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Liminality and the Smearing of War and Play in *Battlefield 1*

by Debra Ramsay

Abstract

This article interrogates how war and play are smeared together in *Battlefield 1,* the first AAA game set in World War I. It advances liminality as a conceptual framework that goes beyond the notion of hybridity (Giddings 2005, Keogh 2014) in addressing how videogames destabilise spatial and temporal relationships and facilitate play with the memory, history and cultural meanings associated with World War I. In contrast to the tendency in games studies to focus either on single-player or multiplayer, this article analyses form, content and player responses in both to answer the following questions:

What happens when the spaces and temporalities of two liminal phenomena merge in *Battlefield 1?* What affective intensities are generated in the play with cultural notions about WWI, and what emerges in the tensions between game form and historical content?

Keywords: World War I, Battlefield, liminality, first-person shooter, war, history, trauma

Introduction

There is a long history of association between war and play, as mapped out initially by Johan Huizinga, who argued that both share an essential identity in their earliest history: "Play is battle and battle is play" (89). But, as Adam Chapman points out, the very playfulness inherent in ludic forms and structures can create a kind of dissonance with certain kinds of historical events and conflicts, such as the Holocaust and World War I (WWI), because of the difficulties of establishing viable "playable positions" within these events, and the risk of trivialising the trauma associated with them by reconstituting them in an arena for play ("Playing Against the Past" 135). So although World War II (WWII) is a favourite setting for videogames set in real-world conflicts, and launched the hugely successful AAA franchises such as *Call of Duty* (Activision 2003-present) and *Medal of Honor* (EA Games, 1999-2012), these games rarely reference the Holocaust ("Playing Against the Past" 135). In turn, WWI is notable for its relative scarcity in games, especially in comparison to World War II. [1]

Widely perceived as a senseless and tragic war of attrition, WWI lacks the apparent moral clarity of WWII. The power of industrialised ballistic weapons made short work of long-standing military tactics, and the war on the Western Front very quickly degenerated into a stalemate, with both sides dug in and shifting strategies to defence rather than attack. Trench warfare was a new kind of combat that rendered individual prowess on the battlefield practically meaningless, and overturned long-standing ideas of strategy and heroism in war. As the war which gave rise to the 'Unknown Soldier', soldiers on both

sides are remembered as victims, making it difficult to identify heroes and villains. The sense of tragedy that surrounds the war, along with the lack of clear ideological positions and the immobility and defensive nature of trench warfare, all make WWI difficult to translate into game form, especially in the case of the First Person Shooter (FPS), where gameplay relies on relentless forward motion and the aggressive conquest of space. As Adam Chapman succinctly puts it, "it's hard to play in the trenches". Chapman is not alone in identifying a struggle between WWI and the formal qualities of gaming. Andrew Wackerfuss argues that the failure of individual skill and valor to bring victory in the trenches makes ground warfare in WWI "an unsuitable subject" for games like First Person Shooters (FPS), which reward precisely those qualities (241). Chris Kempshall similarly highlights the risks of the playful representation of a war that is remembered, particularly in Britain, as "essentially sacred" (*The First World War In Computer Games* 5) as well as concerns regarding the playability of a conflict largely characterised by the "muddy stalemate" of the trenches on the Western Front (ibid 40).

In 2016, however, EA Games released the first AAA FPS set in WWI -- *Battlefield 1*. The announcement of this game met with reservations on the part of games writers. According to Thomas McMullan, for example, EA risked running counter to the "deep running social reverberations" associated with WWI in developing *Battlefield 1*, while an interview with senior producer Aleksander Grøndal noted the difficulties of being "very respectful of sacrifice, but also trying to be a fun game" (in Takahashi). Both comments indicate how concerns regarding the tension between gameplay and content in the case of WWI extend into popular discourse.

This article deploys liminality as a conceptual framework to interrogate how those tensions are negotiated in *Battlefield 1.* Understanding both the game and WWI as liminal facilitates an investigation that engages with unruliness, ambiguity and instability in *Battlefield 1*'s ludic structures and its representation of the conflict. It advances liminality as an analytical frame that moves beyond the conception of videogames as hybrid forms in which all facets of gaming are considered significant (as argued by both Giddings and Keogh) to address how intersections between human and technology, virtual and actual, destabilize spatial and temporal relationships, and what (re)configurations of meaning and memory emerge as a result. It sets out to investigate the following questions:

If both World War I and *Battlefield 1* can be considered as liminal, what happens when these two liminal arenas intersect? What affective intensities are generated in the play with cultural notions about WWI, and what emerges in the tensions between game form and historical content?

Anthropologist Victor Turner (1994-1964) provided the foundation for understanding liminality as a "betwixt and between" process of transition. At its simplest, liminality is a transitional phase of time in which the usual order is momentarily suspended, and in which events occur in spaces outside of those of the everyday yet embedded within them. Liminality is thus always both temporal and spatial. Turner extended the concept (previously associated predominantly with rites of passage in tribal societies) to the Post-Industrial world and identified large-scale events such as wars or disasters as liminal phases ("Liminal to Liminoid" 78). Eric J. Leed applies the concept of liminality to WWI, arguing that the conflict was

> [N]othing if not a transgression of categories. In providing bridges across the boundaries between the visible and the invisible, the known and the unknown, the human and the inhuman, war offered numerous occasions for the shattering of distinctions that were

> central to orderly thought, communicable experience, and normal human relations (21).

Understanding WWI as liminal is thus an approach that goes beyond the notion of war as violence and facilitates a perception of conflict as an experience of the radical breakdown in established social and cultural norms and taxonomies (Leed 13).

Liminality manifests in society not only in such extreme events, but also in play, which Turner describes as "essentially interstitial, betwixt-and-between all standard taxonomic nodes, essentially 'elusive'" (*The Anthropology of Performance* 168). More recent approaches to liminality have argued that cultural forms of play, such as extreme sports, are liminoid rather than liminal, in that they are optional and ultimately not transformative. Bjørn Thomassen, for example, argues that such experiences are commodified and "void of experiential substance" (188). However, it is difficult to quantify the exact nature of what constitutes 'transformation', and as this article will go on to argue, responses to cultural forms such as games are more complex than such critiques might suggest. This article therefore considers games as liminal, not liminoid.

In providing bridges between human and technology, hardware and software, the virtual and actual, gameplay issues its own challenges to orderly experience and social interaction. Liminality has been used in games studies to categorize the rhetoric involved in "framing" games in various theoretical approaches (Deterding), to consider the relationship between ritual and games (Harviainen), and to formalize the intersections of gamespace and lived space in the so-called "magic circle" (Kristiansen). Such approaches are mainly concerned with the nature of boundaries -- conceptual and/ or spatial -- and they do not quite go far enough in considering the other dimensions of liminality as outlined by Turner, in particular the ways in which liminality transforms cultural symbols through "'play' with their possibilities" ("Liminal to Liminoid" 56).

To investigate how *Battlefield 1* plays with the cultural constructs of WWI, and intersects with war as a liminal phenomenon, this article examines both single-player and multiplayer modes of play. In a discussion of liminal experiences in digital media, Jenny Weight describes how temporal and spatial zones might be "juxtaposed". In this article, I want to push that argument a little further, to suggest that time and space are not just juxtaposed, but are actively *smeared* together in *Battlefield 1*'s single-player mode. By examining how time and spaces are smeared together in the liminal arena of the game, this article will demonstrate how *Battlefield 1* replicates some of the aspects of traumatic experiences and memory. This article therefore argues that *Battlefield 1*'s formal structures allow for an acknowledgement of trauma previously believed to be unusual or impossible in games, but it will also demonstrate that emotions in liminal arenas are unruly, and trauma and sorrow might be smeared into other kinds of affective responses. Unruly responses are evident in multiplayer too, and this article extends its investigation of game content to include multiplayer, focussing particularly on game glitches, an aspect often overlooked in close analysis, but one which reveals how the formal structure of multiplayer itself is a faint echo of the structure of industrial warfare.

Single-player

Battlefield 1's single-player campaigns do not follow one central narrative, or one single soldier. Single-player features five "War Stories" -- *Through Mud and Blood; Friends in High Places, Avanti Savoia*, *Gallipoli: The Runner* and *Nothing is Written* -- each of which follows a different playable character. Other than fighting in the same war, these characters have little in common, and their narratives do not intersect. There is also a prologue, *Storm of Steel*, which

introduces an unnamed member of the Harlem Hellfighters (an African American unit) who goes on to provide voice-over introductions for each of the War Stories. In addition to the Harlem Hellfighter narrator, the playable characters -- Daniel Edwards, a young British tank driver, Clyde Blackburn, a maverick American pilot, Luca Vincenzo Cocchiola, a member of an elite force in the Italian Army, Frederick Bishop, an Australian runner, and Zara Ghufran, a female Bedouin fighter - are intended to provide "personal" perspectives of the war (Grøndal qtd in Takahashi). These narratives individualize the war and counter the anonymity of the Unknown Soldier. They also generate a sense of a hugely varied conflict on a global scale, extending from the battlefields of France, through Europe and the Dardanelles, and into the Arabian Peninsula.

Trench warfare on the Western Front, and more specifically in the Battles of the Somme (1916) and Passchendaele (1917), occupies such a significant place in the memory and history of WWI that it has become a synecdoche for the conflict; one which tends to obscure the global scale of this war (as explained extensively by both Philpott and Kempshall). As mentioned earlier, the largely defensive nature of war in the trenches, as well as its attritional nature, make it difficult to translate into game form. Trenches feature very briefly in *Friends in High Places*, but this passage of play, in which the player navigates German trenches after Blackburn's plane is downed behind enemy lines, primarily involves stealth, not combat. *Battlefield 1* thus largely avoids trench warfare, one of the key symbols of WWI, and instead, like most games set in this conflict, turns to "aspects of the conflict often left unexplored in popular culture" ("It's Hard to Play in the Trenches" 30). But if *Battlefield 1* avoids play with this central symbol of WWI, it also leverages space in the broader cultural narrative for unexplored elements of the conflict; a contribution that should not be underestimated. In addition to emphasising the scope of the war, the presence of African American soldiers and female fighters in *Battlefield 1* introduces alternative strands to the prevailing narratives of WWI. Discussions in YouTube videos and game forums in response to the widened scope of the game and the inclusion of the Harlem Hellfighters and the character of Zara Ghufran provide a sense of how *Battlefield 1* challenges preconceptions of WWI. These discussions are instances of the game's ability to initiate what one historian refers to as "invaluable historical conversations" (Whitaker) about a global conflict. In just one example of such a conversation, respondents to a YouTube post by jackfrags on *Battlefield 1*'s depiction of the Harlem Hellfighters discuss their significance to history, issues of racism in representations of the past, and the wider relationship between games and history. Spatial and temporal shifts initiated within the liminal arena of *Battlefield 1*'s single-player mode issue further challenges to broader cultural understandings of WWI by smearing together history, individual memory, and fiction.

The game's menu screen is itself a liminal zone that smears space and time. It provides a perspective of the globe as if from space (an impossible view in the early 1900s) overlaid by digital titles and graphics that provide details of each war story and its location on the globe. The past is thus accessed via an interface coded by markers of the present. On the console game, the prologue and five war stories are all immediately accessible and can be played in any order, which blurs the temporal distinctions between the different stages of the war and generates a sense of simultaneous global events. But even if the war stories are played in the order in which they are numbered, they move backwards and forwards in time -- the prologue is set in 1918, but *Through Mud and Blood* and *Friends in High Places* go back to 1917*, Avanti Savoia* is set in 1918, but *Gallipoli: The Runner* jumps back to 1915, and *Nothing is Written*, the final story, returns to 1918. The choices offered by the menu as well as its design thus constitute

a slippery temporal state that is not fixed in either the present or the past.

When the player selects an option, the graphics zoom from the "big picture" of the globe to a localized, individual perspective of the playable character of the selected war story. This transition is not only spatial, but also temporal. Whereas the digital markers and perspective of the menu locate it in the present, the shift to a specific location on the globe is also a shift to the past in the cinematic cut-scenes that open each campaign. The interaction between cut-scenes and gameplay further undermines any sense of temporal certainty. The prologue, *Storm of Steel*, begins with the image of a man asleep in a tranquil bedroom. "Dream a Little Dream of Me" (a song written in 1931) plays in the background, implying that this scene takes place after the war. The man begins to dream, but when he wakes it is not to the room in 1931, but to brutal combat in a muddy field in Cambrai in 1918. Similarly, the next war story, *Through Mud and Blood,* opens with Daniel Edwards, a chauffeur, sitting in an open-top car in front of a stately home. He glances down at his gloved hands on the wheel. Suddenly they are covered in blood and he is standing in a desolate, war-shattered landscape. Although playing through this campaign explains how Edwards came to be standing on the battlefield with blood-spattered gloves, it is unclear whether these events are a flashback or a flashforward. The slipperiness of time and its impact on any sense of narrative certainty is most evident in *Friends in High Places*, which features an unreliable narrator in the form of the American pilot, Clyde Blackburn. Blackburn is an unusual character. Wackerfuss argues that air combat in WWI, a "contest of skill and chivalric valour", lends itself more readily to adaptation in game form than ground combat (241). But Blackburn, an airman, is anything but an embodiment of chivalry, and his actions throughout the campaign are morally suspect, beginning with his impersonation of an RAF pilot in order to steal a Bristol F2.B aeroplane. His closing statement also casts doubt on the veracity of the entire sequence of play. "Things get mixed up in wartime though," he says after a particularly spectacular and improbable sequence of events, "and you'll probably hear other versions." *Friends in High Places* draws attention to the constructed nature of the narratives of the War Stories, and by doing so, implies that both memory and history are all simply versions of the past, none of them reliable. The closing cut-scene of all the campaigns underscores all the indeterminate temporalities at work in the game. It is at once a call to the future to remember and commemorate the actions of those who fought in the war in the past, and an exhortation to continue fighting in the present. Temporal states in *Battlefield 1* are thus neither stable nor linear, and instead situate WWI in a "mixed up" and fluid temporal zone that smears together past, present and future.

The interplay between cut-scenes and gameplay in single-player mode destabilizes WWI's temporal position, and consequently undermines the idea of the past as stable and easily understandable. The menu, cut-scenes and gameplay of *Battlefield 1*'s single-player disrupt the linear relationship between cause and effect that underpins traditional historical narrative and represent the history of WWI as part of a spectrum of representations of the past, some of which are contradictory or untrue. [2] The "mixing up" of spatial and temporal states and of fact and fiction facilitates an engagement not only with WWI as an historical construct, but also with the relationship between conflict and memory, particularly the memory of trauma.

WWI was the first war in which "shell shock" emerged as a recognized (if poorly understood) condition. Yet Kempshall notes the "absence of substantive attempts" in WWI games to engage in any real way with trauma (*The First World War In Computer Games* 75). Kempshall concludes that the absence of "such a recognisable and reproduced" element of WWI in videogames is due to a fundamental

incompatibility between the topic of trauma and the form of gameplay (ibid, 75). *Battlefield 1,* however, engages with trauma as both event and as memory. Single-player involves competition with the game's Artificial Intelligence (AI), mostly in the form of non-player characters (NPCs). Unusually, *Battlefield 1* features NPCs that are clearly suffering from the debilitating effects of shell shock. Some cower in trenches, others wander aimlessly around the battlefield. These enemy soldiers are a startling contrast to the more familiar encounter with NPCs in the FPS, which usually initiates combat. Encounters with traumatized NPCs provide a momentary disruption in the flow of gameplay, and some players describe how these moments prompted them to think about the nature of war and the act of killing. For example, a comment on a YouTube post by Westie from a player who felt it was "wrong" to shoot someone who posed no threat prompted a debate on the nature of killing in the game as well as in war, and about the potential of the game to arouse feelings of remorse and sadness for all combatants. The inclusion of vulnerable enemy NPCs that present no threat introduces a level of nuance unusual in an FPS, but a deeper engagement with trauma and memory emerges from the temporal uncertainties created in the formal structure of single-player mode.

Understandings of traumatic memory vary radically, but the idea that the experience of trauma disrupts the usual workings of memory underpins most approaches. [3] Freud originally argued that the memory of trauma is screened by false memories, but subsequent understanding recognizes that traumatic memory might also intrude upon the present, and may be powerful enough to supplant the experience of *now* with the experience of *then,* causing the individual to re-experience the event with the same intensity as when it first occurred (Ehlers). Traumatic memory disrupts the relationship between past and present and constitutes a break in autobiographical narrative, making it difficult to process the traumatic event and to place it in the past (ibid). In this sense, traumatic memory *can itself* be understood as liminal, as it precipitates a state in which the individual inhabits neither past nor present, and in which the relationship between actual event, memory and imagination is obscured. The fluid and unstable temporalities of the war stories play in and with these liminal characteristics of traumatic memory.

Gameplay in *Storm of Steel* and *Through Mud and Blood* supplants the "present" of the cut-scenes, and may be traumatic dream, flashback or flashforward. The events that occur in the gameplay of *Friends in High Places* could be purely imaginary, and they might well screen out a darker reality -- that Blackburn did not rescue his co-pilot or save the day. Gameplay is both the source of trauma for the playable characters and the memory of that trauma, playing out in a temporal zone that is of no time but of all times simultaneously. The game's formal structure thus mirrors the experiences of soldiers in the war itself, many of whom identified the war as a liminal space "that enfolded them with its own logic, connections and incongruencies" and which alienated them from those who were outside of it (Leed 36). Like the soldiers of WWI, the playable characters are both spatially and temporally segregated from the world outside of the war. As the Harlem Hellfighter states in the prologue, "the war is the world, and the world is the war."

As both the source of trauma and its memory, the war is not something that can be "won" in *Battlefield 1.* None of the war stories conclude in the victorious conquest usually associated with shooters. *Storm of Steel* has no objective beyond survival, but no matter how hard you fight, you will eventually be overcome. In *Through Mud and Blood*, you ultimately lose the tank you fought so hard to protect. You know from the outset that you cannot accomplish the mission of *Avanti Savoia,* which is to save Luca's brother, as the opening cut-scene makes clear that he is dead. The final section of *The Runner* is

a suicide mission, the achievements in *Friends in High Places* might well be fabrications, and the victory of *Nothing is Written* is undercut by the closing intertitles which indicate that the fighting did not lead to Arab independence. On one level, *Battlefield 1* thus upholds the notion of WWI as a war of senseless attrition and sacrifice. In the absence of an overarching narrative explaining the reasons for fighting, "characters live and die for each other" (Kempshall "Modern Warfare" 259) and not for any ideological cause. In this way *Battlefield 1* overcomes one of the main difficulties that Chapman identifies for games set in WWI, i.e. that of playable positions. The war in *Battlefield 1* is not a clearly defined battle of good vs evil, but it justifies the slaughter of the enemy by framing it as a struggle for survival in which sacrifices are made for the man or woman next to you in a liminal space governed not by ideology, but by its own interior logic.

Single-player mode interweaves sacrifice, trauma and memory in formal structure and content, and allows for an emotional engagement with WWI that resonates with that "necessarily respectful tone" discussed in the introduction to this article. For one reviewer, *Battlefield 1*'s single-player mode is unusual enough for it to be "not just a game" but a "sombre, and powerful, and strangely enlightening" lesson in history (Simpson). Players attest to similar responses, ranging from observations on how the game made them think about the horror and futility of war, to accounts of players moved to tears, particularly when playing through *The Runner* and *Avanti Savoia* . [4] However, regardless of *Battlefield 1*'s ability to generate feelings of sorrow and empathy, there are other dimensions to gameplay. Precisely because gameplay occurs within a liminal arena of shifting temporalities and spaces outside of the normative (yet anchored within the everyday), it allows for play in and with ideas of life and death not possible within usual social parameters. Like the liminality of war itself, gameplay generates experiences within a state "with its own logic, connections and incongruencies" (Leed 36). These are unpredictable experiences that generate clusters of unruly responses.

In *The Runner*, for example, the objective of the final mission is for the player as Bishop to single-handedly capture a Fort, thereby providing a distraction that allows Bishop's compatriots, particularly Jack Foster, Bishop's young protégé, to reach the safety of the fleet offshore. Seconds after taking the Fort, Bishop is shot and fatally wounded. Playing through this sequence involves moving from the intensity and excitement of the challenge of taking the Fort, to a different kind of intensity in watching Bishop die in the cut-scene while a flare fired from one of the ships signals Foster's safe return. YouTube player D-Squared, for example, demonstrates the affective impact of the transition from gameplay to cut-scene in this sequence. The player goes from excited commentary on play -- "Whoa! Hi! Did I get him? [Explosion] That's a resounding yes!" -- to a tearful reflection on the futility of war during the cut-scene - "[crying] so many people died, man. Yeah, there were tales of heroism [but also] tragic loss of life". For this player, and for others, the fun of gameplay and the sadness generated by the cut-scene are smeared together, involving no apparent contradiction [5].

The point here is that the ludic frame of this sequence should not be understood as necessarily in contradiction to the content. The same kind of unruly responses can be found in the liminal zones of the battlefield. The fact that the joy of destruction and killing features in the memoirs of many soldiers is often overlooked in the focus on the trauma of WWI. WWI veteran Henry de Man, for example, admits that he "would this very day start on a journey of ten thousand miles if by so doing I might enjoy something analogous to a 'direct hit' and revive the rapture of those voluptuous seconds" in which he scored a mortar strike on an enemy trench (199). As a liminal phenomenon,

gaming is "something analogous" to the experience of war. I am of course not suggesting that the stakes are anywhere near the same, or that gameplay has the same intensity, but the thrill of hitting targets is an intrinsic component of the FPS ("Whoa! Hi! Did I get him?"), just as it can be an intrinsic element in the experience of combat. *Battlefield 1* loosens the established relationship between WWI and trauma, and leverage space for an understanding of combat in this conflict as a liminal experience involving the radical transgression of socially defined emotional states. Affective emotional intensities are smeared together in both war and gameplay, and serve as a reminder that WWI, like all wars, was a complex phenomenon involving a range of experiences, not just trauma.

Battlefield 1's single-player mode, like all liminal experiences, including war itself, is thus characterized by ambiguity. The figure of the Unknown Solder represents the ultimate victory of industrial warfare over individuality, but the war stories resist that anonymity by providing personal perspectives of the conflict. The scope and scale of single-player mode emphasizes the global nature of the war, and while the trenches feature only briefly, the creation of space for aspects of war generally overlooked in cultural narratives of the conflict should not be underestimated. The indeterminate temporalities and spaces at work in menu, cut-scene and gameplay of *Battlefield 1*'s single-player mode disrupt the linear relationship between cause and effect and reconstitute history as part of a spectrum of possible interpretations of the past. They also enable an engagement with both the experience of trauma and its memory, but *Battlefield 1* simultaneously subverts the notion of WWI as a traumatic experience by reinstating excitement into the memory and history of the war. There are similar ambiguities and contradictions to be found in multiplayer.

Multiplayer

The increasing significance of multiplayer to AAA games is part of a shift in the industry to online content and formats. In the U.S. games industry, online gaming, including subscriptions, downloadable content and mobile apps, now constitutes 74% of annual sales, in contrast to 31% six years ago (ESA Report). Frank Gibeau (President of EA Games during *Battlefield 1*'s development) describes the *Battlefield* franchise as "an online service" but acknowledges that single player is still important as a way "to get fans into the experience, have them train up and get ready for multiplayer" (qtd in Dutton). Gibeau's comments reflect the idea that for many players, single-player campaigns work very much like a trailer for multiplayer, presenting an opportunity to familiarize themselves with the mechanics of weapons and vehicles before encountering them in the much larger and more chaotic milieu of multiplayer. For those players who approach gaming in this way, single-player works as a liminal phase in and of itself; a rite of passage in which players undergo a transformation in experience which prepares them, to varying degrees, for the transition from one mode of play to the next [6].

Competition against other players rather than the game's AI is part of what differentiates multiplayer from single-player, and what makes multiplayer a rapidly developing international sport. Even more so than single-player, multiplayer FPSs are characterized by speed. Furthermore, the introduction of human opponents (some maps in *Battlefield 1* can support up to 64 players) injects a level of unpredictability into gaming that is absent in single-player, and generates gameplay with a different kind of intensity. The maps of *Battlefield 1*, like other online spaces, constitute a "a computer-generated common ground which is neither actual in its location or coordinates, nor is it merely a conceptual abstraction, for it may be experienced 'as if' lived for given purposes" (Shields). Within this liminal space that is neither entirely actual nor conceptual, players are

similarly neither entirely present nor absent. As Michael Thomsen observes, in multiplayer human presence is evidenced only via the affordances of the game and its technologies; an interface that simultaneously allows for interactions between players but that also intervenes between them. Speed, unpredictability, fierce competition and the nature of the technological interface make online gaming a liminal zone of particularly elemental intensity. The reputation of digital gaming for sexism, racism, aggression and homophobia can be attributed, at least in part, to the fact that it occurs in a highly charged liminal space which is at once lived and virtual, in which players participate but are not physically present, and in which normative social rules and behaviours are all too easily disregarded. Perhaps even more so than single-player, multiplayer engages on a visceral level with the delight of scoring a "direct hit", which in the case of this mode of play involves removing (at least temporarily) another player from the game, rather than defeating an NPC.

Battlefield 1's multiplayer mode expands the canvas of WWI far beyond that of the five war stories. The initial release of multiplayer featured nine maps covering historical battles in France, Italy and North Africa. The game's "premium" service (which requires extra purchases) has since offered more, with four expansion packs planned, each with a range of new maps, weapons and classes. Two of these have been released at the time of writing -- one set in Russia and one in France. Despite the historical settings and details offered in voiceovers, even developers regard the setting of multiplayer as "less important" than in single-player (Valerian Noghin qtd in Grayson), with the focus predominantly on play. In single-player mode, playable characters only come from the Allied forces. Multiplayer, however, allows players to play on both sides of the conflict.

By allowing players to take any side in the conflict, multiplayer smooths over ideological distinctions and renders WWI down to its most basic form -- an intense competition for space, resources (such as capturing the flag and collecting and personalising weapons) and information (in this instance represented by messenger pigeons) that involves killing as many of the enemy as possible. There is some weight to the argument that by removing WWI's ideological context, *Battlefield 1,* like other games set in this conflict, participates in the "whitewashing" of history (Chapman, "It's Hard to Play in the Trenches"), but I want to suggest an alternative perspective. Reducing WWI down to its most basic form reveals elemental truths about the conflict. It allows us to see past the ideas of nobility, sacrifice and naivety associated with WWI often conveyed, as Kempshall puts it, "through paper and pen, through poetry and prose, and all of it infused with an emotion that is both dutiful and distraught" (*The First World War in Computer Games* 7). Instead, multiplayer reveals the fact that like all wars, WWI was at the most fundamental level about people doing everything in their power to kill other people. The chaos and unpredictability of multiplayer's formal structures, even more than in single-player, constitute a particularly powerful liminal zone that is at least a faint echo of the chaos and unpredictability of industrial warfare.

For some players, especially those new to this mode, the challenge presented by the volatile nature of online gameplay and the sheer scope of some of *Battlefield 1*'s maps recreates aspects of the brutality of an industrial war of attrition. While single-player glides effortlessly from the global context of the war to specific war stories, multiplayer's interface is considerably more difficult to navigate, especially for those new to the *Battlefield* franchise. Games writer Kirk Hamilton, for example, describes his initial encounters with *Battlefield 1*'s multiplayer as an experience of being "horribly slaughtered" within "minutes -- sometimes seconds" of every respawn. For Hamilton, the difficulties of rapidly processing massive

amounts of information via the game's interface while enemy combatants are trying to kill you creates an experience akin to the "tunnel vision of a WWI infantryman" focussed only on survival for the next few seconds, rather than on long-term goals or strategies. The structure of multiplayer thus mimic the structure of liminal space in WWI as a "landscape saturated with invisible [combatants] and controlled by an unapproachable technology" (Leed 20).

Mismatches between player action and game design, bugs in the game mechanics and lags in its operation bring players into intimate encounters with aspects of a largely 'unapproachable' technology that can disrupt and/ or terminate play. Multiplayer is an arena of play that is itself in a liminal state, subject to continual patches and updates in response to the "ongoing struggle" to match the unpredictability of player actions with the design of game software (Ash 655). Of course, whereas experience of the machine of war forced combatants in WWI to acknowledge the "suprapersonal and technological powers" at work on them and on the battlefield (Leed 30), encounters with the mechanics that simulate war have very different outcomes.

One possible outcome of an encounter with an aspect of technology beyond their control is that players might simply withdraw from the game's liminal arenas. Not, of course, a viable option for combatants in actual war but perhaps the ultimate act of resistance to the suprapersonal powers of the commercial games industry. For example, ongoing issues with *Battlefield 1*'s servers prompted some players to demand refunds (Henry). While server lag effectively terminates gameplay, glitches and bugs cause aspects of the gameworld to behave in ways that contravene not only the rules of the game, but also the laws of physics. Examples from gameplay in *Battlefield 1* include heavy artillery and vehicles that inexplicably float, bodies that remain upright after being shot, or bullet hits that fail to register. Eben Holmes refers to glitches as ruptures that threaten to destabilize a game's "reality effect" (261). But understanding gameplay as liminal allows a different perspective to emerge. Multiplayer glitches such as these can be interpreted as representations of the monstrous, fantastic and unnatural shapes that Turner identifies as characteristic of the liminal ("Liminal to Liminoid" 72-73).

Robert Graves is one of many veterans who describe how war overturns what might be considered the normal workings of the world, leading to inexplicable occurrences such as soldiers having foreknowledge of events, or sightings of men after their deaths (160-161). Later, in WWII, J. Glenn Gray would refer to this sense of disruption of the normal workings of the world as "the strange" -- events that were "incomprehensible, either absurd or mysterious or both" (15). Glitches in *Battlefield 1*'s multiplayer such as the body that will not fall, the bullet hits that do not register, or the ghostly figure that disappears from a gunsight but reappears when the sight is dropped, inadvertently recreate not only the transgression of the boundaries between the normal and the strange on the battlefield, but also a smearing together of life and death. They are *Battlefield 1*'s equivalent of the ghosts which, according to Graves, "were numerous" on the battlefields of WWI (161). These figures are at once there/ not there, alive/ not alive, and they are a faint reminder of the absurdities and ruptures occurring in the spaces of warfare.

Of course, the experience of gameplay is of a different intensity to war, where actual life is at stake, and glitches in gameplay naturally facilitate responses of a different register. The many online videos that feature edited compilations of glitches in *Battlefield 1* and player responses to them are indicative of their significance to gameplay [7]. These videos display player reactions to glitches ranging from hilarity to unease, and in some cases, fury. Montages of glitches and player

responses are themselves a form of play with the imperfections of technology. They are demonstrations of what Turner refers to as the creative use of disorder in liminal activities ("Liminal to Liminoid" 55) and they use humour to undermine the autonomy of *Battlefield 1*'s game mechanics and software. Lags, bugs and glitches in multiplayer bring players into an acknowledgement of the mechanisms involved in the representation of WWI in game form and emphasize its nature as an unstable and artificial construct.

The very structure of multiplayer operates as a pale reflection of WWI as a vast, impersonal machine. For some players, like Hamilton, multiplayer offers the faintest glimmer of an understanding of the obliterating power of the industrial battlefield. As a liminal arena itself, constantly undergoing patches and developments, the lags, bugs and glitches of multiplayer are an inadvertent recreation of the perceived breakdown of the normal workings of the world in conflict, and a reminder of the mechanisms at work in the game's construction of WWI.

Conclusion

Like other games set in WWI, *Battlefield 1* struggles to accommodate a conflict that Kempshall describes as "so deeply complicated and convoluted and contradictory that it does not always know what it wants to be" (*The First World War in Computer Games* 98). It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that the game itself is similarly contradictory and ambiguous. There is no doubt that *Battlefield 1* elides some of the key issues facing games set in WWI -- it avoids the literal quagmire of the trenches, and the metaphorical quagmire of the ideological complexities of the reasons behind the war. But in doing so, the game introduces other perspectives, and reinstates the sense of the war as a global conflict. Using liminality as a conceptual framework revealed how the smearing together of temporal and spatial zones in *Battlefield 1's* formal structure allows for a uniquely appropriate depiction of trauma as experience and memory, but also acknowledged that the ambiguity in the game's generation of affective responses such as hilarity and excitement is also present in the liminal arena of war itself. The ongoing negotiation between human action and technology in multiplayer in turn replicates some of the ruptures and absurdities at work in war, but perhaps more importantly serves as a reminder of the impersonal forces at work in both the simulation of warfare and its industrial real-world equivalent. *Battlefield 1*'s disruption of linear narrative in single-player, and multiplayer's ongoing negotiation between human action and game design combine to expose WWI itself as an uncertain and continually contested construct of memory, media and historiography.

As a critical framework that accommodates ambiguity and contradiction, liminality is particularly suited to interrogate the dissonances and resonances (to borrow terms from Chapman) between form and content in historical games, especially those that deal with war. Both war and games are complex phenomena that challenge established taxonomies, and require an approach capable of encompassing ambiguity, accounting for intensities of very different registers, and acknowledging unruliness. In other words, liminality and its smeared qualities are concepts that allow us to work through what Ian Bogost identifies as the essential "messiness" of videogames, and to address their confluence with the even messier phenomenon of war.

Endnotes

[1] While the parameters of each study into WWI videogames vary, the most comprehensive identify the maximum number of all

videogames set in this conflict up until around 2015 at between 42 and 59 (Wackerfuss; Crabtree; Chapman).

[2] I am drawing here on Weight's explanation of the relationship of hypertext and history as a way of understanding how game form and gameplay complicate notions of stable narratives.

[3] For an overview of some of the key debates around trauma and memory, see Antze and Lambek.

[4] See for example YouTube video *Let's Play Battlefield 1* for D-Squared Gaming or *Avanti Savoia -- Battlefield 1 -- Single Player Gameplay* by Nerdphilia and the comments to both.

[5] For other examples see LazarBeam *The Greatest Australian to Ever Live!* and Boozy Gaming, *I'm not Crying. You're Crying! Battlefield 1.*

[6] I am indebted to a discussion with Professor Pascale Aebischer for this insight.

[7] See for example, *Battlefield 1:Dumb Yet Hilarious Glitches* (gameranx 2016) and *Battlefield 1 Top 5 Funniest Glitches* (FunGaming Media 2016).

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