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Cultural Capital

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How text-based war games are challenging representations of conflict

Text-based games are saying things about the wars we fight that the AAA shooter cannot.

BY [JOHN BRINDLE](#) | PUBLISHED 05 DECEMBER 2012 17:19



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>win

I'm sorry, you'll have to say what you want to win.

>win war on terror

That isn't possible in this story.

>peace

I'm sorry, I don't understand that word.

>kill terrorists

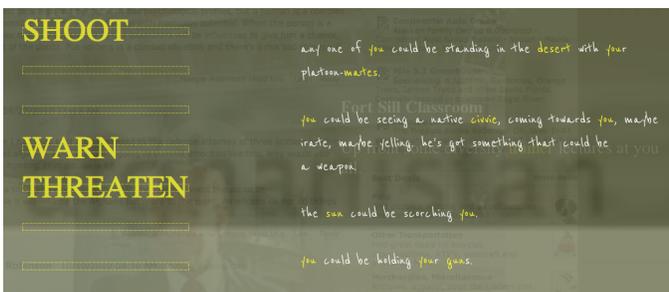
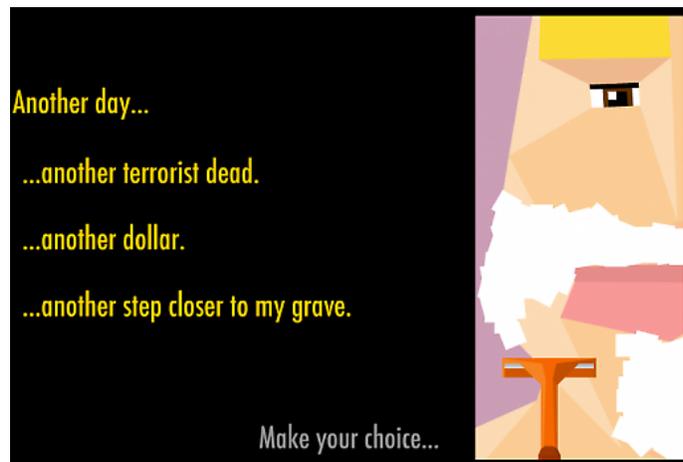
Now we're talking.

Modern first person shooters are to videogames what Michael Bay movies are to film. Loud, bombastic, and visually spectacular, they dazzle us with more exciting versions of wars that have exhausted the electorate. But there's a small crop of games which use the text-based methods of interactive fiction, or IF, to cover the same subject matter – and say things about the wars we fight that the AAA shooter cannot.

Violence in IF is nothing new. There's the cowboy shootout sim *Gun Mute*, the pious but clumsy *Urban Conflict* (about enemies trapped in a foxhole together) and, way back in 1999, there was *Persistence of Memory*, where you learn the lot of the powerless individual soldier by standing on a landmine for the entire game. But the titles I'm talking about are hyper-topical, often plucked from the headlines.

Take 2007's *Rendition*, whose title would not exist without the war on terror. Both the first two *Modern Warfare* games include "interrogation" sequences, once with a beating and once with electrodes. But where they coyly conceal the violence involved, *Rendition* makes you participate in awful detail. Try to leave the room and you're told you haven't done enough to Abdul. "Break Abdul's toe," you type, and the game replies: "Which do you mean? his left little toe, his left second toe, his left middle toe, his left fourth toe, his left big toe, his right little toe..." At this point, many players simply quit.

Another game, *Maybe Make Some Change*, is based on a [series of real-life murders](#) committed by US Army soldiers in Afghanistan in 2010. *Maybe* traps the player in a kind of purgatory, reliving the shooting of an unarmed man in many different ways. At first the only possible verb is "shoot"; slowly, you learn other ways of engaging with the world. But some playtesters refused to even type the first command, according to the game's author, PhD student Aaron Reed. "Refusing to engage with a system you find unacceptable is a valid response," he told me, but it seems like shooting the messenger to me – you can't talk to the terrorists in any other game either.



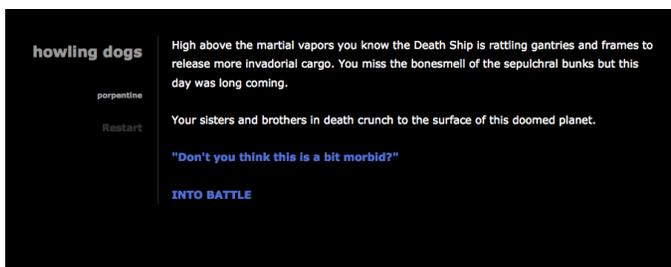
A still from Maybe Make Some Change

Beyond topicality, it's this difficult relationship to the AAA mainstreams that makes these games so interesting. *Maybe*, for example, plays footage of games including *Call of Duty*, *Counter-Strike* and *Battlefield 1942* in the background even as it tells the player that no, you're not allowed to hug the insurgent. Reed said: "The idea that most people, especially younger people, are relating to these wars through the black-and-white mechanics of a first-person shooter game started becoming deeply unsettling to me."

"Games that try to represent violence through graphical fidelity usually just end up being silly porn," agreed IF author Porpentine, whose *Howling Dogs* includes both an introspective husband murder and a ludicrous parody sequence involving death marines dropping into battle from orbit in coffins ("it's absurd," says Porp. "It's war"). "Text rejects the wrongheaded challenge to depict violence through visual fidelity...the best game about war will probably be one where you don't have a gun and it won't be pleasant and it will be scary and very loud and dirty and dangerous and unfair."

Unmanned, designed by Italian academic Paolo Pedercini, is nothing like this. It simulates a day in the life of a modern drone pilot using two screens divided by a central line: on one side you shave, drive to work, smoke cigarettes and fire missiles at the white silhouettes of Afghan targets, while on the other you contemplate your actions or converse with others using a text-based interface. At one point you chat with your son while playing a blatant *Call of Duty* parody on the TV.

Early prototypes had no text, but Pedercini found them inadequate for his purposes. "The experience of a drone pilot is already way too similar to the gamer's experience," he told me: "mediated reality, god-like vision, joystick interface, physical safety." Using text allowed him to establish a clear difference between the player's actions and the stories she tells herself to justify them.



Reed, too, believes text allowed him to step away from the sheer speed of real-time first-person gameplay, creating a "frozen moment of contemplation". "We're not used to having all the time in the world to think how to react when someone is running towards us in a game," he said. "That situation is usually objective in an FPS - it's being described with polygons, not racially-loaded language." (At one point in *Maybe* you are asked to "shoot the [hajji](#)".)

That sour, loaded word illustrates something else these games do with text: draw attention to their own artifice. To progress in Reed's, game you have to recognise that everything you're playing through is actually a representation made by specific people with their own motives, agendas and prejudices. The stories they tell you have just one answer, and only by understanding why they're told can you find a way out of the game's weird purgatory.

Of course, says Robert Yang – an indie developer who has written about [how videogames simulate war](#) – 3D graphics are equally constructed. But most of us just don't read them that way yet. "We tend to understand text as more introspective because we know how to read its subtleties and read it as a construction," Yang says. AAA developers don't bother with introspection because it's rarely valued or understood.

Reed agrees: "Text-based games really encourage you to think about things on a number of different levels: the simulated world, the person telling you about that world, the things that are described versus those left out. My mom always used to walk in while I was playing video games as a kid, and be like, 'Why don't you try talking to them?' And I'd roll my eyes or whatever, because she 'didn't get it.' But as an adult that's actually kind of powerful."

But perhaps most important is the difference in production. It takes dozens of people billions of dollars to make a manshooter, but one person with some spare time to write text game. Emily Short, a prominent IF author who helped design the Inform 7 programming language, told me: "Text isn't typically that great at *glamorising* war: textual explosions aren't that sexy...without voiceover and animation costs, dialogue in IF can go deeper. Text is a good medium for treating memory and interiority." Porpentine, who has [written extensively](#) on how lo-fi game tools empower the screwed-by-society to find their voice, puts it more bluntly: "Words are cheap, and that's good."

All the developers I spoke to saw their work as a crucial challenge to the mainstream. As Yang puts it, AAA shooters symbolise "what videogames are" to many people, whereas most filmgoers are at least aware that arthouse cinema exists. "Games are getting more diverse now," he says. "We just need more player awareness of that diversity." Until that changes, text-based war games will speak the things the holodeck can't. "In a way," Pedercini dryly observes, "we are still stuck in the meta-genres defined by two of the earliest games: *Spacewar!* and *Zork*."

John Brindle blogs on games [here](#)

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