

Computer Games, the Civil War, and Education

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Education is not an affair of "telling" and being told, but an active and constructive process.

—John Dewey *Democracy and Education* 1916

Almost one hundred years ago, Dewey was critiquing the system that still seems very much in place today. In a conversation with Donald Macedo in 1999, Noam Chomsky echoes what many progressive educators have said before and since Dewey: schools are "institutions for indoctrination and for imposing obedience. Far from creating independent thinkers, schools have always, throughout history, played an institutional role in a system of control and coercion" (16). Formal schooling continues to encourage passive adherence to social norms. Formal schooling is also a place where students can learn complex and academic "truths" about world history, culture, language, and mathematics. More often, in an economic environment that creates a perpetual crisis in formal education, schooling gets reduced to mere indoctrination of students. This has contributed to what, in the United States, can be described as a dysfunctional democracy. This can be combated, in part, by educators who encourage the development of civically minded, independent, and contemplative students. How can this type of citizen become the norm? The answers are myriad, but there is at least one powerful tool that deserves much more consideration.

Computer games are likely to get more and more attention in the coming years as they are studied from a variety of fields. The field of education is only one area in which game scholars emerge. Computer games already have a place within formal education that will probably continue to grow, but the methods in which games educate is a question that needs further study by interested researchers from many fields. The answers to the aforementioned question have implications that should be of interest to us all.

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In this paper, I will discuss games that feature historical events. My focus will be on wars in which the United States participated. Though games are always educational, the historical events that many games depict are often simplified for a variety of reasons that are technically as well as ideologically revealing about the culture in which these games are produced and purchased. What I intend to do here is interrogate some of the issues that arise when entertainment is our culture's most powerful educator about war. My primary focus will be the United States' Civil War, but I will also discuss other wars that are depicted in computer games.

The Ubiquitous Tutor

The education provided by mass marketed entertainment is necessarily simplistic and reductive. This is especially troubling when its subject matter is war and other painful cultural memories. Often, war is rendered as romantic and sentimental in entertainment media. These types of representations undermine the profound tragedy of warfare.

Most popular film productions about U.S. wars have been sympathetic in regard to the justifications for war and simplistic in their rendering of the causes and consequences of conflict. Certainly, the average American who has been through a formal system of education has been educated about war through textbooks and through classroom education. However, film, television programs, and popular novels may impose the most powerful and lasting memories about the subject of war: *Birth of a Nation*, *Gone With the Wind*, *The Sands of Iwo Jima*, *The Green Berets*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Pearl Harbor*, *The Patriot*, *Band of Brothers*, *Black Hawk Down*, and so on. Though a comparatively recent addition to the media stable, computer games are emerging to become an equally important entertainment format for educating people about U.S. wars. For game consoles, World War II is the most popular war to be used in games as evidenced by the highly popular series *Medal of Honor*. Vietnam War games, which I will discuss in more detail later, are also increasing in number and popularity. *Conflict Desert Storm* uses even more contemporary theaters, and many games like *Ghost Recon*, *Full Spectrum Warrior*, and *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six* series create fictional theaters but are clearly relying on association with actual conflicts. The Revolutionary War and the Korean War have game-based representations, as does World War I; none of these, however, is particularly popular in the current marketplace. While I am interested in the notable lack of attention to particular military conflicts by the game industry, I am especially interested in this phenomenon vis-à-vis the Civil War. In this essay, I will focus on some revealing features of the games that exist for personal computers (as opposed to console games like the PS2 and Xbox). By doing this, I hope to illuminate some major issues that constellate around the study of "historical event" games.

The War Between The States In American Memory

The Civil War lives on in U.S. culture. References to it appear in popular news sources and media regularly. For instance, recently one of the potential presidential nominees in the 2004 election, Howard Dean, created a public relations nightmare that was covered by most media outlets when he said that he would like to be the candidate of guys with Confederate flags on their pickup trucks. Several years ago there was the confrontation between those who wanted to keep the Confederate flag waving at the state capitol of South Carolina and those who did not. The History Channel produced a documentary about the issue called *In Whose Honor?* In it, they interviewed dozens of people who felt personally invested in the debate. The History Channel also airs the long running program *The Civil War Journal* and, every few years, broadcasts the popular 1990 Ken Burns's documentary *The Civil War*. In its original broadcast on PBS, this eleven hour program broke the educational series rating's record and had over thirteen million viewers for its premier; it is estimated that over forty million viewers watched at least one episode of the documentary (Toplin xv).

Furthermore, representations of the Civil War on film are legion and have been bankable for over a century. The recent film *Cold Mountain* earned an academy award for Rene Zellweger and 2003's film *Gods and Generals* starred Robert Duvall and was shown on screens throughout the country. Add these to the list of the eighty other films that have used the Civil War as their subject matter since 1929, and the hundreds of Civil War films produced in the silent era, and it becomes clear that this war has been, and will continue to be, a hugely popular topic in the powerful realm of cinematic entertainment (Kinnard vii; 281-284).

Evidence of the United States' consistent interest in this topic doesn't end with Hollywood films and documentaries though; from television's mini-series *North and South*, to the musical *The Civil War*, to the countless books and magazines dedicated to the study of the war, there is no outlet of media that has not used the Civil War as a subject. This ranges from the most traditional to the most cutting edge formats. Tony Horwitz writes in *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War* that by 1998, "The number of books about the Civil War passed 60,000; a bibliography of works on Gettysburg alone ran to 277 pages" and more Civil War books are published each year (5). The war is now covered on the Internet with hundreds of thousands of sites related to everything from major battles to minor intrigues. In fact, William G. Thomas and Alice E. Carter published *The Civil War on the Web* in 2001 in an effort to help others in "separating the meat of the grain from the chaff" (xi).

The war is all around us, but the complexity of its causes and its influence on the present are rarely discussed in productions that attain popular status. The war's influence on, among other things, race relations, U.S. governmental structure, foreign policy, economic philosophy, industrialization, and military technology are

left out of the most financially successful depictions of the war. Cast in such productions as *Gone with the Wind*, *Gettysburg*, and *Glory*, the war can seem like a character in a shallow narrative. In many depictions, it is a past without influence on the present. Computer games could render more complicated versions of the war but, unfortunately, there are only seventeen Civil War games for the personal computer and none for popular game consoles like the Sony PlayStation 2 and the Microsoft Xbox. Moreover, all of the games featuring the war that do exist for PCs are remarkably similar to one another. This is especially surprising when Civil War games are compared to other war-oriented games. Other wars are represented across virtually all the game modes: FPS, role playing, real time strategy, massively multi-player online games, and a plethora of innovations with and beyond these modes.

The Civil War is significant and complicated for obvious reasons so this may be a reason that the war is not a more popular subject for computer games especially in modes that may depict the war in graphic detail. It doesn't seem like a topic for a computer game, and yet computer games have taken on this subject as has every other entertainment medium, and like other media productions, computer games present the Civil War as something distant from our contemporary world. Transforming trauma into a mythic narrative is something that seems like a normal response to unspeakable violence. During the four years of the war, the combined Union and Confederate armies suffered more than 620,000 deaths through battle and disease (Foote 1040). Another 470,000 soldiers were wounded and/or permanently disfigured. In a nation of any size, these are staggering numbers, but in a nation of only thirty-two million (the United States' population in 1865), they were devastating. If the mortality rate were adjusted to present day figures with the American population at approximately 280,000,000, it would mean that roughly five million soldiers would die. How would the nation react? How would the nation continue after peace had been settled? Perhaps the nation would do again what it did in the past: drop deeply into a state of debilitating denial. Rather than discussing the reasons for conflict in the aftermath of the war, the Whites of the North and the South were urged to find a common ground and look to the future and forget the complexities of the past. How was sense made of the chaos, tragedy, and social disruption that resulted from it? The assassination of Lincoln, the results of emancipation, the formation of the KKK, and the tremendous struggles of Reconstruction were bitter reminders that all was not well between the two former adversaries after 1865. The war is kept at a distance or delineated in simplistic ways for the same reason that traumas are often sublimated. The computer games continue a long tradition.

Some of these Civil War computer games are trivia games, but the rest are either real time strategy or role playing games; the player controls large numbers of troops from a commanding general's point of view or makes large scale political and military decisions for the section of the nation they've selected. The following

description, which comes from the box cover for The History Channel's *Civil War the Game: Great Battles* (released in 2002 by Activision), is fairly representative of all past and current games:

You must rally the troops and counterattack. Your skills as a strategic thinker and a tactical commander will decide the outcome. It's up to you to preserve the Union or win independence for Dixie. Take command!

Two more games are being developed for release in late 2004, one called *Civil War: The War Between the States* (developed by Walker Boy studios) and another called *Take Command 1861* (developed by Mad Minute Games). In the first game, the player holds the position of commander for either the Union or Confederate Armies:

The Walker Boys Studio will allow you to take the course of history and change it. You decide where to fight, where to move, how to operate and direct how the war will go. There will be no set guidelines as for when battle will happen, or where; you are not told where to go. You are in full command of your troops. You will have to use your strategies and plans in order to either crush the Southern Rebellion, or to defeat the Northern Invasion. (Morelli)

Take Command 1861 is described as a real time strategy game as well. Players command troops and will be able to control larger groups of soldiers as they win battles. Though it is like a role playing game in that it gives the player opportunities for promotion, it is, in most respects, quite similar to the aforementioned games.

The point of view and game play for all Civil War games is nearly identical. These are, for the most part, strategy, and large scale military tactical games where the view of combat is obscured by distance from the violence. Why have so many other "history" games utilized first person shooter designs, for example, but Civil War games have not tapped into this format? Controversy has not stopped the game industry from developing titles about other painful and controversial topics from history such as the attack on Pearl Harbor and the war in Vietnam. Obviously, some painful cultural memories are more marketable than others. Investigating some of these cultural memories is being done through computer games more so than ever before.

Acceptable Wars

Though World War II is the most popular subject for historically-based first person shooters, the controversial Vietnam War is gaining popularity. Several companies have released Vietnam games that are first person shooters, and more are soon to be released. Vietnam game development creates unique challenges in light of

the United States' knowledge about that war. With WWII games, fighting against Nazi enemies is fairly easy to rationalize in the United States. As Stephen Totilo of the *New York Times* indicates,

For years, the dominant real-world conflict in video games has been World War II. That war proved a natural fit: Nazis could be presented as an unambiguous evil that fit the simplistic morality of most video games. (1)

However, the Vietnam War carries a different moral complexity than WWII. The new games are including some of this complexity: *Battlefield: Vietnam*, *Men of Valor*, *Vietcong*, *Shellshock: Nam '67*, and *Conflict Vietnam* all muddle the clearly demarcated space between the villains and the heroes that is typical in many video games.

Vien Hong, a Vietnamese-American voice actor, provides the voices of many Viet Cong characters in *Men of Valor*. Totilo recounts an interview he had with Hong. In it, the actor claimed the game added moral ambiguity between who was the enemy "particularly in a scene in which a North Vietnamese combatant whose voice he supplied suffers torture at the hands of American forces" (2). Totilo continues: "He praised the *Men of Valor* development team for allowing the 'enemy' to exude human qualities like humor and hunger" (2). Will a game that encourages empathy for the enemy be a success? Regardless, the game is demonstrating more emotional complexity than many games that feature war. Presenting more intricate storylines and evoking moral ambiguity is a new step for graphic war-oriented computer games and may signal a shift to more realistic depictions of war.

Being able to play *Men of Valor* as the Viet Cong shows the potential that games have for teaching points of view that most media are not willing to address. The inclusion of such perspectives also provides evidence that game developers are delving into more complicated aspects of history. *Men of Valor* is described in detail on the gamespot.com:

Battle your way through the major actions in the conflict, from search and destroy missions around Danang airbase to the Tet offensive and the counterattack on Hue. Or experience the entire thrilling tour of duty with friends via various multiplayer modes, which allow you to view the war from the perspective of the Viet Cong guerillas as well as U.S. forces. Furthermore, as *GameInformer: Video Game Magazine* sees it, 2015 [the game's development company] is doing their utmost to ensure that Sgt. Shephard, the main character in M[en] o[f] V[alor], is a fully-developed character that gamers can empathize with—something that's almost unheard-of in the FPS genre. (78)

This game seems to mark, then, a new trend in game design. It is one that does not shy away from complicating the motivations for war.

It is more difficult to simplify, glorify, or romanticize the conflict in Vietnam than it was to simplify the conflict in World War II. The world's knowledge about the Vietnam War will forever be influenced by, among other things, the protests against the war, the reports of atrocities committed by U.S. forces, and the withdrawal of the U.S. before military domination. It seems like an odd choice for a computer game because of this. The more complex storytelling that is signaled by *Men of Valor* should indicate that computer games may be departing from the other more simplistic stories that much entertainment media tells. If this can be done with Vietnam, it should be possible with other significant conflicts from United States history.

The Civil War's Legacy

On the fourth of July of 1913, President Woodrow Wilson addressed an audience gathered at America's most famous battleground. The semi-centennial commemoration of the battle at Gettysburg attracted tens of thousands of curious spectators and over fifty thousand Union and Confederate veterans (Blight 8). In his speech, Wilson asked, "What had the fifty years since the battle meant?" His answer:

We have found one another again as brothers and comrades... []. How complete the union has become and how dear to all of us, how unquestioned, how benign and majestic, as state after state has been added to this, our great family of free men! (qtd. in Blight 11)

This answer, "struck the mystic cord that most white Americans were prepared to hear" (Blight 11). Wilson's speech is only the culmination of what the fifty years previous had been repeated in the form of political speeches, newspaper articles, novels, soldiers' memoirs, poems, musicals, and advertisements: the war was over and the nation was united. The sheer volume of material declaring full reunion indicates that most Americans had a deep desire for at least the illusion of sectional reunion. Therefore, when the past was recalled in entertainment, it was done so in simplistic and sentimental ways.

The violence and complex reasons for the war were re-crafted in popular literature as a clash of two equally noble fighting forces whose faith in their vision of American ideology was worth what Lincoln called in the Gettysburg address "the last full measure of devotion." The popular poetry, novels, essays and children's books by Thomas Nelson Page (1853-1922) are representative of the rhetorical vision many White Americans embraced: the conflicts in his work were typically resolved with intersectional marriages. Pages' novels such as *In Ole Virginia*, *Befo' de War*, *Robert E. Lee*:

man and soldier and the children's story "Two Little Confederates," not only delineated heroic Union and Confederate soldiers, but also told of a pre-war South that was full of loving and kind slave owners and happy and loyal slaves, ignorant of their plight. Nelson was first published in *Century* magazine in 1884 and was immediately popular in the South. Pre-eminent critic and journalist Edmund Wilson writes of Page in *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War*. He finds that Page's depiction of the South offered a strange satisfaction to readers of the North:

The Northerners, after the shedding of so much blood, illogically found it soothing to be told that slavery had been not so bad, that the Negroes were a lovable simple race, whose business was to work for the whites. (605-06)

Page's work was wildly popular throughout the entire country. In his work, the world before the war was rendered as more innocent, placid, and wholesome than the urbanizing Union. The popularity of this work reveals, at least, some ambivalence about the war's result. Historian and Amherst Professor David Blight argues that in the years following the war "Civil War memory fell into a drugged state, as though sent to an idyllic foreign land from which it has never fully found the way home" (217). The popular literature of the day, represented by Page, had no room for complexity, bitterness, or reflection. This romanticism culminates in *Gone with the Wind* in which the war is packaged as drama, sentiment, and romance.

Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that Civil War computer games keep their distance from the battlefield. Perhaps it is not proper to play with horrible historical events or entertain ideas in too much detail about a guilt-filled past that treated human beings as animals or tools. However, the events that evoke pain, controversy, and guilt for a nation are the ones that most need attention. Games can be the place to give profound and serious attention to episodes that should not be forgotten and that should not be relegated to a week long discussion in history class. The god's eye view of *Sid Meier's Gettysburg* is typical of all the aforementioned Civil War games (also see the Appendix). This distance from the war allows for the simplistic myths to go unchallenged. Instead of critiquing and probing the source of those myths and easy memories about the war, games have maintained their distance from the battlefield, focused on iconic figures, and perpetuated infantile understandings of the war. The games that do exist do not encourage complex thinking about the war as many Vietnam games are starting to do. The Civil War games that do exist are not reaching out to an audience that has been raised on *Halo*, *Medal of Honor*, *Rainbow Six*, and other fast-paced and thoroughly detailed games.

Sid Meier's Gettysburg! offers a perspective that is emblematic of the distance that citizens of the United States want to keep from the war. The game does not offer reminders of the material condi-

tions in which the battles were fought. Even when a player zooms in on the violent action, individuals are not depicted. Each individual is representative of many others in the unit. There is no attempt by the game developer to create verisimilitude. Additionally, games do not include reference to the Constitutional justification for slavery, the consolidation of federal power during the war, or the intense religious arguments used by slave owners and abolitionists alike. But why should games do what no other popular medium has attempted?

The consequences of the war and resultant emancipation have never been deeply confronted in the nation as a whole. The United States continues to suffer debilitating racial inequality as a result. David Blight identifies this problem. Through our entertainment about the war, "We sometimes lift ourselves out of historical time, above details, and render the war safe in a kind of national Passover" (4). This is symbolized in the great distance from the battlefield that Civil War games replicate. There is little need for investigations of moral ambiguity when the war is presented as no more than an innovative chess match. The warfare is kept at a clean and safe distance in the games just as the war is kept at a safe and clean distance in popular memory. Blight goes on to discuss the popular speeches, plays, novels, songs, poems, and films that have remembered the war in ways that Americans can tolerate. Typically, these entertaining productions have not been profoundly educational. More than anything, they have been distractions from any "real" discussion of the war and its consequences.

The entertainment value of activities like reading comic books and magazines, listening to music and watching television, or playing games seems to overshadow any notions that those activities are educational or coercive. For this very reason it is important to study the education that is being promulgated in these activities. As John Dewey argued, people learn things best when they are active and enjoying themselves. Games are already teaching players about war. Computer games can take the lead in profoundly altering conceptions of history by captivating players while also educating them about the intense importance of historical events such as wars and their causes. Thus far, games about the Civil War have only repeated the lessons about the war learned in other mediums. Is this something that can be changed? Or is the United States sentenced to perpetual denial about the influences of that war?

Why does it matter if citizens of the United States have a better and more complicated understanding of the Civil War? Even an FPS with the Civil War as its setting will continue a tradition of obsession with the military history of the war. But battle games need only be one type of game within a larger universe of games about the Civil War. An excellent game, in any mode, would create a curiosity in those who play it. More importantly, games about the war need to stop perpetuating the simplistic views of the past. Military strategy is part of the Civil War. States' rights are a part of the Civil War. Slavery is a part of the war. But there is more to it as well. The

war is more complicated than entertainment tends to acknowledge. Computer games are a unique medium through which a powerful education can be encouraged. History can be acknowledged in complicated and intriguing ways so that when players turn to games, they will enjoy themselves and learn complex and thought provoking lessons about their history. Can such games be commercially viable? The many new Vietnam War titles may provide an answer. Can a game about war be engaging while it also encourages empathy and challenges cultural myths? This remains to be seen.

Appendix

- **12 Roads to Gettysburg*- TDC Interactive 1995
- **The History Channel's Civil War the Game: Great Battles*- Activision 2002
- **Edward Grabowski's The Blue and The Gray*- Impressions 1993
- **Civil War General: Robert E. Lee* Sierra 1996
- **Civil War 2 Generals: Grant, Lee and Sherman* Sierra 1997.
- *Sid Meier's Civil War Collection- Firaxis Games 2002. This is a collection of two games that were previously released separately: *Gettysburg!*-1997 and *Antietam!*-1999. A South Mountain Campaign was added for the re-released collection.
- **Civil War Explosion*- A collection of three games on three CD-ROMS: *Civil War I*- trivia questions, *Civil War II*- war simulation, and *Civil War Shootout*- also a trivia game. Countertop Software 1998.
- **American Civil War*- Interactive Magic 1995(?)
- **Civil War Battles*- Three games by John Tiller from a company called HPS Simulations in their collection *The Age of Rifles and Muskets: Campaign Corinth* (2001), *Campaign Ozark* (2003), and *Campaign Franklin* (2003)
- **The War Between the States*- Walker Boy Studios (forthcoming).
- **Take Command 1861: The Civil War*- Mad Minute Games (forthcoming).

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