

POLITICS IN VIDEO GAME: THIS WAR OF MINE

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This War of Mine (TWoM) is a war survival game developed by a Polish game development company. In the game, players are controlling a group of civilians in a fictional city that was devastated by war. As highlighted by the developers during an interview, the game emphasises a clear educational purpose of war (Gamereactor, 2015). Thus, it could also be classified as a serious game that engages with the political topic (Abt, 1970).

Besides, the game simulates the under-war situation thoughtfully, in which players have to struggle with a lack of food, medicine and constant danger continuously. This kind of simulation motivates gameplay engagement with its key message (Barachini & Sary, 2020). To better understand how the game connects to politics, the gameplay and design will be further explored and explained with below arguments:

Argument 1: This War of Mine vs FPS war games

Hartmann's study will be used to compare TWoM and FPS war games' engagement with in-game and real-world politics. Their different perspective settings will be further analysed to understand how their engagement performance is affected.

Argument 2: Empathy as a catalyst

Darvasi's reading will be used to examine how empathy took place in the game and how it fosters players to understand the political aspect of the game. This helps to uncover how empathy boosts TWoM's engagement with political topics.

Argument 1: This War of Mine vs FPS war games

The traditional first-person shooter (FPS) war games and TWoM immerse players in the harsh realities of war (Hartmann, 2017). However, the former usually focuses on glorifying combat or the heroics of soldiers, and the latter is emphasising the experiences of the survivors or the civilians (Ecenbarger, 2016). Besides, FPS games privilege combat and hardcore play, but TWoM prides itself on the storytelling of survival, which is the political complexities surrounding conflicts (Johnson, 2023).

According to Bogost (2008), games have the power of changing others' beliefs and values. The interactions have the potential of influencing player's engagement with political and social issues as well. Hartmann (2017) added that, although some FPS games are trying to communicate warfare and violence, players are enjoying virtual violence rather than feeling guilty. This issue is worsened when players are playing FPS games with virtual reality. VR is an immersive technology that makes the gameplay experience closer to reality (Carter & Egliston, 2020). Therefore, players may feel more like soldiers and kill others for glory. This could be seen that FPS games have very little effectiveness in motivating players to reflect on their behaviours and the political issue of war (Hartmann, 2017).

In contrast, the Polish government added TWoM to the recommended reading list for Polish students because of its unique perspective and gameplay of anti-war (Bailey, 2022). It was stated that the game provides a foundation for students to learn the consequences of war. It provides a realistic simulation for modern society to think about the real-world implications of conflicts (Roy, 2016). With the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it is important to teach the next generation to understand the impacts of war. This proves that the political influence of TWoM is not limited to the gamers, but also the society, which is not achievable by the FPS war games.

Additionally, moral status may also impact players' engagement with political issues. Hartmann (2017) revealed that people will only apply moral status to things that they feel are alive. For instance, “nobody feels guilty about kicking a rock”. However, doing the same to a child is always prohibited. Applying this concept to FPS games, the reason why players are focused on the violent aspect is clear that they do not feel the enemies are alive. Thus, the players would have fewer negative feelings when killing those “enemies” (Stuart, 2015).

On the other hand, players are more intended to apply moral status to TWoM’s non-player characters (NPCs) because those NPCs have “minds”. Players can see what the NPCs think when entering their homes (see Fig. 1 below). This provides the essence of moral judgement to the players, which engages them to reflect on their moral decision and the circumstances under the political environment (Hartmann, 2017).



Fig 1. NPC dialogue in This War of Mine (Dutta, 2021)

Furthermore, the player character’s (PC) reaction to the events may affect the engagement as well. Erb, Lee and Doh (2021) supported that players can feel connected to their characters and share the same feelings as them. In TWoM, the PCs will act sadly when stealing food from those NPCs (*see Fig. 2 below*). Compared to controlling cold blood

soldiers in FPS war games, the connection in TWoM may further strengthen the engagement on political issues (Pergerson, n.d.). Apart from that, in most FPS war games, enemies are often highlighted as the devils and the PC is a victim. This rationalises players' violation actions and reduces the guilt that players may have (Hartmann, 2017). However, in TWoM context, not only the PCs are the victims, but the NPCs living around them are also suffering. This instead forces players to make moral decisions and challenges them to consider the broader political and social impacts beyond the battlefield.



Fig 2. Player character feelings guilty after an immoral act (Ford, 2015)

Moreover, many FPS games are designed to make violence enjoyable, which is due to video games being treated as entertainment products (Hartmann, 2017). When FPS games players are asked to murder someone in the game, they may feel disengaged due to self-sanctions at first (Shafer, n.d.). To avoid moral disengagement in the games, game developers may try to blur the ethics and morals of the action. Players are not penalised for killing the targets, so they are not reflecting on the actions.

Contrarily, TWoM features relatively little physical violence, but more moral dilemmas (Hartmann, 2017). PCs are penalised with lower ability status and negative feelings

due to moral transgressions. This fosters players to experience the struggle of survival during wars and under a poor political environment. This is also where cultural rhetoric took place (Johnson, 2023).

In short, TWoM contextualises moral dilemmas that influence players to reflect on violent actions. Compared to FPS games that focus on rationalising violence under wars, TWoM has more impact and engagement towards political and social issues. To understand specifically how TWoM engages with politics, its game mechanics and empathy interaction between players and the in-game characters will be further explored.

Argument 2: Empathy as a catalyst

As mentioned, TWoM has numerous moral dilemmas designed. These challenges are created by the game mechanics. The game developer has highlighted that one of the key mechanics is the scarcity of resources (Leviathyn, 2014). The game design has been downkeying to represent the living conditions during wars. The amount of food and antibiotics (medicines that treat infections and diseases) is not enough. This leads to the dynamic of players having to take heavy decisions (Smale, Kors & Sandovar, 2019).

The mechanics successfully illustrate the political complexities surrounding conflicts. Players must navigate the presentation of ethical dilemmas to continue and survive. Stealing resources from others is common within the game (Dutta, 2021). Players cannot grow crops or magically generate food for the PCs, which is realistic as what happens in a real war. Thus, stealing could be seen as a mandatory act to “win” the game, which is to ensure the survival of the PCs (*see Fig. 3 below*).

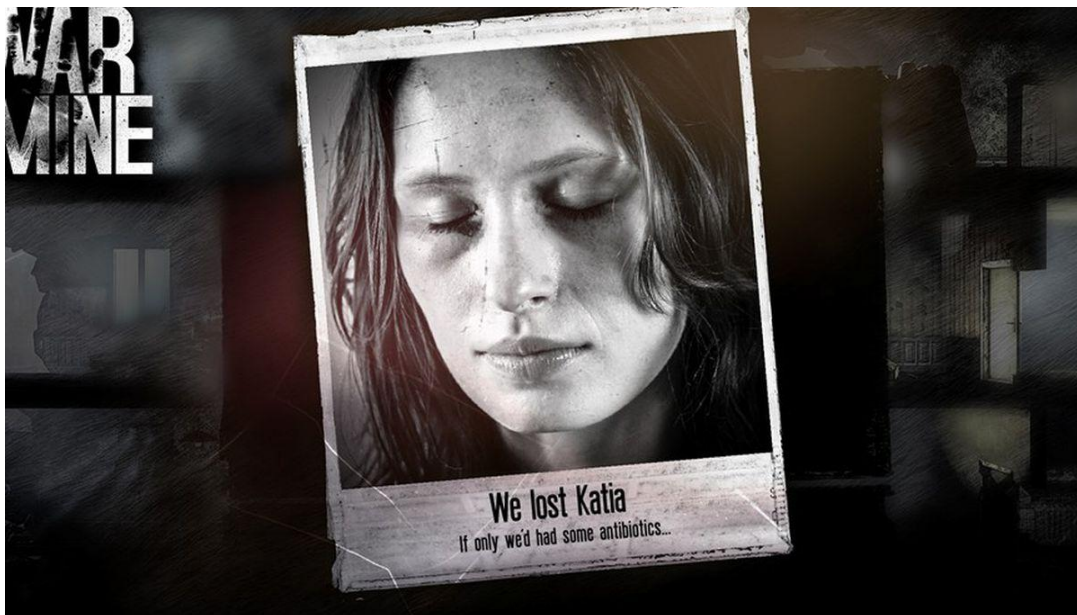


Fig 3. Player characters may die from illness (Caampbell, 2014)

Besides, these dilemmas force players to make difficult choices, which raises players' empathy for the characters at the same time. They may start to understand and share the PCs' feelings (Darvasi, 2016). Someone may argue this is similar to the game *Civilisation*, in which players have to destroy the barbarians. The option is not presented as an ethical choice, but a necessity (Johnson, 2023). So what about sacrificing their own well-being to help others in need in TWoM? Providing the resources to others is totally optional, and players have to contemplate the moral responsibilities individuals face in such circumstances. As suggested by Klimmt et al., (2009), these decision-making processes can strengthen the effects of perspective-taking, which triggers players' empathy towards the game characters.

The dilemmas also pushed TWoM to provoke players' empathy and lead to sustained and meaningful changes in behaviour and attitude within the game context and the real world (Darvasi, 2016). Besides, the NPC that players murder for food or the PC who died from starving, none of them will be back the next day. The permadeath design further enhances the effects of moral dilemmas (Devlin, 2016). Players may deeper examine the consequences of their choices through empathy and gain better insight into the political complexities inherent in conflicts.

The influences of TWoM are proved by the players. On Reddit "This War of Mine Review Thread", one of the players commented that "... My four characters did survive, but I don't think my humanity did...". Devlin (2016) suggested that the empathy design in the gameplay can change an individual's mindset and behaviour in the real world. It is clear that players have a great reflection on what they did in the game, and TWoM has raised their awareness of the dark side of war. Devlin's reading (2016) also mentioned that TWoM has

the potential of “changing the way we watch the news, treat others or cast a vote in an election”.

On top of that, with the rise of streaming platforms (e.g. Twitch.tv and Youtube), the game was able to reach a larger audience group. Those streaming platforms create a dynamic and participatory experience for the viewers. Thus, not only the players but also the viewers can engage with the game (Egliston & Carter, 2020). For instance, discussing and making decision suggestions for the players. By providing the decision suggestions to the players, the viewers are also connecting to the game. Thus, the moral dilemmas are applied to the viewers, which may trigger their empathy and awareness of the political issues happening within TWoM and the real world. This helps promote peace education (Devlin, 2016), which shows the game has a strong impact on global political problems.

Conclusion

Based on my gaming experience, I agreed that I would not reflect much on any political and moral issues when playing FPS games. I have not thought of the ethical issues of killing enemies, as that is what the mission told me. Instead, in TWoM, I stole food and murdered the neighbour after they noticed me. However, since then, I struggled when reading the diary of the characters. Their personal stories highlight the struggles and humanity of those affected by wars. This made me reflect a lot, especially when I had the choice of running away once the NPCs noticed me.

I have never experienced war, but I found how horrifying wars are after playing the game. Although some players may find the activities in the late game repetitive, which loses some engagement, the political concept of the game is still well presented and impactful on personal and social.

In conclusion, TWoM has engaged with politics with an entertaining experience for the players. It successfully promotes the political message of “war is hell” through its unique perspective on the survivors’ lives. At the same time, the downkeying game design triggers players' empathy and motivates them to reflect on real-world and moral issues. The game's message is further strengthened by the rise of streaming platforms, in which it was able to reach more audiences and players. This creates a better connection between players and the communities, which encourages not only players but also the viewers to think critically about the in-game ethical and moral dilemmas and real-world politics (e.g. Russian invasion of Ukraine).

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