

M/C Journal, Vol 20, No 1 (2017)

You Are Not Expected to Survive: Affective Friction in the Combat Shooter Game *Battlefield 1*
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Abstract

Introduction

I stumble to my feet breathing heavily and, over the roar of a tank, a nearby soldier yells right into my face: "We're surrounded! We have to hold this line!" I follow him, moving past burning debris and wounded men being helped walk back in the opposite direction. Shells explode around me, a whistle sounds, and then the Hun attack; shadowy figures that I fire upon as they approach through the battlefield fog and smoke. I shoot some. I take cover behind walls as others fire back. I reload the weapon. I am hit by incoming fire, and a red damage indicator appears onscreen, so I move to a better cover position. As I am hit again and again, the image becomes blurry and appears as if in slow-motion, the sound also becoming muffled. As an enemy wielding a flame-thrower appears and blasts me with thick fire, my avatar gasps and collapses. The screen fades to black.

So far, so very normal in the World War One themed first-person shooter *Battlefield 1* (Electronic Arts 2016). But then the game does something unanticipated. I expect to reappear—or respawn—in the same scenario to play better, to stay in the fight longer. Instead, the camera view switches to an external position, craning upwards cinematically from my character's dying body. Text superimposed over the view indicates the minimalist epitaph: "Harvey Nottoway 1889-1918." The camera view then races backwards, high over the battlefield and finally settles into position behind a mounted machine-gun further back from the frontline as the enemy advances closer. Immediately I commence shooting, mowing down German troops as they enter our trenches. Soon I am hit and knocked away from the machine-gun. Picking up a shotgun I start shooting the enemy at close-quarters, until I am once again overrun and my character collapses. Now the onscreen text states I was playing as "Dean Stevenson 1899-1918."

I have attempted this prologue to the *Battlefield 1* campaign a number of times. No matter how skillfully I play, or how effectively I simply run away and hide from the combat, this pattern continues: the structure of the game forces the player's avatar to be repeatedly killed in order for the narrative to progress. Over a series of player deaths, respawning as an entirely new character each time, the combat grows in ferocity and the music also becomes increasingly frenetic. The fighting turns to hand-to-hand combat, or shovel-to-head combat to be more precise, and eventually an artillery barrage wipes everybody out (Figure 1). At this point, the prologue is complete and the gamer may continue in a variety of single-player episodes in different theatres of WW1, each of which is structured according to the normal rules of combat games: when your avatar is killed, you respawn at the most recent checkpoint for a follow-up attempt.



What are we to make of this alternative narrative structure deployed by the opening episode of *Battlefield 1*? In contrast to the normal video-game affordances of re-playability until completion, this narrative necessitation of death is in some ways motivated by the onscreen text that introduces the prologue: "What follows is frontline combat. You are not expected to survive." Certainly it is true that the rest of the game (either single-player or in its online multiplayer deathmatch mode) follows the predictable pattern of dying, replaying, completing. And also we would not expect *Battlefield 1* to be motivated primarily by a kind of historical fidelity given that an earlier instalment in the series, *Battlefield 1942* (2002) was described by one reviewer as:

a comic book version of WWII. The fact that any player can casually hop into a tank, drive around, hop out and pick off an enemy soldier with a sniper rifle, hop into a plane, parachute out, and then call in artillery fire (within the span of a few minutes) should tell you a lot about the game. (Osborne)

However what is happening in this will-to-die structure of the game's prologue represents an alternative and affectively unsettling game experience both in its ludological structure as well as its affective impact.

Defamiliarization and Humanization

Drawing upon a phenomenology of game-play, whereby the scholar examines the game “as played” (see Atkins and Kryzwinska; Keogh; Wilson) to consider how the text reveals itself to the player, I argue that the introductory single-player episode of *Battlefield 1* functions to create a defamiliarizing effect on the player. Defamiliarization, the Russian Formalist term for the effect created by art when some unusual aspect of a text challenges accepted perceptions and/or representations (Schklovski; Thompson), is a remarkably common effect created by the techniques used in combat cinema and video-games. This is unsurprising. After all, warfare is one of the very examples Schklovski uses as something that audiences have developed habituated responses to and which artworks must defamiliarize. The effect may be created by many techniques in a text, and in certain cases a work may defamiliarize even its own form. For instance, recent work on the violence in *Saving Private Ryan* shows that during the lengthy Omaha Beach sequence, the most vivid instances of violence—including the famous shot of a soldier picking up his dismembered arm—occur well after the audience has potentially become inured to the onslaught of the earlier frequent, but less graphic, carnage (*Bender Film Style and WW2*). To make these moments stand out with equivalent horrific impact against the background of the Normandy beach bloodbath Spielberg also treats them with a stuttered frame effect and accompanying audio distortion, motivated (to use a related Formalist term) by the character’s apparent concussion and temporary disorientation. Effectively a sequence of point of view shots then, this moment in *Private Ryan* has become a model for many other war texts, and indeed the player’s death in the opening sequence of *Battlefield 1* is portrayed using a very similar (though not identical) audio-visual treatment (Figure 2).



Although the Formalists never played videogames, recent scholarship has approached the medium from a similar perspective. For example, Brendan Keogh has focused on the challenges to traditional videogame pleasure generated by the 2012 dystopian shooter *Spec Ops: The Line*. Keogh notes that the game developers intended to create displeasure and “[forcing] the player to consider what is obscured in the pixilation of war” by, for instance, having them kill fellow American troops in order for the game narrative to continue (Keogh 9). In addition, the game openly taunts the player’s expectations of entertainment based, uncritical run-and-gun gameplay with onscreen text during level loading periods such as “Do you feel like a hero yet?” (8).

These kinds of challenges to the expectations of entertainment in combat shooters are found also in one sequence from the 2009 game *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* in which the player—as an undercover operative—is forced to participate in a terrorist attack in which civilians are killed (Figure 3). While playing that level, titled “No Russian,” Timothy Welsh argues: “The player may shoot the unarmed civilians or not; the level still creeps slowly forward regardless” (Welsh 409). In Welsh’s analysis, this level emerges as an unusual attempt by a popular video game to “humanize” the non-playing characters that are ordinarily gunned down without any critical and self-reflective thought by the player in most shooter games. The player is forced into a scenario in which they must make a highly difficult ethical choice, but the game will show civilians being killed either way.



In contrast to the usual criticisms of violent video games—e.g., that they may be held responsible for school shootings, increased adolescent aggression and so on—the “No Russian” sequence drew dramatic complaints of being a “terrorist simulator” (Welsh 389). But for Welsh this ethical choice facing the player, to shoot or not to shoot civilians, raises the game to a textual experience offering self-inspection. As in the fictional theme park of *Westworld* (HBO 2016), it does not really matter to the digital victim if a player kills them, but it should—and does—matter to the player. There are no external consequences to killing a computer game character composed only of pixels, or killing/raping a robot in the *Westworld* theme park, however there are internal consequences: it makes you a killer, or a rapist (see Harris and Bloom).

Thus, from the perspective of defamiliarization, the game can be regarded as creating the effect that Matthew Payne has labelled “critical displeasure.” Writing about the way this is created by *Spec Ops*, Payne argues that:

the result is a game that wields its affective distance as a critique of the necessary illusion that all military shooters trade in, but one that so few acknowledge. In particular, the game’s brutal *mise-en-scène*, its intertextual references to other war media, and its real and imagined opportunities for player choice, create a discordant feeling that lays bare the ease with which most video war games indulge in their power fantasies. (Payne 270)

There is then, a minor tradition of alternative military-themed video game works that attempt to invite or enable the player to conduct a kind of ethical self-examination around their engagement with interactive representations of war via particular incursions of realism. The critical displeasure invoked by texts such as *Spec Ops* and the “No Russian” level of *Call of Duty* is particularly interesting in light of another military game that was ultimately cancelled by the publisher after it received public criticism. Titled *Six Days in Fallujah*, the game was developed with the participation of Marines who had fought in that real life battle and aimed to depict the events as they unfolded in 2004 during the campaign in Iraq. As Justin Rashid argues:

the controversy that arose around *Six Days in Fallujah* was, of course, a result of the view that commercial video games can only ever be pure entertainment; games do not have the authority or credibility to be part of a serious debate. (Rashid 17)

On this basis, perhaps a criterial attribute of an acceptable alternative military game is that there is enough familiarity to evoke some critical distance, but not too much familiarity that the player must think about legitimately real-life consequences and impact. After all, *Call of Duty* was a successful release, even amid the controversy of “No Russian.” This makes sense as the level does not really challenge the overall enjoyment of the game. The novelty of the level, on the one hand, is that it is merely one part of the general narrative and cannot be regarded as representative of the whole game experience. On the other hand, because none of the events and scenarios have a clear indexical relationship to real-world terrorist attacks (at least prior to the Brussels attack in 2016) it is easy to play the ethical choice of shooting or not shooting civilians as a mental exercise rather than a reflection on something that really happened. This is the same lesson learned by the developers of the 2010 game *Medal of Honor* who ultimately changed the name of the enemy soldiers from “The Taliban” to “OPFOR” (standing in for a generic “Opposing Forces”) after facing pressure from the US and UK Military who claimed that the multiplayer capacities of the game enabled players to play as the Taliban (see Rashid).

Conclusion: Affective Friction in *Battlefield 1*

In important ways then, these game experiences are precursors to *Battlefield 1*’s single player prologue. However, the latter does not attempt a wholesale deconstruction of the genre—as does *Spec Ops*—or represent an attempt to humanise (or perhaps re-humanise) the non-playable victim characters as Welsh suggests “No Russian” attempts to do. *Battlefield 1*’s opening structure of death-and-respawn-as-different-character can be read as humanizing the player’s avatar. But most importantly, I take *Battlefield*’s initially unusual gameplay as an aesthetic attempt to set a particular tone to the game. Motivated by

the general cultural attitude of deferential respect for the Great War, *Battlefield 1* takes an almost austere stance toward the violence depicted, paradoxically even as this impact is muted in the later gameplay structured according to normal multiplayer deathmatch rules of run-and-gun killing.

The futility implied by the player's constant dying is clearly motivated by an attempt at realism as one of the cultural memories of World War One is the sheer likelihood of being killed, whether as a frontline soldier or a citizen of a country engaged in combat (see Kramer). For *Battlefield 1*, the repeated dying is really part of the text's aesthetic engagement. For this reason I prefer the term *affective friction* rather than critical displeasure. The austere tone of the game is indicated early, just prior to the prologue gameplay with onscreen text that reads:

Battlefield 1 is based on events that unfolded over 100 years ago
More than 60 million soldiers fought in "The War to End All Wars"
It ended nothing.
Yet it changed the world forever.

At a simple level, the player's experience of being killed in order for the next part of the narrative to progress evokes this sense of futility. There have been real responses indicating this, for instance one reviewer argues that the structure is "a powerful treatment" (Howley). But there is potential for increased engagement with the game itself as the structure breaks the replay-cycle of usual games. For instance, another reviewer responds to the overall single-player campaign by suggesting "It is not something you can sit down and play through and *not* experience on a higher level than just clicking a mouse and tapping a keyboard" (Simpson). This affective friction amplifies, and draws attention to, the other advances in violent stylistics presented in the game. For instance, although the standard onscreen visual distortions are used to show character damage and the direction from which the attack came, the game does use slow-motion to draw out the character's death. In addition, the game features incidental battlefield details of shell-shock, such as soldiers simply holding the head in their hands, frozen as the battle rages around them (Figure 4). The presence of flame-thrower troops, and subsequently the depictions of characters running as they burn to death are also significant developments in violent aesthetics from earlier games. These elements of violence are constitutive of the affective friction. We may marvel at the technical achievement of such real-time rendering of dynamic fire and the artistic care given to animate deaths and shell-shock depictions. But simultaneously, these "violent delights"—to borrow from *Westworld's* citation of Shakespeare—are innovations upon the depictions of earlier games, even contemporary, combat games. Indeed, one critic has almost ashamedly noted: "For a game about one of the most horrific wars in human history, it sure is pretty" (Kain).



These violent depictions show a continuation in the tradition of increased detail which has been linked to a model of "reported realism" as a means of understanding audience's claims of realism in combat films and modern videogames as a result primarily of their hypersaturated audio-visual texture (Bender "Blood Splats"). Here, saturation refers not to the specific technical quality of colour saturation but to the densely layered audio-visual structure often found in contemporary films and videogames. For example, thick mixing of soundtracks, details of gore, and nuanced movements (particularly of dying characters) all contribute to a hypersaturated aesthetic which tends to prompt audiences to make claims of realism for a combat text regardless of whether or not these viewers/players have any real world referent for comparison.

Of course, there are likely to be players who will simply blast through any shooter game, giving no regard to the critical displeasure offered by *Spec Ops* narrative choices or the ethical dilemma of "No Russian." There are also likely to be players who bypass the single-player campaign altogether and only bother with the multiplayer deathmatch experience, which functions in the same way as it does in other shooter games, including the previous *Battlefield* games. But perhaps the value of this game's attempt at alternative storytelling, with its emphasis on tone and affect, is that even the "kill-em-all" player may experience a momentary impact from the violence depicted. This is particularly important given that, to borrow from Stephanie Fisher's argument in regard to WW2 games, many young people encounter the history of warfare through such popular videogames (Fisher). In the centenary period of World War One, especially in Australia amid the present Anzac commemorative moment, the opportunity for young audiences to engage with the significance of the events. As a side-note, the later part of the single-player campaign even has a Gallipoli sequence, though the narrative of this component is designed as an

action-hero adventure. Indeed, this is one example of how the alternative dying-to-continue structure of the prologue creates an affective friction against the normal gameplay and narratives that feature in the rest of the text.

The ambivalent ways in which this unsettling opening scenario impacts on the remainder of the game-play, including for instance its depiction of PTSD, is illustrated by some industry reviewers. As one reviewer argues, the game does generate the feeling that "war isn't fun — except when it is" (Plante). From this view, the cognitive challenge created by the *will to die* in the prologue creates an affective friction with the normalised entertainment inherent in the game's multiplayer run-and-gun components that dominate the rest of *Battlefield 1*'s experience. Therefore, although *Battlefield 1* ultimately proves to be an entertainment-oriented combat shooter, it is significant that the developers of this major commercial production decided to include an experimental structure to the prologue as a way of generating tone and affect in a fresh way.

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