

“In war, not everyone's a soldier.” A Review of ‘This War of Mine’

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Abstract

This article works to critically engage *This War of Mine* as a radically different style of war game that is rarely seen today. War games often glorify what it means to be in battle and have the player, essentially, saving their country or the world. *This War of Mine*, on the other hand, puts the player in the role of a survivor, someone simply trying to make it through the turmoil. This article examines the ways in which the game creates empathy for the avatar through aesthetic and narrative devices.

Keywords

This War of Mine; War; Aesthetics; Narrative



This War of Mine (2014) is a war survival game designed and published by 11 bit studios based on the four-year siege of Sarajevo, Bosnia—the longest city siege since World War II. At the onset of the project 11 bit studio's goal was to produce a new war game, but one story out of the thousands inspired 11 bit studios to illuminate the real horrors of war. The developers turned to the story of Emir Cermovic, who was nine years old during the siege and has described the hardships of that experience (11 bit studios, 2014). Emir's powerful story inspired 11 bit studios to "make something real, something that moves people and makes them think for a second" (Maiberg, 4, 2014). The game was originally released in November of 2014 for PC, Mac, and mobile devices; in January of 2016, the game was made available on the Xbox One and Playstation 4.

This War of Mine is a radically different than war games such as the *Call of Duty* or *Battlefield* franchises, which usually place players on the frontlines of a conflict. Instead, the player controls a group of two to four civilians trying to survive the turmoil. The civilian avatars require constant attention from the player, as it is the player's responsibility to maintain their characters' health, mood, and safety. The game does not end until the civilians have perished or have survived to the point where a ceasefire has been declared, which is randomly generated at the start of the game. As each in-game day passes, resources become increasingly scarce as NPCs and the player deplete scavengable areas, consequently making survival more difficult. Furthermore, group members can be killed by hostile NPCs who raid your shelter, be killed while scavenging, or simply die from starvation.

The aesthetics and character identification of *This War of Mine* work in conjunction to create a sense of empathy and connectivity to the civilians the player controls. That is to say, players will not only want the civilians to survive not just in order to win the game, but because they have a personal attachment to them. The aesthetics of *This War of Mine* creates a perpetual sense of war and despair. At the onset of a new game, we encounter the words "FUCK THE WAR" painted on a crumbling wall outside of the dilapidated shelter. As this is the first thing players are presented with upon entering the game a seemingly innocuous design element serves to establish the tone of anger and helplessness felt by the survivalists. Party to this, the soundtrack plays a soft, hopeless melody that is broken up by the sounds of bombing that is presumably occurring in another part of the city. Flashes of light in the distance coincide with the sounds of fired shells. Once night falls and civilians can leave their shelter to roam the city - the situation does not improve. Burning buildings, crashing bombs, and more graffiti damning the war can be found throughout the game. This ambience is magnified by the fact that the game is purposefully tinted grey, as it is nearly black and white. This assists in the illusion of hopelessness and despair of the situation for these characters (Tulleken, 2015).

While one cannot escape the despondent mood that the aesthetics play a role in shaping, players can attempt to make the best of a bad situation for the civilians in the game. Although interaction between characters is limited to trading or scripted conversations, players are able to learn about the civilians they are controlling. Each character has a biography that reveals their backstory and motivations, creating a sense of connection to the character and urgency for the player to get them through the siege. Additionally, the user interface of the game places a portrait of each civilian in the bottom corner of the screen. This portrait, at first, seems as if it is a still picture. However, after some time, a player may notice the portrait seems to be hopelessly staring right at them and even blinking on occasion; ostensibly begging the player to consider them as something more than a 2D image being controlled.

The “realness” of these civilians is further enhanced through their distinct personalities and skillsets. This is not uncommon in video games within the context of *This War of Mine*, players are forced to take this into consideration from a distinct perspective from most war games. For instance, if characters go without food, sleep, or entertainment they could fall into depression. While they are depressed, the characters cry, pray, or sleep all day just wishing the war would end. Players watch the civilian fall apart because of the war. This is a notable departure from other war games, such as the immensely popular *Call of Duty* franchise, where players are with characters who thrive during war and yearn for the ‘thrill of battle’. In these titles, combat is often depicted as glorious and heroic. Meanwhile the civilian casualties of war are often depicted as two-dimensional and are used to move along the plot (if the collateral damage of battle is shown at all).

Every decision a player makes in *This War of Mine* affects civilians with potentially detrimental effects. Perhaps not surprisingly, even if the game is being played well the civilians never seem quite happy. There is always a constant concern, fear, and low level of anxiety that a player can sense from the civilians through the minimal amount of dialogue being presented. This intensifies and is transferred to the player through the game’s visual aesthetics, such as the cringing of a player portrait or the colour tone of the screen, when tough decisions must be made. To illustrate, food is the scarcest of resources in the game. When a player is scavenging at night, they may only visit one location - roaming all over the city looking for whatever one needs is not an option. A player could be presented with a situation where their group is on the brink of starvation, and, while out scavenging for food, find an abundance in the home of an elderly couple. Taking the food means the player’s civilians will survive, but there are consequences for the elderly NPCs. The player must make a moral decision that could impact the mental health of the civilians in the group. In other words, pillaging from elderly folks could

send one's character into a state of depression and possibly lead to death.

This War of Mine deals with complex moral themes pertaining to the life of civilians during war time. 11 bit studios have created a game that illuminates a side of war that is often neglected in video games. Moreover, *This War of Mine* creates a connection between player and avatar that engenders empathy and compassion for those living under these conditions. If the aesthetics are not enough to assure one that war is hell, the gut-wrenching decisions a player must make is in stark contrast to the "run and gun" mentality of most mainstream war games. In sum, *This War of Mine* provides insight to another side of war, one that is often left out or overlooked in games through the deployment of critical decisions mechanically and aesthetically.

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