

Deceptive Heroism – an Attempt to Redefine the Figures of War in Mass Culture on the Example of Films and Computer Games

Rafał Bartos

University of Zielona Góra (Zielona Gora, Poland)

E-mail: rafal.bartos@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6314-3418>

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The main objective of the paper is to discuss the themes of war and heroism used in films and video games, and how those topics are shown. At the beginning, there will be a short review on basic definitions of a hero. It will be useful to understand how essential the hero is to people and culture. The next steps will explain how the heroism is shown in films and why war films are at the same time pro- and anti-war productions. In relation to video games, the topic of heroism will be explained on the example of a gamification of a war zone, and how it can be dangerous for perception of the war by players. Also, the differences between heroism in films and video games will be shown in popular examples.

Keywords: war, films, video games, heroism, gamification

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Introduction

In this paper, I will investigate the subject of heroism presented in contemporary war films and video games. It is a common topic, although its complexity should be realized. The main problem seems to be the fact that any production using the war theme is at the same time pro and anti-war. Moreover, all of these types of production show a complicated view of deadly combat, one that depicts the infliction of lethal violence as a norm of behaviour, regardless of the conflict presented. War is a tragedy for everyone. It does not matter for which side – civil or military – it should be shown from both sides. The experience and tragedy of war and the traumatic effects, which are shown in movies and video games, are observed by the audience or the players from a safe and comfortable distance.

The basic meaning of a hero

In the beginning, it is important to consider who the actual hero is. To answer this question, I begin by taking a closer look at the dictionary's basic definition, 'a hero is someone who is famous for their heroic deeds'. Additionally, I also learn that they are a character characterized by great bravery, sacrifice, and exceptional merits for the good of others. These two brief examples might clarify this concept (Uniwersalny Słownik, 2003: 295, 1137).

Then I review a literary hero. A fictional person depicted in the world of the presented literary works, who is in the centre of the writer's interest. The fate of the characters comes to the fore of the presented world, and it is the main reason why the narrator tells his story (Głowiński et al., 1986: 326).

According to Christopher Vogler in *Podróż autora, Struktury mityczne dla scenarzystów i pisarzy* (2010), a hero is defined as 'someone who is ready to sacrifice his own desires and needs for others' (Vogler, 2010: 34). Strength and courage are the traits most commonly attributed to a hero. However, the most important of them is self-sacrifice because it is what distinguishes him from common people. It is significant to emphasize that the hero is ready to sacrifice even his own life for the sake of ideals, community, and good.

Finally, it is necessary to clarify the definition of the hero used in computer games. It is, by definition, similar to the literary one. The hero is the main character, and the story is about his life, but the difference is that the player makes decisions. They are not passively observing, but actively participating in the game, creates the story of the main character. In a way, it depends on the player how much the hero of the game will be brave, prone to sacrifice, and what will make him heroic.

It is essential to have heroes as examples. They are an inspiration to act, fight, or mobilize, and help each other. Thanks to them, we are inclined to care for the common good in difficult and dangerous times of war.

At the same time, there is a selfish belief in people that one would also be like that and that one would do great deeds. Although at the same time, people are grateful that it was this person, a hero, who sacrificed himself for others.

Over the centuries, people have often gotten into fatal conflicts among each other's. Warriors, and then soldiers, although aware of the atrocities that may befall them, seem eager to take part in this harmful situation. Like all creatures with instincts, humans fear death. However, the distinguishing feature of man is the awareness that death is inevitable. The opportunity to participate in community, culture, nation, or religion gives meaning to our life after heroic death. The culture contains virtues and ideologies that drive people to act, making them aware of existence after death. The ability to extend life beyond actual existence allows people to perform heroic deeds.

Heroism in modern cinematography

In pop culture, there are many re-narratives of myths, also presented in movies or games. They present conflict and war in an impressive way, and show momentum, monumentalism, and heroism, all of which are received positively. It is an untruth many people agree to. Various reports from wars and conflicts are recalled. People are aware that they are brutal and terrifying, but they all eagerly repeat stories of heroic people who, despite all the atrocities of war, go there in the name of something higher and more important.

Historically, heroes must always play a critical role and function. A person who puts his life at stake and avoids death becomes an example to follow and a symbol of winning over death. Nowhere is this more obvious than in war. Amidst the chaos, death, and destruction of war, the hero stands as a life-affirming force. And the mere presence of the heroes confirms that other people can also win with death.

The action of the TV series called *Band of Brothers* (2001) takes place during World War II. In the seventh episode, the most crucial of the scenes is the attack of the Allied troops on the village of Foy. During the charge of the snowy fields, one of the leading captains mentally breaks down, risking the entire attack to fail. Captain Speirs replaces him. He is a heroic one with his determination and confidence and starts leading the other allied soldiers to fight. Additionally, to maintain communication with the rest of the troops, he performs a heroic act. He runs through the enemy lines to connect with the stuck units on the other side of the city. Therefore, inspiring the other soldiers fighting by his side.

The second example of heroism on the battlefield is the war film *'1917'* (2019). The film is set during the First World War, when the heroic chase of the hero is depicted with an order to stop the army from attacking enemy lines. The aerial reconnaissance observed that the German army made a strategic withdrawal to better positions, and they were waiting to overwhelm British soldiers. The field telephone lines were cut, so the commanders ordered two soldiers to deliver a message calling off an attack scheduled for the next morning. When the main character reaches the frontline, none of the commanders trust him, and the assault is going to start in a few minutes. He noticed that the trenches were too crowded for him to deliver the order on time. The soldier decides to run with the message along the front lines, on the open battlefield, between charging British soldiers. Around him, a lot of comrades-in-arms die, but he knows that this race is the only option to save their lives. It is worth it.

In both examples, there is a hero who puts a goal above their life. Courage, bravery, and, one might say, partial madness motivates them to act here and now. In both cases, this effort pays off and saves the lives of many comrades, but at the cost of the opponents' death. Every heroic deed during the war, on the one hand, is paid for with the death of the other.

The Gamification of Combat

In video games, the basic gameplay is something one does most of the time. In popular games featuring a war theme, this core gameplay loop is almost always focused on combat. Whether it is from a first- or third-person perspective, the basic mechanics are largely the same from the start. The player walks with their weapons being ready to shoot and moves from trench to trench in order to eliminate enemies until the game is over.

Therefore, what is attractive in this type of competition? I would say that, as players, we operate in the virtual world, but physically control this interaction in the real. It can be simplified that gameplay is essentially a translation process between a physical entrance and a virtual exit – that is, our physical movements are transferred to the movement of a virtual character in the game. Strengthening real dexterity in the virtual world allows you to feel directly connected to what is happening in the virtual world. The easiest way to feel the joy of being qualified, being the one who and something achieves, influences the virtual world.

Furthermore, the importance of audiovisual presentation in video games plays a key role. Simulation warfare gameplay can be applied to spectacle, in which players are provided with an intense audiovisual experience. The feeling can be strong to the point where the player feels

the proximity of a war that they do not really want. The games evolve over time, the mechanics are enriched with new elements, the high-resolution graphics become more and more realistic, and the sounds contained in the game are recorded. It shows how tremendous progress have been made in the video game space, but it has also caused anxiety about the development of immersion. The limit and the ability to cross it is unknown.

One of the basic problems of computer games is the presentation of the player's health (life points). Originally, their number was represented by the health bar, which changed depending on whether the player was wounded or healed with special packages. With the development of the gaming industry, developers are moving away from this idea, and in its place, they provide players with a self-healing state of health. This change is a direction that allows the player to wait awhile to replenish health, so the only goal of the game is to kill. In contrast, in the old mode, the gameplay forced the player to survive, he had to not only go and kill, but also carefully follow the plot, while trying to stay alive. It symbolically represents that combat wounds are not something that you just wait a moment and move on, but they are something that deserves serious attention.

The gamification of the fight also means that the game does not makes one think about the topic of killing, on the contrary, the player is rewarded for its effectiveness, for example, the basic indicator on hitting the target is white and informs the player of inflicting wounds on the opponent, while fatal hits with are shown with a red indicator colour, which simply shows the player his effectiveness. However, there are also productions, such as the *Sniper Elite* video game series, which glorify dealing fatal damage. Their presentation takes place in slow motion or approximately, showing the exact location of the hit and the damage in the opponent's body that the projectile caused. Although the emphasis on the realism of the battlefield should be rejected, feared, and terrorized, it often provides a spectacle, makes it more attractive, and provides a gameplay that ultimately consists of tearing through the next stages.

There are also productions, completely opposite, such as *This War of Mine* (2014), an atypical war game that shows the struggle on the other side – the side that is also suffering and struggling to survive – of the innocent civilians. The player takes on the role of an ordinary person, a free victim who is forced to survive in difficult conditions, caught in the conflict. Like combat soldiers, he must fight for survival and make morally difficult decisions. As a civilian, the player has to provide food and medicine to his shelter. There are two parts of the game: one is during the day, when the player can take care of our wounded people, and construct or repair the shelter. The second is at night, when the player must leave his safe zone and go to the dangerous city, avoiding soldiers, to find useful items to improve his civil community.

Heroism in Video Games

Computer games use elements that were already known to film recipients. The most recognizable scenes from war movies, e.g., the storming of Omaha Beach in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), or the storming of Okinawa from the *Pacific* (2010) series. Experiencing them in this way is completely different because, in the film, the event is experienced from the viewer's perspective. While the games immensely engage the player in the events taking place on the screen, often emphasizing the development of the plot based on the decisions made by them.

In games, players are not only observers of events, but also participants with various degrees of agency. Game designers who are giving opportunities for players to be more interactive and allow them to create their own meanings. It depends on the reflection how much the player will

become involved in the game world and the gameplay, how deeply he will turn his imagination into it to add meaning in his own way.

Depending on the type of gameplay – single or multiplayer – performing a heroic deed may be planned by the game developers or simply performed by the player.

One difference between single-player and multiplayer is that, in the first case, the planned gameplay sometimes forces heroism, as it is necessary to further relive the story of the main character. In the second type, as players, we can decide to make something heroic, we have free will, and we can do anything – especially if a multiplayer game is based on a sandbox.

You can also meet games in which the player has the opportunity to make a decision, and it depends on him which path he will follow. The game provides exciting entertainment, giving many opportunities to make a lot of stunts and heroic moves during combat.

In multiplayer games, where the main character is not placed at the centre of attention, the gameplay is completely different. Players are much more focused on the results and progress of the team, they see the importance of seemingly trivial activities such as suppressing fire, building medical or supply stations, or carrying out diversions. Even the death of a unit during an assault on an enemy position may make it easier for someone else to survive, which will ultimately lead to the victory of the entire team.

On the contrary, single-player games are easy to predict, especially since one can play each stage many times, learning it and anticipating where the threat will come from. Playing as a team with other players also ensures the uniqueness of the game, no match is the same, and the opposing team's players behave in an unknown or unpredictable way.

This can be seen on the example of the “Battlefield” video game series, in which players take on the role of fighting soldiers. In this series of games, the game is played in both modes.

As an example, the gameplay of the game “Battlefield V” is set during the Second World War. In the single-player game, the creators of the game focused on telling a few separate stories of the participants located on different sides of the conflict. This allows players to experience the conflict from several sides, discover personal stories, and get to know the human emotions of the characters.

In the multiplayer mode, the gameplay is based mainly on the fight of two sides for key points on the map. In this mode heroism also appears, but in a completely different, atypical, way. The concept of “battlefield moments” was born, which is nothing more than a depiction of the spontaneous chaos of spectacular combat that is basically followed by players. Battlefield moments are also moments where players perform amazing, often heroic deeds that involve only digitally created characters, not a real human being. However, the possibilities offered by the game by enhancing human perception allow the player to do impossible things: such as jumping out of a fighter and defeating your opponent with a shot from a handgun and jumping back into the falling machine and flying away.

Conclusion

In conclusion, war, regardless of the medium in which it is presented, terrifies us and, aware of its cruelty, we do not want it. However, war games and films are interesting to us; they engage viewers and players, allowing them to feel like a hero. They allow us to observe the characters and their deeds from close range, or to impersonate them. We do it from a safe distance, in the privacy of our home, being grateful that we can end it at any moment and return to normal life.

Above all, the experience of war in those productions is always a simulated one, and it is never the same as going through the same real thing. That brings another kind of problem – do we, the audience, and the players, become immune to the harm and tragedy of war? Do we want to live in that kind of world, dangerous and destroyed?

Nowadays, game producers focus on creating more and more inspiring virtual worlds than on inventing new, creative mechanics that allow for advanced interaction with the world. Especially, when it comes to war games, which always contain politics, ideology, and other meanings that shape the reality we perceive. The creators of movies and video games are, in a way, the precursors of what they do; there is no right path or boundaries yet, and creating in the subject of war is something very complicated. An attempt at gamification of the battlefield shows how much something as terrible as killing can be simplified and rewarded. Today, when there are more and more of such productions on the market, one should consider whether the society will not get used to it and shall not reduce the importance of war and struggle to something prosaic. In my opinion, as the realism displayed in games increases, the risk of getting used to certain elements of the war increases. However, it is impossible to simply experience war as it really is with video games and war movies. The nightmare that affects soldiers fighting at the front is often beyond the comprehension of the audience of this entertainment.

Regardless of the medium in which we want to show heroism during the war, we must, unfortunately show everything that is also around it. Even the greatest hero, who wants to survive during the war, does terrible things. The horror and chaos of war, suffering, brutality, and indecency. A real war will never be a film or a game.

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