Centenary (Computer Games)

By Chris Kempshall

Summary

The First World War centenary saw an emergence of new portrayals of the conflict in computer games. These new games sought either to tell new stories of war and conflict during the time period or to utilise the fact that it was a little-explored war in games to bring their audience something new. The success of these games was mixed; they did achieve notable results in portraying elements of the conflict not often understood by western, particularly British, audiences. However, they also reproduced many of the shortcomings of traditional media regarding imperial contribution and the causes of the war.

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Introduction

The First World War centenary coincided with shifts within the genre of historical computer games to produce a number of notable titles which focused on the conflict. The games that appeared during the centenary produced representations of the conflict on multiple fronts and incorporated elements of existing historiography in order to tell new stories about the war.

Before the centenary, First World War games had largely been located in particular genres, such as strategy games or flight simulators. These games had achieved moderate success within a dedicated player base but very few featured a recognisable narrative or plot aside from the historical backdrop. One of the key features of the wave of First World War-focused games that appeared around the centenary is the shift in using the war not just as a time period setting but also as a vessel for telling stories.

Whilst some strategy games continued to appear during the centenary period, it is with the First Person Shooter (FPS) and narrative adventure games that this article is primarily concerned, as these games represented the greatest departure from those which had come before. This article will attempt to explain the emergence of these games during the First World War centenary period, their successes and shortcomings, and to speculate on their legacy.

New Stories and Opportunities

The arrival of mainstream games focused on the First World War was effectively the confluence of an emerging industry need and the serendipity of the centenary period. Recent trends in military computer games, particularly FPS titles, had seen them abandon their historical roots in the Second World War and advance into modern and future conflicts. Whilst this chronological jump forward had paid initial dividends, sales and reviews of games such as *Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare* had trailed off and some companies began searching for alternative time periods in which to set their products.[1]

The first of these new recognisable games was an online FPS game titled *Verdun 1914-1918*.[2] Effectively developed as an independent title, *Verdun* was made playable during open-beta testing in June 2013 and was eventually fully released in April 2015. The game allowed for up to sixty-four players to fight over First World War battlefields up and down the Western Front and play as a variety of different nations, such as the Germans, French, British, and Canadians.

The primary success of *Verdun* was to puncture the long-standing notion that combat games set in the First World War would be too boring or difficult to appeal to a wide playerbase. By early 2015, before the game had been officially released, *Verdun* had achieved 100,000 sales and around 1,000 people playing the game each day.[3] The reproduction of trench warfare within *Verdun* had not dissuaded players from purchasing or enjoying the game and neither had the high difficulty level. In many FPS games, players can recover from multiple wounds by “resting” out of the line of fire. In *Verdun*, a gunshot wound would almost always result in immediate death. This new setting and steeper learning curve seemingly appealed to the players’ sense of skill and achievement and contributed to the game’s popularity, to the extent that a sequel, *Tannenberg*, set on the Eastern Front, was released on early access in November 2017.[4]

Valiant Hearts: The Great War, a narrative adventure game which was released in June 2014 shortly after *Verdun* had been made playable online, further advanced the representation of

the war.[5] The game's plot revolves around a series of interlocking characters: Emile, a French farmer who is brought back into the army at the outbreak of war; Karl, a German married to Emile's pregnant daughter, who is drafted into the German army in 1914; Freddie, an African-American who volunteers for the French army after a German offensive kills his wife; Anna, a Belgian veterinarian who becomes a nurse and whose father has been kidnapped by Germans; and a small dog, named Walt.

These characters travel around the Western Front encountering one another in a variety of situations and battles where the game then requires the player to solve certain puzzles in order to progress the story. The game's overarching narrative focuses on Karl and Emile's desire to return to their home which is now behind German lines. Because of the nature of the characters, *Valiant Hearts* is not a game built around combat, but around comradeship.

Whilst the player, particularly when controlling Emile and Freddie, is involved in battles, they do not actively participate in killing or using weapons except at a specific moment towards the game's end. What *Valiant Hearts* sought to do was introduce narrative and humanity into a war setting. Whereas in games such as *Verdun*, the enemy is the opposition soldier and victory is achieved by defeating them, in *Valiant Hearts* the enemy is the war itself and victory is not achieved through the act of killing but instead through the act of surviving.[6]

To achieve a sense of shared humanity between the different characters, *Valiant Hearts* often included different nationalities cooperating in attempts to survive the conflict regardless of whether they were allies or adversaries. To build on this, the game also incorporated particular moments of the war such as the Battle of the Frontiers in 1914, Verdun and the Somme in 1916, and the Canadian attack on Vimy Ridge in 1917.

One of the game's crucial moments comes during the French attack at the Chemin des Dames in 1917 where Emile strikes and accidentally kills a commanding officer in an act of mutiny. As a result of this action, he is later executed by firing squad during the game's epilogue. *Valiant Hearts* was a noted critical success and, in March 2015, won the "Best Original Property" category at the BAFTA Games Awards.

Several of the key developers behind *Valiant Hearts* would later form their own studio and release the game *11-11: Memories Retold*, which followed a Canadian war photographer and a German soldier searching for his missing son.[7] Like *Valiant Hearts*, this game also focused on the human aspect of interaction and survival during the conflict.

Whereas *Verdun* was able to confirm that players could connect to a combat setting in the First World War, *Valiant Hearts* proved that there were also narrative stories to be told in

these spaces. The additional benefit of these stories was that they were far less well-known than comparable stories set during the Second World War. This provided game developers with the opportunity to shock and surprise their audience, and allowed First World War games to enter the mainstream.

Battlefield 1

The *Battlefield* series of FPS games drew their heritage from Second World War settings, before attempting to explore modern and future conflicts, with mixed results. The developers at Electronic Arts (EA) initially favoured another game set in a futuristic setting and needed to be convinced of the merits of setting a title during the First World War when it was first broached by developers at EA Digital Illusions CE AB (EA DICE).[8] The insistence of the team that the game could be a success, coupled with the precedents simultaneously emerging through *Verdun* and *Valiant Hearts*, provided evidence to EA DICE, the developers of the *Battlefield* franchise, that a game set in this time period had commercial viability.

Battlefield 1 was officially announced in May 2016 and released in October of the same year.[9] The game combined single-player "war stories" with online multiplayer combat similar to *Verdun*. The single-player "war stories" consisted of storming beaches at Gallipoli as an Australian, fighting an Ottoman armoured train in the Arabian Peninsula as a Bedouin rebel, manning a tank during the 1918 Battle of Cambrai as a British soldier, flying a British fighter plane as an American, fighting in the Dolomite mountains as an Italian *Arditi*, and a prologue, where the player takes on the role of various African-American soldiers in 1918.

The geographical spread of these "war stories" allowed the game to examine different combatants and fronts during the war and use them to tell new narratives. Whilst the game remained largely Euro-centric, the decision to not simply examine the Western Front but also explore the Italian perspective as well as fighting in the Dardanelles and Middle East does represent a significant departure from traditional media portrayals of the conflict.

However, *Battlefield 1* did have some notable absences from the base version of the game. None of the "war stories" permitted the player to take on the role of any soldiers from the Central Powers; only the Entente were seen as suitable for active play. Further to this, the Entente itself was noticeably missing both the Russians and the French. Whilst these nations would be introduced in later downloadable content expansions (DLC) this only included them in multiplayer format, rather than adding new narrative "war stories". Additionally, the inclusion of *Arditi* caused controversy in the Italian press, given the links between that group and the rise of fascism under Benito Mussolini (1883-1945).[10]

Battlefield 1 was a signficant commercial success for EA DICE and, by September 2017, had sold over 15 million copies.[11] As a result it can claim to be the most widely experienced media about the First World War during the centenary period.

Research and Shortcomings

The aforementioned games represent a noticeable shift during the centenary period in the portrayal of the First World War in computer games. Their production was often driven by European developers, many from Scandinavia, who held an existing interest in the conflict and utilised particular historiography to inform their narratives.

The development of *Valiant Hearts* was carried out in cooperation with the production of the French documentary series *Apocalypse: WW1*.[12] The series, written by Isabelle Clarke and Daniel Costelle, was originally broadcast in French in March and April 2014 before later being rebroadcast in English for an American audience. The collaboration between the developers of *Valiant Hearts* and *Apocalypse* gave the former access to the work of historians such as Alexandre Lafon from the *Mission Centenaire*.[13]

The portrayal of the war in *Apocalypse* had a noticeable effect on the narrative of *Valiant Hearts*, with both media emphasising the emotional impact of the war and referring to it almost as a sentient entity. In several key moments of *Apocalypse*, ongoing battles are symbolised by the literal figure of the grim reaper, who swings a scythe over a smoke-covered battlefield, whereas in *Valiant Hearts*, an “infinite” appetite for death and destruction is ascribed to the war.

The developers of *Battlefield 1* were also influenced by the colour footage of *Apocalpyse*, but also sought to read and potentially incorporate the work of historians such as Hew Strachan, Margaret MacMillan, and Peter Hart.[14]

Authenticity as a concept in historical computer games has often been paired with visual fidelity; accuracy of uniforms and weaponry are key examples of this “authenticity lite”.[15] Maintaining a semblance of authenticity whilst also providing entertainment is a tension which lies at the centre of most of these games. The developers of *Battlefield 1* made their position clear: they prioritised the latter over the former and many of the weapons and scenarios the player encounters in the game were edited to produce a Second World War-esque war of movement and technology.[16] However, games like *Valiant Hearts* and *11-11: Memories Retold* incorporated historical collectibles into their games to provide a form of interaction with contemporary ephemera.[17] Alongside their game, the developers of *11-11:*

Memories Retold, a game much in the spirit of *Valiant Hearts* and designed by some of the same creators, also released a graphic novel, which provided historical context to the places and events depicted within the game's narrative.[18]

Despite the historiographical foundations of some of these games, they have encountered notable issues and manifested shortcomings in their portrayal of the war. Although there is a wider geographical spread than might otherwise have been expected, particularly in *Battlefield 1*, the portrayal of the First World War in these games is predominantly European and white. Whilst titles like *Valiant Hearts* did feature soldiers of different ethnicities, the contribution of assorted imperial and colonial soldiers during the war is generally overlooked in favour of European experience. Both *Battlefield 1* and *Valiant Hearts* featured women in playable roles, with the female Bedouin rebel in *Battlefield 1* being particularly noteworthy, but most games tend to have male protagonists.

Additionally, these games continue to have issues explaining the rationale for the war and its origins. As a result, without explicitly confronting the outbreak of the war, these games implicitly support a "sleepwalkers" narrative where the war became inevitable as a result of international mismanagement.

The legacy of these games is also unclear. Whilst *Battlefield 1* was a success for EA DICE, it was used as a springboard to return to their original roots of Second World War games, with *Battlefield V* being released in November 2018.[19] Mainstream big budget portrayals of the First World War in computer games may not last much beyond the end of the centenary.

However, the players of these games did use them at points to interact with the concept of remembrance and memorialisation in general. Each year, players of *Verdun* have the opportunity to mark a "Christmas Truce" and have snowball fights and football matches with opposing soldiers.[20] Some players in both *Battlefield 1* and *Verdun* also marked the date of 11 November 2018 by ceasing combat during online multiplayer matches.[21] This development suggests that these games can become part of a wider landscape and framework of memorialisation.

The release of games such as *11-11: Memories Retold* and the forthcoming narrative game *Within Whispers* do suggest that the First World War can provide an ongoing setting for narrative adventure games to explore, whereas FPS games like the *Battlefield* franchise will not dwell on this time period.

Conclusion

The First World War centenary heralded the arrival of computer games that tackled the conflict and its time period. In many ways, these games can be considered both a commercial and historical success.

By widening the focus from just the Western Front and incorporating some soldiers and battles from further afield, titles like *Verdun*, *Valiant Hearts*, and *Battlefield 1* serve as an important potential gateway into First World War historiography and understandings. The reach of these games is far longer than alternative forms of media, and *Battlefield 1*, in particular, is probably the most commercially successful First World War media portrayal ever created.

The utility of the First World War to the developers of these games lay in its duality. On the one hand, it was a recognisable conflict, particularly in Britain and Europe. On the other, many in the audience had no deep understanding of the war. This allowed the games to recreate elements of assumed memory whilst also having the freedom to surprise the player through narrative or adapt their experience with a view to playability.

The more nuanced games, such as *Valiant Hearts*, were able to make use of a conflict with no clear moral enemies, such as the Nazis for Second World War games, to tell stories of shared humanity and suffering in wartime. Whether the First World War will continue to provide a platform and setting for future explorations of these themes is currently unclear. Studios such as EA DICE appear to have already moved on.

Nevertheless, the success achieved by games during the centenary will likely not have gone unnoticed and, at the very least, the First World War is now recognised not just as a moment with ludic potential, but also as one with enough complexity and depth for exploration.

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Notes

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Citation

Chris Kempshall: Centenary (Computer Games), in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer D. Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2019-09-19. DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.11403

External Links

- Chapman, Adam: It's Hard to Play in the Trenches. World War 1, Collective Memory and Videogames, in: Game Studies 16/2, 2016 (Games Studies) (Article)
- Chapman, Adam / Kempshall, Chris: Battlefield 1. Can the Great War be a Great Game? 16 February 2017 (The Ontological Geek) (Article)
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Metadata

Regional Section(s)

Middle East > Ottoman Empire
North America > USA
Western Europe > Belgium
Western Europe > France
Western Europe > Great Britain and Ireland > Great Britain
Western Europe > Italy

Thematic Section(s)

Media
Post-war

Subjects

Culture > Mobilization, cultural > Interpretations of war
Culture > Visual arts
Memory and historiography > Commemoration, cult of the fallen > Remembrance days
Memory and historiography > Historiography > Controversies
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Politics, law > International relations > Origins of war
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Society > Social groups > Minorities
The media > Film, documentary
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Warfare and the military > Battles, battlefields and campaigns > Battles, battlefields and campaigns, Italy
Warfare and the military > Battles, battlefields and campaigns > Battles, battlefields and

campaigns, Near and Middle East
Warfare and the military > Battles, battlefields and campaigns > Battles, battlefields and campaigns, Western Front
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Warfare and the military > Warfare, air > Air warfare
Warfare and the military > Warfare, land > Trench warfare
Warfare and the military > Wars after war > Second World War
Warfare and the military > Wars after war > Post-war conflicts

Author Keywords
computer games; memory; representation; centenary

GND Subject Headings
Weltkrieg [1914-1918, Motiv] ; Computerspiel

LC Subject Headings
Computer war games ; World War, 1914-1918

Rameau Subject Headings
Guerre mondiale (1914-1918)

Key Person(s)
Mussolini, Benito; nurse

Key Location(s)
Verdun; Vimy; Gallipoli

Title
Centenary (Computer Games)

Author(s)
Chris Kempshall

Article Type
Handbook Article

Classification Group
Survey Article (Thematic)

Articles That Link Here
Centenary (New Zealand) and Centenary (Hungary)