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COUNTER-NARRATIVES OF WAR: PEDAGOGICAL USES OF “THIS WAR OF MINE” IN SHAPING CRITICAL EMPATHY

In times of conflict, the struggle over narratives becomes as crucial as the struggle on the battlefield. Education plays a vital role in shaping how future generations understand war, morality, and responsibility. This paper explores how “This War of Mine”, a critically acclaimed video game portraying civilian survival during wartime, can serve as a pedagogical tool for educators universally seeking to foster critical empathy and challenge one-sided portrayals of war. Drawing on insights from cyberpsychology, narrative psychology, and game studies, the paper demonstrates how interactive storytelling enables players to emotionally and ethically engage with the realities of war beyond political rhetoric. By analysing classroom applications and narrative mechanics, the text highlights how educators can use digital games not to glorify or trivialise conflict, but to humanise it, transforming students from passive recipients of information into active interpreters of moral complexity. The paper further underscores the importance of critical media literacy in the face of propaganda-driven titles such as Squad 22: ZOV, which promote militaristic, one-dimensional depictions of war and contribute to dehumanising narrative framing. Ultimately, it argues that video games can become powerful instruments for building nuanced, humane understandings of atrocity and survival.

Keywords: video games; narrative; conflict; war; media pedagogy; educational psychology.

Introduction. More than half a century has passed since McLuhan (1964) wrote about the “global village.” During this period, technological change and development have accelerated to a degree unprecedented in human history. Over fifty years ago, computers required their own dedicated rooms; today, devices many times more powerful than those that sent humans into space have become embedded in the fabric of everyday life.

Pedagogy not only attempts to keep pace with these changes, to understand and describe them within the context of educational practice, but also strives to harness technology as a tool through which

didactic and formative activities can become not merely “modern,” but above all effective, thus aligning with the longstanding work of researchers and practitioners of media education. It would be difficult to claim that this fascination with technology is universally shared by all educators. Issues surrounding technology and its safe use remain subjects of debate, and the literature includes publications highlighting potential risks such as addiction (Kuss et al., 2018), excessive cognitive offloading (Grinschgl et al., 2021), or sleep disturbances (Johansson et al., 2016). However, not all such claims are supported by rigorous analysis, particularly in light of reports and studies that fail to confirm these adverse effects or point to problems stemming from flawed diagnostic procedures. Some scholars explicitly draw attention to biases related to technology that may impede objective approaches to it (Ferguson & Colwell, 2019).

Unfortunately, the current geopolitical reality forces us to consider the above not only as a contribution to the conversation on new methods and forms of teaching, but also, perhaps foremost, as a new domain in which influence on upbringing, attitudes, and morality is increasingly shaped in dehumanising ways. While the use of video games may foster the development of empathy, games are also carriers of narrative, and these narratives are now being leveraged to disseminate disinformation and propaganda, for instance, the video game *Squad 22: ZOV*, which offers a propagandistic portrayal of the battles for Mariupol. This article aims to identify the aspects of video games that make them so deeply engaging and to demonstrate how a specific title (“*This War of Mine*”, 11 bit studios) can be employed to cultivate empathy and convey the perspective of civilians during armed conflict.

Characteristics of selected mechanics and phenomena in video games. The specificity of the phenomena discussed in this paper arises primarily from the polymodality and interactivity inherent in the experience of playing video games. Identification with a literary character, according to some authors, is qualitatively different from identifying with a video game protagonist (see e.g. Klimmt et al., 2010). One may assume that the nature of this relationship is more active. Players direct the actions of the protagonist, often attributing to them distinct personality traits and agency (e.g. Banks & Bowman, 2021), or

they identify with them in various ways (Downs et al., 2017). The actions of the player/protagonist, whether this relationship is monadic or not, may directly influence the development of the narrative and the shape of the fictional world. Although identification with characters in other cultural texts is possible, the author of this paper argues that it constitutes a qualitatively different and more passive type of experience.

The aforementioned video game protagonist is more commonly referred to as an avatar (an entity the player “embodies”). Several phenomena and processes have been observed within this relationship. Banks and Bowman (2021) distinguish several subtypes of this relation depending on its degree of socialisation. The player may treat their avatar as a tool, an extension of the self, may establish a symbiotic relationship with it, or treat it as though it were a real person endowed with uniqueness and agency. Each of these types may lead to different outcomes. For example, players who explore aspects of their identity through video games typically form a symbiotic relationship, using gameplay to examine how they might behave when confronted with morally challenging choices (see also Bowman et al., 2016).

A phenomenon closely related to specific forms of avatar–player relations is identification, which Klimmt and colleagues (2009) define as a temporary shift in self-concept through perceiving and adopting the characteristics of a portrayed character. This is one of many definitions present in the literature (Downs et al., 2017), where scholars also advocate for a holistic consideration of identification, emphasising its various forms (e.g., monadic, dyadic, partial, wishful, etc.). A similar definitional diversity can be observed with regard to the term immersion, which refers to a specific state of being deeply absorbed in various aspects of a video game’s virtual reality. A player may become immersed in the fictional world, the narrative, or even the community that co-creates the environment of a given game (see Bowman, 2018).

Particularly noteworthy in this context is the use of virtual reality. Czub and Janeta (2021) demonstrated that individuals who exercised while embodying a muscular avatar in a VR environment completed significantly more repetitions than those who exercised outside VR while looking at their own reflection in a mirror. Interesting conclusions also emerge from experiments involving popular moral dilemmas (such as the trolley problem) in VR contexts (e.g., Navarrete et al., 2012;

Niforatos et al., 2020; Kissel et al., 2023). These findings suggest that video games and virtual reality environments may not only constitute more ecologically valid research settings for certain phenomena, but also provide grounds for assuming that such tools can produce more durable educational effects due to the intensity of the experiences they evoke. Enacting certain situations “on paper” or mentally is qualitatively different from experiencing them “as if” they were real. Some studies support this assumption, demonstrating more prosocial behaviour in players outside the virtual environment following gameplay sessions (Guegan et al., 2020).

The above phenomena and the research conducted on them illustrate how engaging, meaningful, and emotionally charged video game experiences can be. This is highly relevant in the context of memory, particularly autobiographical memory. Given that educational and formative efforts must be durable and cognitively accessible to the learner in order to be effective, one can observe numerous practical applications of these phenomena within pedagogical contexts.

“This War of Mine” - description and application. “This War of Mine” is a 2014 survival game developed by the Polish studio 11 bit studios. The title diverges from traditional war-themed digital games by shifting the locus of agency from soldiers to civilians trapped in a besieged urban environment. The game constructs a representation of wartime survival that foregrounds vulnerability, scarcity, and psychological strain. Instead of focusing on combat as a primary mode of engagement, it emphasises day-to-day endurance, moral conflict, and the social dynamics of individuals attempting to persist under extreme circumstances. The game’s thematic and aesthetic inspirations draw heavily from accounts of the Siege of Sarajevo (1992 – 1996) and other conflicts in which civilians constituted the primary victims of urban warfare.

Core mechanics in “This War of Mine” revolve around managing a group of civilians as they attempt to survive until the eventual ceasefire. Players must maintain essential conditions such as physical health, hunger levels, warmth, emotional stability, and security. This requires the allocation of limited resources, the construction or improvement of shelter, and the completion of crafting tasks. The game’s night cycle introduces a contrasting high-risk system in which

players scavenge for food, medicine, and building materials in hostile locations. These actions create a tension between risk-taking and preservation, making survival both a logistical and ethical challenge. Ultimately, success is defined not by domination or conquest but by the ability of the group to endure the crisis.

The development of “This War of Mine” was informed by extensive interdisciplinary research conducted by 11 bit studios. The team engaged in interviews with survivors of real conflicts, particularly individuals who experienced the conditions of the Balkan War. These firsthand accounts provided qualitative insights into the emotional and practical realities of living under siege. Developers also consulted war correspondents, who contributed professional perspectives on the dynamics of civilian survival in conflict zones. The research process further incorporated documentary materials, academic analyses of trauma and civilian experiences in wartime, and humanitarian reports from organisations such as UNICEF and UNHCR. Environmental authenticity was enhanced through the study of war-damaged architecture, emergency shelters, and photographic documentation of destroyed urban spaces. The studio emphasised an ethical approach to representation, seeking to avoid sensationalism in favour of a respectful and accurate portrayal of civilian suffering.

A distinguishing feature of “This War of Mine” is the centrality of moral dilemmas that emerge from routine gameplay decisions. The game systematically places players in situations where ethical values conflict with practical survival needs. One recurring dilemma concerns the decision to steal essential supplies from vulnerable non-player characters; while such actions may prolong the survival of the player’s group, they can simultaneously cause characters to experience guilt, depression, or psychological breakdown.

Similarly, choices involving violence, whether in self-defence or pre-emptive action, carry potential repercussions for the mental state of characters and the cohesion of the group. Other dilemmas arise from interaction with neighbouring survivors, who may request assistance that jeopardises the player’s limited resources. The game’s portrayal of children in the Little Ones expansion introduces additional layers of moral responsibility, highlighting conflicts between nurturing obligations and the necessity of harsh survival strategies. In this way,

the game operates as an experiential framework through which players confront ethically ambiguous scenarios analogous to those faced by civilians in real wartime contexts.

Framework for pedagogical use. If this game were considered a pedagogical tool, there are many ways of using it in the classroom. The trailer of the game is a great opening point for discussion. As the trailer begins, the viewer sees soldiers in urban combat, suggesting this game will be another shooter. However, at the end of the trailer, a group of afraid civilians sit in the room with a caption “In the war, not everyone is a soldier”. The teacher could ask about the different perspectives of soldiers vs civilians.

The points at which the player has to choose a hard moral dilemma could be played by the players themselves, the teacher can play the game, and the class can observe the gameplay, or samples of gameplay could be shown during the class. This would also be accompanied by the discussion during the class can choose and later see the consequences. Each of such dilemmas should be discussed from the point of view of real-life people who might be undergoing the stress and burden of such choices today in Ukraine.

A more complex activity could be a journal-starting assignment. After finishing a play session, the player/student would write a journal entry from the perspective of the characters in-game. Such a task would force the player to try to feel and think like the civilians during a war conflict, making that experience more vivid and visceral.

The main idea behind using this game could be summarised by two processes, which should be active during the pedagogical work with it: a discussion point that would evoke reflexive thinking, and an opportunity to try be able to see the war through the eyes and hardships of civilians, making the war less movie-like and shooter games-like.

There are some risks and limitations. First of all, the game is not suited for younger students, since the portrayal of the brutality of war is a core focus of the game. Depending on the sensitivity of students, some of them could not bring themselves to play. A potential off-screen sexual assault event, if experienced without guidance, could have an emotional impact that some students may struggle to process independently. Educators must implement guided processing, ensure psychological safety, offer alternative participation paths, and integrate

post-activity emotional debriefing to support self-regulation and meaning-making.

It is also important to note that in an educational context, the role of memory and memory consolidation is critical for an effective pedagogical application. Since video games are polymodal, they give the players a sense of agency and responsibility for actions and effects that occur on screen, and they do not feel like a chore that someone has to be pushed to do (like, for example, mandatory lecture reading). Those and the factors mentioned in the first part of this paper can contribute to the overall pedagogical effectiveness of using “This War of Mine” as a tool, which can be downloaded from the Polish Government site (<https://www.gov.pl/web/gryweducacji/this-war-of-mine>).

Conclusions. This paper contends that “This War of Mine” can be applied in classrooms universally as an effective instrument for cultivating critical empathy, media literacy, and moral reflection on civilian wartime survival. Through game affordances such as agency, avatar embodiment, and narrative engagement that strengthens autobiographical memory, students gain the capacity to become active interpreters of ethical ambiguity and human vulnerability, rather than passive recipients of war discourse.

The growing use of video games in spreading wartime propaganda, including titles such as Squad 22: ZOV, portraying the battle for Mariupol in a one-sided, militaristic manner and embedding Z-symbol narratives, demonstrates the need for education to confront and deconstruct dehumanising digital narratives. Games like “This War of Mine” offer a constructive counterbalance: they do not glorify conflict but expose its human cost, enabling ethical reasoning, perspective-taking, and critical analysis of conflicting war stories. When implemented with trauma-sensitive facilitation, digital play becomes a meaningful extension of media pedagogy, supporting humane understanding, narrative plurality, and resilience against manipulative or reductive representations of war.

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COUNTER-NARRATIVES OF WAR: PEDAGOGICAL USES OF “THIS WAR OF MINE” IN SHAPING CRITICAL EMPATHY

W czasach konfliktu walka o narracje staje się równie istotna jak walka na polu bitwy. Edukacja odgrywa kluczową rolę w kształtowaniu sposobu, w jaki przyszłe pokolenia rozumieją wojnę, moralność i odpowiedzialność. Niniejszy artykuł analizuje, w jaki sposób “This War of Mine”, wysoce ceniona gra wideo ukazująca perspektywę cywilów próbujących przetrwać w realiach wojennych, może stanowić narzędzie pedagogiczne dla nauczycieli poszukujących sposobów rozwijania krytycznej empatii oraz kwestionowania jednostronnych przedstawień konfliktu. Odwołując się do ustaleń cyberpsychologii, psychologii narracyjnej oraz game studies, tekst pokazuje, w jaki sposób interaktywne opowiadanie historii pozwala graczom emocjonalnie i etycznie zaangażować się w realia wojny, wykraczając poza polityczną retorykę. Poprzez analizę zastosowań edukacyjnych i mechanizmów narracyjnych, artykuł podkreśla, że gry cyfrowe mogą służyć nie do gloryfikowania czy trywializowania konfliktu, lecz do jego humanizacji przekształcając uczniów z pasywnych odbiorców informacji w aktywnych interpretatorów moralnej złożoności. W rezultacie autor dowodzi, że gry mogą stać się potężnym narzędziem wspierającym kształtowanie zniuansowanego, humanitarnego rozumienia okrucieństwa i przetrwania.

Słowa klucze: gry wideo; narracja; konflikt; wojna; pedagogika medialna; psychologia edukacyjna.

Петро Клімчик

КОНТРНАРАТИВИ ВІЙНИ: ПЕДАГОГІЧНЕ ВИКОРИСТАННЯ «ЦІЄЇ МОСІ ВІЙНИ» ДЛЯ ФОРМУВАННЯ КРИТИЧНОЇ ЕМПАТІЇ

У часи конфліктів боротьба за наративи стає такою ж важливою, як і боротьба на полі бою. Освіта відіграє життєво важливу роль у формуванні того, як майбутні покоління розуміють війну, мораль і відповідальність. У пропонованій статті досліджується, як схвалена критиками відеогра «This War of Mine», де зображується виживання цивільного населення під час війни, може служити педагогічним інструментом для викладачів, які прагнуть розвивати в учнів критичну емпатію та кидати виклик однобоким зображенням війни. Ґрунтуючись на знаннях кіберпсихології, наративної психології та ігор, автор демонструє, як інтерактивне оповідання дозволяє гравцям емоційно та етично взаємодіяти з реаліями війни поза межами політичної риторики. Аналізуючи застосування едукативних і наративних механізмів, у тексті висвітлюється, як педагоги можуть використовувати цифрові ігри не для уславлення чи тривіалізації конфлікту, а для його гуманізації, перетворюючи учнів із пасивних користувачів інформації на активних інтерпретаторів складних моральних ситуацій. У статті підкреслюється важливість сформованості критичної медіаграмотності перед загрозою пропагандистських ігор, таких як Squad 22: ZOV, де пропонуються мілітаристські, одномірні зображення війни, що сприяє дегуманізованню наративного фреймінгу. Зрештою, стверджується, що відеоігри можуть стати потужними інструментами для розвитку нюансованого розуміння жорстокості та виживання.

Ключові слова: відеоігри; наратив; конфлікт; війна; медіапедагогіка; освітня психологія.

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