

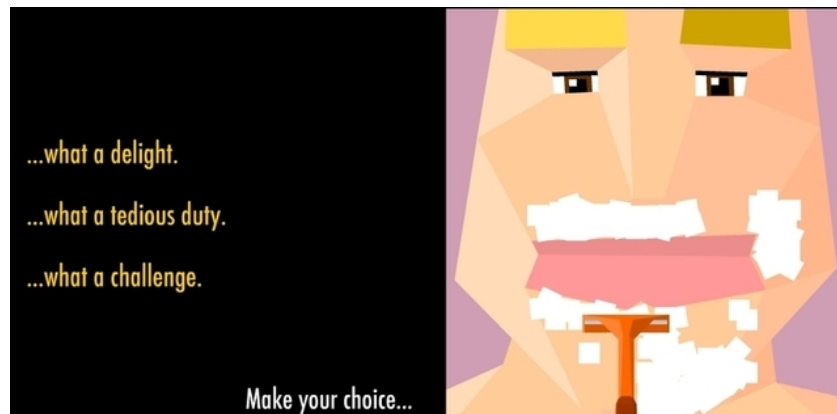
OPPOSABLE THUMBS / GAMING & ENTERTAINMENT

Unmanned presents a nuanced, psychological perspective on modern warfare

In focusing on the humdrum life of a suburban drone pilot, Molleindustria's ...

by Kyle Orland - Feb 23 2012, 11:42am EST

48



Believe it or not, this is one of the most realistic depictions of war I've encountered in a video game.

Image courtesy of Molleindustria

When most video games deal with war, they typically turn you into a killing machine. The most important decision you have to make in many military first-person shooters is whether to first shoot the sniper giving cover fire from a nest above, or the guy with a rocket launcher threatening to blow through your cover. Even strategy games that zoom back from the action usually reduce your goals to an appropriately militaristic "kill the enemy before he kills you."

Unmanned is not that kind of war game. The game uses a series of short, split-screen vignettes to combine simple mini-games with clickable conversation options, and takes you through the rather safe, humdrum existence of a modern drone pilot. Shaving, driving to work, flirting with your cute co-pilot, and even playing video games with your son are all given equal weight to actually blowing up a suspected insurgent thousands of miles away from a comfortable seat in front of a monitor.

Not only does *Unmanned* arguably present a more realistic and full-fledged vision of a modern soldier's mission than most war games, but it gives the player time to really get into the head of a soldier as he deals with trauma-induced dreams, interpersonal relationships, an ADHD-riddled son, and sheer boredom, alongside his military duties. The game's short length practically demands multiple playthroughs, with different conversation options leading to significantly different outcomes. The result is a nuanced, wide-ranging look at a soldier's life from a variety of viewpoints, and one of the most thought-provoking games I've played in a while.

Ars spoke to Molleindustria's Paolo Pedercini about the creation of the *Unmanned* and his goals for the game. Our conversation contains some minor spoilers regarding the gameplay, so you should probably [give the game a try](#) at least once before you read on. It's free to play and it'll only take you a few minutes, we promise.

Ars: What was the inspiration for creating *Unmanned*? How long have you been thinking about

TOP FEATURE STORY



FEATURE STORY (2 PAGES)

"Look, you may hate me": 90 minutes with John Steele, porn troll

Says Judge Wright's *Star Trek* references were "beneath the dignity of the court."

271

STAY IN THE KNOW WITH



LATEST NEWS

CHITTY CHITTY BANG BANG

Flying car crashes near elementary school in Canada

GROUND CONTROL TO MAJOR TOM

Commander Chris Hadfield bids adieu to ISS with "Space Oddity" cover

SPACEWALK WITH ME

NASA arranges a quick spacewalk to repair leaking space station



The British 'Atlantis' is mapped in detail

ALL AROUND THE WORLD

Live map of recent changes to Wikipedia articles is mesmerizing



Are you obligated to point out security flaws if you're just hired for a small job?

such a project?

The idea came about two years ago. I was reading P.W. Singer's terrific and terrifying book *Wired for War* while the drone attacks in Pakistan were getting more and more common. At the time, I just officially became a US taxpayer and I started to feel more directly implicated in these distant events. Not to mention that my employer, Carnegie Mellon University, gets a good deal of funding from the Department of Defense due to research in robotics.

However, at the time there was no public debate around CIA's covert operations and issues related to unmanned warfare; only Der Spiegel and Wired's Danger Room were talking about drone wars. My original idea was a kind of semi-playable art installation that simply reproduced the control room of an UAV juxtaposed with mundane conversations. It was meant to present something "invisible" in a cold, detached way.

The concept was similar to *Terminal Air*, an installation by a radical engineering group called the Institute of Applied Autonomy that I contributed to a bunch of years ago. It was a way to visualize the extraordinary rendition program (also run by the CIA) through flight data and by imagining a hypothetical government office/tourism agency where bureaucrats organized the kidnapping and torture of suspected terrorists.

Anyway, at some point in 2009 drones started to become a hot topic and I realized that just pointing to the existence of a similar program wasn't enough. So it gradually warped in a more complex, character-driven game and I decided to ask [Jim Munroe](#), a Toronto-based writer, director, and game community organizer, to write the dialogue.

Ars: I felt a real undercurrent of disconnection running through the game. Was that the intention?

Yes, disconnection is a theme that runs all the way through *Unmanned*. It is embedded in the split screen and dual gameplay that reflects the schizophrenic life of the protagonist, and in the characters' lives as well: in the father and son's difficult bonding, in the protagonist's potentially challenging relationship with his wife. It's even hinted in some conversations about the transformation of the battlefield and the changing relationship with the enemy.

On another level, you can see the whole game as an attempt to connect, even if though fiction, to an everyday reality of war that is so carefully removed from our existence. We are living the paradox of being inundated by militaristic entertainment while we barely know about what happens, for example, in Yemen and Somalia where US covert operations are regularly taking place.



Ah, the thrill of combat...

Molleindustria

Ars: The game rewards players for certain actions and conversation paths with in-game medals. Were you trying to guide the player down a certain "correct" path?

On a design level, the medals are there to tell the players that they are not dealing with some kind of "not-game" in which their choices don't substantially affect the outcome. The chapter structure is linear and rigid but there are many choices that are meaningful.

On a meta-level, the medals are my ironic take on gamification and external motivators: Jesse Schell, in [his famous talk about gamification or "gamepocalypse"](#) was envisioning a world in which you get points for brushing your teeth; here you have shaving and similarly trivial stuff, accomplishments that are appropriate for the pathetic suburban hero you are impersonating.

[Creative Writing Classes](#)

www.FullSail.edu

Create Compelling Stories and Bring them to the Screen. Full Sail Univ.



AdChoices

There is a conversation thread that you may or may not encounter that reveals that the protagonist and the blue-haired girl are Air Force pilots working for the CIA. Awards and decorations for classified operations can't really be acknowledged in public (in slang, CIA medals are called "jock strap medals") so the two characters joke about "making up their own medals," thus revealing that the medals are diegetic. In my mind they represent the ambitions and the moral compass of the protagonist but not the "right" way to play the game.

Ars: What's the significance of using Queen's "One Vision" in the "karaoke" portion of the game, where you have to pick the right lyrics in time with the music? How does the song's message relate to the game?

Unmanned is, into some extent, about game culture and about seeing your life as a videogame, so I wanted to reference different genres in the various chapters. There is a pseudo-FPS, a pseudo-driving game similar to *F1 Race* for the NES (or to the infamous *Desert Bus* if you are into obscure games) and I wanted to have a music game a la *Guitar Hero*.

To me, this kind of game is so centered on the songs' formal structures that manage to strip away the meaning and cultural significance of these musical works. In *Rock Band* you can play "Rebel Girl" by Bikini Kill right after "Painkiller" by Judas Priest... after all, they can both be reduced to a sequence of inputs and accompanied by uncanny CGI puppets representing a generic idea of "rock." The short karaoke section in *Unmanned* forces the player to think about the lyrics and their meaning in that particular context.

"One Vision" was probably intended to be a hopeful, universalistic anthem to world peace, but its lyrics—even the verses that didn't make into the game—are quite sinister. The Slovenian industrial band Laibach once made a bleak German cover of the song, turning it into a Nazi anthem.

In *Unmanned* you may interpret these words as an allusion to American exceptionalism ("One world / one nation / one true religion"), as a reference to the technological warfare ("No blood, no stain / All we need is one world wide vision"), or as a reinforcement of the commute scene in which there's nothing to do except for driving straight ahead ("One man / one goal / one mission").

Ars: *Unmanned* includes a section where you play simplified versions of modern first-person shooters with the protagonist's son. How do you feel about how these types of games represent war?

We are witnessing a two-fold process that consists, on one hand, in the separation of civilians and soldiers from the reality and consequences of the war through technology and secrecy. And, on the other hand, in the pervasion of stylized, romanticized, or redacted depictions of war in news and entertainment.

I'm not among those people who abhor violence in games: I grew up with *Wolfenstein 3D*, *Doom*, and *Quake*; in general I have no issues with guns—without which many social changes wouldn't have happened. But you have a cultural problem when that type of gameplay becomes the basic, default mode for the majority of the products, and "game design" becomes the business of deciding what kind of stories will justify this type of interaction and what kind puzzles will occasionally interrupt the action.

READER COMMENTS 48



Kyle Orland / Kyle is the Senior Gaming Editor at Ars Technica, specializing in video game hardware and software. He has journalism and science degrees from University of Maryland. He is based in Pittsburgh, PA.

[Follow @KyleOri](#)

[← OLDER STORY](#)

[NEWER STORY →](#)

YOU MAY ALSO LIKE ↴

SITE LINKS

[About Us](#)

[Advertise with us](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Reprints](#)

SUBSCRIPTIONS

[Subscribe to Ars](#)

MORE READING

[RSS Feeds](#)

[Newsletters](#)

CONDE NAST SITES

[Reddit](#)

[Wired](#)

[Vanity Fair](#)

[Style](#)

[Details](#)

[Visit our sister sites](#)

[Subscribe to a magazine](#)



[VIEW MOBILE SITE](#)

© 2013 Condé Nast. All rights reserved

Use of this Site constitutes acceptance of our [User Agreement](#) (effective 3/21/12) and [Privacy Policy](#) (effective 3/21/12), and [Ars Technica Addendum](#) (effective 5/17/2012)
[Your California Privacy Rights](#)

The material on this site may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, cached or otherwise used, except with the prior written permission of Condé Nast.

[Ad Choices](#)