroic and romantic legend".<sup>23</sup> According to him this was because war was viewed through the paintings and the stories about it, much in the way *Battlefield 1* can influence the view of war today. *Valiant Hearts* and *11-11* do not, in any way, try to make the player more heroic, more powerful, or even more comfortable. They focus more on the horrors of war, instead of the heroism or sacrifice.

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<sup>23</sup> Zweig, Stefan. Quoted in *Apocalypse: World War One: part 1*.

## Chapter 2: Look at what I just did Gameplay in World War I games

### 2.1: *The power of video games*

In this chapter I will discuss the two main components that the medium of video games adds to the stories of the Great War. The first is the element of power, or agency, that can take the player from witness to participant, followed by the second element: the playable memory of the Great War. In *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* Espen Aarseth argues that “[a] reader, however strongly engaged in the unfolding of a narrative, is powerless”.<sup>24</sup> The reader has no influence on the story whatsoever. Compare this to video games and the different endings to *11-11* I already mentioned. The other games do not give the player actual influence over the outcome. This does not lessen the effect, however, as Aarseth argues: “In other cases, perhaps most, the sense of individual outcome is illusory, but nevertheless the aspect of coercion and manipulation is real”.<sup>25</sup> Even a game that gives the player no influence on the outcome of its story still feels empowering.

This empowering control over the character is both a strength of video games, as well as a potential problem. The problem arises because of the idea of re-enactment. People, journalists, mothers, senators, wonder how ethical it is to let young people act out war atrocities. Especially because, as James Paul Gee points out, “[in] video games, we play with life as if life were a toy”.<sup>26</sup> When people play through the Great War, killing each other for fun, one might argue that these games are trivialising the horror of the conflict. Because this is an ethical dilemma, and a very sensitive one at that, I do not wish to elaborate on it any further. This is a dilemma that should include all war games, which would mean that it goes far beyond the scope of this thesis. Furthermore, it would not add anything to my inquiry regarding the memory of the Great War to ponder whether the games should or should not have been made. I merely attempt to further our understanding about the memorialising element of these games.

### 2.2: *From witness to participant*

Contemporary society is, according to Chapman, a witness to the Great War.<sup>27</sup> We can study it, we can visit the graves of the soldiers, we can watch films and read books about it, yet we will still remain on the outside looking in. We can never live through it like the soldiers did, or even the civilians living close to the front. To a certain degree, video games can change this, because the ergodic reader, or player, is, unlike the reader of literature, not safe. According to Aarseth, the gamer is unsafe because the cybertext, or game, puts them in a position where they have to improvise actions, which puts them at risk of failure.<sup>28</sup> I will discuss this risk of failure and the discomfort that it leads to later on. First we have to define ‘unsafe’ in the context of video games. The player is not merely a spectator, rather they are complicit in their character’s actions in the game. They are in charge of keeping the character alive, which means that the gamer is more invested than the reader.<sup>29</sup> At the same

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<sup>24</sup> Aarseth, Espen. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. P.4.

<sup>25</sup> Idem.

<sup>26</sup> Gee, James Paul. “Video Games and Embodiment”. P.261.

<sup>27</sup> Chapman, Adam. “It’s Hard to Play in the Trenches”. P.3.

<sup>28</sup> Aarseth, Espen. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. P.4.

<sup>29</sup> Aarseth, Espen. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. P.4.

time, video games are alienating the player because of the disconnect from physical pain.<sup>30</sup> This disconnect is especially noticeable in *Battlefield 1* because if the player takes damage, they can just wait a few moments until their health is fully restored. In *11-11* and *Valiant Hearts* the disconnect is less obvious since the player is instantly killed the moment they are hit by an explosion or a bullet. Of course being hit in these games does not hurt the player physically either, but, in contrast to *Battlefield*, being hit is immediately life ending. So in *11-11* and *Valiant Hearts* being hit is actually something to be afraid of. The player is 'emotionally unsafe'; physically, of course, they are very safe.

This brings us to the 'risk of failure' that differentiates the player from the reader, according to Aarseth. This risk is something that can be used to great effect by the developer of a game. According to Kristine Jorgenson, who wrote an article about discomfort in *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012), there are two types of failure in video games. The first is the most common: it is caused by simply making a mistake which often leads to the death of the player-character. The second one is more interesting: it is failure through success. This is when you, as a player, do everything right and the mission still fails, or the character still dies. This is the kind of failure that leads to discomfort, according to Jorgenson. We have already discussed the deaths of Bishop in *Battlefield 1* and Emile in *Valiant Hearts*. These are good examples of both the framing of death and the discomfort through failure. The moment that Bishop sees the artillery shells flying towards him, the feeling that filled me as a player was not failure. It was not only meant to happen, I had completed my mission, I had saved those boys. My death, the death of Frederik Bishop, was a sacrifice I was meant to make. His death was not a failure, thus it did not lead to discomfort. The death of Emile, on the other hand, did lead to a feeling of discomfort. Just like with Frederik Bishop, I, as a player, had done everything right. I had done exactly what the game led me to do, completing the objectives the game presented me. But, seeing as I had not stopped the slaughter, Emile's death was not a success. The game had failed me, even though I succeeded. The reason this failure through success leads to discomfort is because, as Jorgenson argues, it challenges the player's sense of emotional safety.<sup>31</sup> The player is more invested than the reader and assumes that, as long as they do everything right, they will succeed. That is the safety that Jorgenson means, the assumption that success will lead to a happy end. The reason that it is so powerful to challenge that assumption in a game about the Great War, or any war for that matter, is because: "They didn't have to make a mistake or do something wrong or foolish in order to die".<sup>32</sup> If a game wants to show what war is like, the player should also run the risk of dying without doing something wrong. That is the risk that comes with the power a player has, a risk that makes them unsafe.

### 2.3: The playable memory

I propose that video games work as a playable memory. Before I can argue why, I have to define the word 'memory' in video games. In some games the player is playing through someone's personal memory, but in most they play as a fictitious or partly fictitious person. That is why when arguing that video games are a playable memory, especially in my case studies, I am talking about 'collective memory'. The player plays through the war in a way that we as a society remember the Great War.

The first important element of the playable memory is the role video games play as a

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<sup>30</sup> Bogost, Ian. "Pretty Hate Machines" P.1.

<sup>31</sup> Jorgenson, Kristine. "The Positive Discomfort of Spec Ops: the Line". P.14.

<sup>32</sup> Kempshall, Chris. *The First World War in Computer Games*. P.55.

digital 'site of memory'. Pierre Nora argued that societies construct these sites of memory as places where we can encapsulate the memories of a lost culture, because there are no longer any real environments of memory. Nora uses the disappearance of peasant culture as an example: through modernization they have disappeared and with them the memories that they held. It could be argued that the culture that experienced the Great War, just like peasant culture, has vanished. It was a world where information travelled slow and was stopped at the border. The European countries were mostly ruled by kings and queens, and they had colonies under their control. The world had yet to see modernised weaponry used on 'good, white, Christian countries'.<sup>33</sup> That world has long since passed, devastated by two world wars during which new modern inventions were used to kill millions. Nora argues that this fast changing world, "the acceleration of history", has forced us to replace "unviolated" memory with history because society changes so fast.<sup>34</sup> The real environment of memory of the Great War is gone. What remains is history.

What games allow the player to do, however, is walk around in the environment where the memory was born. In the summer of 1919, the first summer after the war, a Michelin guide was published offering tours of the battlefields of '14-'18.<sup>35</sup> These battlefields were 'untouched', the trenches, the barbed wire, all but the bodies remained on the fields. Although now, more than a century later, the scars are still visible in the farmlands that have reclaimed the battlefields, the war remains nothing but a memory of what once was. Even when there are still people getting hurt by artillery shells that are still buried in the mud. Even when there are still bodies of soldiers being found in long forgotten trenches. The environment of war has disappeared from the fields. American sociologist J.K. Olick argues in his introduction to *The Collective Memory Reader* that "[the] past is a foreign country not simply because it is so long ago, but because it is often far away".<sup>36</sup> If we consider the past as a 'foreign country', we can assume that the same theories that apply to traveling to actual foreign countries also apply to the past. Of course this claim is problematic in the real world, but not so much in a digital one, because only through digital environments is time travel possible. As media scholar Kiri Miller argues that one can travel to 'Los Santos', a digital parody of Los Angeles, in *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013), we can claim to visit the past in the same way.<sup>37</sup> She argued that *GTA V* gave the players that are unable to travel to the actual Los Angeles a close digital replica. The digital environment works as a substitute for the real one. If this 'digital tourism' is applicable to a geographical 'foreign country', it can also apply to a historical one.

Digital tourism would not be as effective in its role as a site of memory, if video games would not be so enticing. That enticement ensures a large audience, an audience for whom the Great War might be a foreign concept. *Battlefield 1, 11-11: Memories Retold*, and *Valiant Hearts: the Great War* introduce them to the memory of that war. This introduction is so effective because, as David Mason argues, the brain does not distinguish between empirical reality, and a fictitious one.<sup>38</sup> Of course we rationally know what was 'just a story' and what really happened, but emotionally it is the same response according to Mason. This

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<sup>33</sup> Most of the weapons (machine guns, rifles, etc.) that were 'introduced' in WW1 were already in use against uprisings in the colonies.

<sup>34</sup> Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History". P.8.

<sup>35</sup> Fussell, Paul. *The Great War and Modern Memory*. P.75.

<sup>36</sup> Olick, J.K. *The Collective Memory Reader*. P.7.

<sup>37</sup> Miller, Kiri. "The Accidental Carjak".

<sup>38</sup> Mason, David. "Video Games, Theater, and the Paradox of Fiction". P.1110.

means that if someone plays *Battlefield 1*, *11-11*, or *Valiant Hearts*, the emotional response that is stored in their brain is just as real as if these stories actually happened. *Battlefield 1* is, as the only FPS, even more effective in this aspect, because that perspective pulls the player even more into the role of the character.<sup>39</sup> These stories are stored as ‘true’ events in the ‘archive of experience’ of the player. This would lead them to store the memory of the Great War as a prosthetic memory, as Landsberg defined it.<sup>40</sup> That means that the player adopts the memory of an event that they were not a part of, as their own. Through this the memory of the Great War lives on through the people who experienced and controlled the sacrifice of Frederik Bishop, the actions that led to Emile’s execution, and the revenge, or forgiveness, that Karl achieved.

#### 2.4: *The realism of entertainment*

Having established the way in which stories of video games are consumed and remembered by players, I want to address the issue of realism. As Chris Kempshall writes: “Neither computer game designers nor, indeed, those who play them want authenticity from historical games. They want authenticity lite”.<sup>41</sup> This comes back to the fact that these video games are, at the core, just that: games, games that are supposed to be fun, or at least exciting. The problem with portraying the Great War is that it is not a conflict that was all that exciting. “The diaries and letters of First World War soldiers do indeed report a recurring theme but it is of boredom rather than horror”.<sup>42</sup> In that regard *11-11* is the only game of my three case studies, and perhaps all video games about the Great War, that captures this feeling of boredom. The game is by no means boring, but there are rarely any action-sequences; the battles are rare and if you get hit, you die. Instead of fighting, the player is mainly exploring the areas they are deployed in, taking photographs, talking to fellow soldiers, and playing cards. Even *11-11* does not and cannot offer an authentic Great War experience. What results in all of these games is “a form of moderate authenticity that captures the spirit of how we believe the war [was]”.<sup>43</sup> With this shortcoming we are back at Nora’s description of what a memory was. A memory is alive, it is born from the society that presents it.<sup>44</sup> These games do not present the history of the war, but the memory we have of it. As philosopher Slavoj Žižek wrote in *For They Know Not What They Do*: “The point is not to remember the past trauma as exactly as possible: such ‘documentation’ is a priori false, it transforms the trauma into a neutral, objective fact, whereas the essence of the trauma is precisely that it is too horrible to be remembered, to be integrated into our symbolic universe”.<sup>45</sup> These games are not meant to be an authentic representation of the Great War, they are supposed to be a site of memory for our memorialisation of the war. As Yoan Fanise said about *11-11*: “In Great Britain, every year on 11 11, people wear a poppy in memory of the fallen, [...] [this] project is our little poppy”.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Mason, David. “Video Games, Theater, and the Paradox of Fiction”. P.1112.

<sup>40</sup> Landsberg, Alison. *Prosthetic Memory*. P.9.

<sup>41</sup> Kempshall, Chris. *The First World War in Computer Games*. P.23.

<sup>42</sup> Ibidem. P.21.

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem. P.23.

<sup>44</sup> Nora, Pierre. “Between Memory and History”. P.8.

<sup>45</sup> Žižek, Slavoj. *For They Know Not What They Do*. P.272.

<sup>46</sup> Fanise, Yoan. in “Valiant Hearts creator Revisits the Great War with 11-11: Memories Retold”.

Conclusion: 11-11-1918 10:50

In this thesis I have aimed to answer the question how contemporary narrative video games frame the Great War and how this affects the collective memory of it. When analysing the filmic elements of the video games, we see that they only rarely diverge from the traditions of memory in other mediums, despite the differences inherent in them. The three games use their art style to completely different effects. Where the mimetic art style of *Battlefield 1* suggests to the player that this will be a realistic vision of the Great War, *11-11: Memories Retold's* impressionist evocation shows the player the fleeting nature of memory, and *Valiant Hearts: The Great War* softens the graphic horror of the war to allow more people to witness the story. Where *Battlefield* frames the death of Frederik Bishop as an example of heroic sacrifice, *Valiant Hearts* lets Emile embody the useless waste of life that the war caused, and *11-11* breaks with traditions in this aspect as they let the death of Max cause hate and even more death. When we focus more on the traditions within video games, *Battlefield 1* is the only one that hides the bodies of fallen allies and foes to spare the player discomfort rather than showing them the true cost of war. *11-11* and *Valiant Hearts* are in a different position because they humanize both sides so that every fallen soldier is a fallen individual instead of a faceless evil foe.

The fact that the player is the one who is possibly confronted with the foes they have killed, shows how video games make the player a participant of the war. They decide the actions of the main character, which leads to a greater emotional investment in the story than when we read a book for instance. This can lead the player to feel discomfort, for example by being confronted with your choices. The main way to feel discomfort, however, is failure through success. This is exemplified in *Valiant Hearts* by letting the main character die, even after the player did everything right and kept him alive throughout the entire game. At the same time, games can function as a way to walk around the battlefields of World War One as a digital tourist. Because of the power and emotional investment the player feels, they adopt the memories of their character as a prosthetic memory of their own.

Through combining these two elements, the filmic and the gameplay, video games about the First World War become powerful sites of memory. Even if they do not offer authentic experiences of the war, they do offer the player the vision of what our contemporary society believes the Great War was like. There will be even greater possibilities to experience these foreign memories as technology evolves. There are many interesting opportunities for further studies, one of which I already mentioned: the ethical dilemma involving all war games. It would also be interesting to expand my main question to all video games that interact with the First World War to make more general claims, or even study other wars and analyse the differences between them.

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