10   "It Feels Real to Me": Transgressive Realism in *This War of Mine*

Kristian A. Bjørkelo

Like movies and literature, games can present thought-provoking, uncomfortable scenarios that feel realistic to the audience. The pain and tragedy portrayed on screen and through gameplay seem genuine and affect the player. Taking a cue from this similarity, in this chapter I explore *This War of Mine* (11 Bit Studios 2014) through autoethnography as an example of *realism* in computer games. I do not consider this realism in terms of graphical or mechanical realism but rather as an accurate representation of a situation that is far removed from most players' range of experiences. I build on ideas of realism, social realism, and transgression and discuss how they relate to this game before I try to shed light on the gameplay experience.

Toward the very end of the chapter, I develop the idea of *transgressive realism* as a way of describing game experiences that feel real through their ability to disturb or be uncomfortable. Thus, they are transgressive because they are able to make us reflect in ways that entertainment media normally do not. Transgressive realism thus begs the question: Does playing a game that makes one feel uncomfortable or distressed enhance the game's sense of realism?

This War of Mine

First released in 2014, *This War of Mine* has received attention for dealing with wartime suffering in a mature and engaging manner. Created by 11 Bit Studios in Warsaw, it draws inspiration from the Siege of Sarajevo during the Balkan War of the 1990s to make a serious, social-realist gameplay experience. The marketing of *This War of Mine* focused on the game as different from other war games. The public-relations slogan was "In war, not everyone is a soldier," and the trailers used slow-moving, black-and-white images from the game and from war, accompanied by somber, classical music. The message is that war is something that happens to civilians more than to soldiers and that it forces civilians to make difficult choices for their survival.

For many players, playing *This War of Mine* is a rewarding yet uncomfortable and disquieting experience, reminding them of or confronting them with the civilian experience of war. And as expressed in discussions online (Toma 2015, 217–218), there are also those who find the game frustrating for different reasons. For some, it does not live up to the expectation of a war game or of a resource-management game, or it is experienced as simply depressing. Other players treat it like any other game, giving tips on how to successfully deal with the challenges. Sometimes these players are joined by voices explaining that the game has to be this hard and frustrating because that is how war is (see Toma 2015). The message is: war is horrible.

In *This War of Mine*, the player controls a group of three to four characters trying to survive in a bombed-out squat during a siege. The game is set in a city plagued by a (fictional) civil war. When the game starts, the player does not know how long the war will last, and the actual number of days is randomized for each playthrough. During the course of the game, the player must gather supplies, reinforce the shelter, trade, and deal with other survivors. The game days are divided into daytime, when the player takes care of the characters' needs around the shelter, and nighttime, when the player sends out one of the characters to scavenge or raid buildings in the city for resources. Over time, the available resources become scarce, and the world becomes more violent as the characters grow more desperate. The player must make difficult choices so that their characters will survive until armistice.

The game is semirandomized: there is a limited set of locations and events, but the actual selection of locations and events is randomized for each playthrough. The safe house is also randomized and has different rooms, loot, and challenges, such as locked rooms and debris. This randomization not only increases replayability but also adds a sense of uncertainty when a new playthrough is started.

When a player starts a game, their first tasks are to secure the shelter and to excavate the most readily available areas for resources. Available resources range from manure, raw meat, vegetables, and canned goods to mechanical parts, electrical parts, and wood as well as, of course, weapons, weapon parts, and ammunition. These resources are spent on keeping the characters alive and upgrading the safe house. The player also needs to make weapons to defend the safe house from the inevitable nightly raids or to use during the nightly search for resources.

During daytime, the game plays out like a depressing version of a dollhouse simulator such as *Little Computer People* (Activision 1985) or *The Sims* (Maxis 2000), where the players micromanage characters and their needs. But in this game everything is in disrepair, and the characters move around slowly due to injury, exhaustion, or depression. At nighttime, the player may scavenge or raid the locations near the safe house. This is

the stealth-action part of the game and is not without its moral dilemmas. The player must choose where to go, and the map screen indicates whether an area is populated or not and whether the people there are peaceful or not. The player can therefore choose to encounter no resistance and scavenge in environs that are safe but have smaller rewards or take a risk for greater reward by going where they can expect resistance. There is also the opportunity to loot homes and safe houses belonging to nonplayer characters, though this choice may end in a violent confrontation. Is the player willing to steal? Is the player willing to kill innocents? As the resources become more and more scarce, the player is forced to ask these questions. Is it better to "safely" rob those who cannot protect themselves? Or should the player take the moral high ground and steal only from those perceived as a threat or as criminals?

Realism and Games

The term *realism* eludes a single working definition because it points both to a set of genres of artistic expression and to the attributes of these genres (Morris 2003). In addition, in philosophy, being a realist is an ontological and epistemological position, countered by an antirealist position (Braver 2012, 2015). Realism is further complicated by being defined and evaluated differently for different forms of expression; realism is not the same for paintings as it is for literature, nor is it the same for films or for games. As a genre, realism is generally focused on conventions for portraying reality with a certain level of authenticity and truthfulness. Postmodernists often accuse it of being obsessed with the minute details of everyday life (Beaumont 2010). When discussing realism in a particular medium, such as a book, a film, or a game, we tend to consider the level of realism of a work based on its verisimilitude—that is, to what extent it manages to create an authentic and truthful version of our perceived reality. For the purpose of this chapter, a working definition of *realism* is the representation of certain aspects of reality in a truthful manner or in accordance with our preconceived notions of what is real in the world.

According to Gonzalo Frasca (2003), videogames are not conventional representations like novels and paintings; they are simulations. They are dynamic models of complex systems that result in narratives or representations for the external viewer. Central to a videogame is the player who performs actions within the simulated game-world. According to Alexander Galloway (2004), the fact that games are played and are influenced by the player's actions complicates the problems of representation and thus the concept of realism. Because of the simulated nature of games and the player's actions, it is not enough to discuss the visual and textual representational qualities of

games; the world in which these actions take place and how they correspond to the "real" world must also be addressed. Galloway suggests discussing realism in games from the perspective of how these actions and worlds correspond to their real-world counterparts and how the gameworld adds kinesthetic, affective, and material dimensions to the discourse of representation and meaning. Furthermore, he suggests two distinct forms of realism in digital games: *realisticness*, which is the accuracy or authenticity of the audiovisual representation of the world, and *social realism*, which refers to the accuracy of game characters' behavior, their social world, and the narrative. To this we can add *behavioral realism*, which refers to the truthfulness of the physics of the simulation—that is, the gameworld and the items in the gameworld behave according to our expectations of how they behave in the real world (see Breuer, Festl, and Quandt 2011, 2012; Pötzsch 2015; Šisler 2016). Behavioral realism is the springboard for Holger Pötzsch's (2015) discussion of *selective realism*, wherein unpleasant aspects of warfare, for instance, are kept out of the simulation in war games, but concepts such as war, militancy, and violence are glorified. Commercial digital wargames are often surgically clean of civilians, thus allowing players to avoid the more problematic sides of war when playing such games.

These concepts become important as we move on to discuss *This War of Mine* and transgressive realism. In particular, *social realism* becomes central and is here understood as the truthful simulation or representation of the social world and character behavior within the game, as perceived by the player.

Transgression and Games

The chapters in this anthology approach and define the transgressive and the act of transgression in games from a multitude of perspectives. What is transgressive is contingent on who, when, and where. It is subjective, and it is contextual. Central to the concept of transgression is the crossing of lines and the breaking of boundaries. Chris Jenks defines the act of transgression as "go[ing] beyond the bounds or limits set by commandments or law or convention, it is to violate and infringe " (2003, 2). Jenks adds that transgression implies an acceptance of the conventions: "Transgression is a deeply reflexive act of denial and affirmation" (2). In this assertion, he finds support in Georges Bataille (1985), who argues that transgression serves to reaffirm the boundaries that are being transgressed. This position is perhaps well summed up by the saying "Rules are meant to be broken."

The *Oxford English Dictionary Online* defines transgression as "the action of transgressing or passing beyond the bounds of legality or right, a violation of law, duty or

command; disobedience, trespass, sin. … The action of passing of or beyond" ("Transgression" 2017). A transgression can be against conventions, expectations, or morality and is a violation that fosters negative responses by the community, institution, or individuals. A game can break with the conventions of a genre and thereby also with the expectations of the audience (see chapters 6 and 11 in this volume), but it can also include content that breaks with cultural ideals of morality (see chapters 3, 4, and 14 in this volume). Whether a game is transgressive or not, however, depends on the response it receives. A transgressive game, in this understanding, is a game that causes a negative response either from society or from the game community or from players engaging with the game in question.

With respect to games, the boundary being crossed can be the expectation that the game should be fun or pleasurable or that it should behave like other games in a particular genre. When a game breaks with expectations and turns out to be uncomfortable rather than fun or subverts game mechanisms with respect to the conventions of a genre, boundaries are broken. In certain contexts, this breaking of boundaries may create a negative response of disgust or offense (Aldama and Lindenberger 2016) and thus opposition to the game, but in other contexts the immediate negative reaction that the game does not follow expectations may be followed later by pleasure, acceptance, or reflection. In the latter case, transgression may reaffirm the boundaries that have been transgressed and further our understanding of them. Therefore, transgression can contribute to profound and meaningful experiences. In this sense, games also allow us to consider serious out-of-game matters (Jørgensen 2014) or to have negative experiences in a safe environment (Montola 2010). Games allow us to play around with transgression and corresponding emotions such as discomfort, anger, sadness, and disgust in a safe environment.

Autoethnography of the Individual Gameplay Experience

Playing a game is an individual experience, formed by, among other things, game design and the player's individual context. It is nearly impossible for a designer or researcher to account for each individual player, and no reading can define every possible experience (Boudreau 2012). The different readings, experiences, and playstyles of *This War of Mine* found in online forum created to discuss the game attest to this (Toma 2015). At the time of writing this chapter, more than 4,000 discussion threads on Steam are dedicated to the game. Only a few hundred of the threads are active at any given time. Most of them are asking for help in different ways; a few are reporting bugs; and some are emotional posts about war, about the game, and about its emotional impact

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or are complaints that it is a bad game because it does not make players feel good. There is obviously no one single way of playing or understanding the game.

There is a growing trend of acceptance and usage of autoethnography in anthropology, folkloristics, and other academic fields in which ethnography is the primary research method (Reed-Danahay 1997; Anderson 2006; Denshire 2014). Autoethnography is both a process and a product (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011) that seeks to lift the self-reflective notes and biography of the embedded ethnographer to the level of a primary source in order to get a firsthand account of a culture or experience. Combined with the stories and perspective of other actors as well as with theories and analysis, autoethnography becomes a layered account of that culture or experience (Ronai 1995; Anderson 2006). In the context of this chapter, autoethnography is used as a tool to enhance the textual analysis, wherein I, in the role of a researcher, add my own emotional responses, reflection, and autobiographical details to the analysis of *This War of Mine*. As a basis for analysis, playing the game is not only acceptable but necessary (Aarseth 2003). By using autoethnography, I aim to make visible the autobiographical factors that inform my particular reading of the game. In addition, strong paratextual (Toma 2015) elements, such as marketing material, reviews, and discussions, provide contexts that influence my reading. The reading is focused on transgression and realism as I have experienced them while playing *This War of Mine*. This chapter is an autoethnographical text in a limited sense because it deals with only a single text and experience, not with an overall culture (*ethno*). It is also limited in scope because the full journal account and autoethnographical text of my playthroughs of the game are quite extensive. Playing a game is a subjective experience, and every playthrough of a game informs and shapes how the next playthrough is experienced. My first experience was very distressing, so I approached the second one more cautiously. However, at that point, I also had a better understanding of how the game worked and was perhaps better prepared for success.

My Autoethnographic Account

While playing *This War of Mine* and documenting my play, I focused on detailing what happened in the game from in-game day to day, how the characters responded, and, most importantly, what my thoughts and reactions were to what was going on, while making detailed notes in my journal. I had already played the game a few months earlier, and I had failed to keep the characters alive. This first playthrough ended with them succumbing to illness, starvation, and injuries or being killed. The playthrough stopped completely when the final character became depressed and committed suicide.

This playthrough left me emotionally devastated. *This War of Mine* reminded me of the stories that people who had experienced the civil war in the former Yugoslavia told me. After telling a woman who had been caught up in the struggle as a civilian about the game, she flatly replied, "This isn't a game to me." No, it was her childhood, spent fighting to survive. My response to the game was formed by my relationships to the people who have lived through war—people who have starved, who have been in firefights, who have killed to survive, and who live with the memories of it all. Playing *This War of Mine* triggered my recollection of their stories and influenced my experience. This background to my playing of the game goes to show how our biographies form a context for our reception and reading of a game.

Throughout the text, I distinguish between the characters as programmed entities in the gameworld and myself as the player who makes them act in a certain way because this is how I experienced the gameplay, and I attempt to reconstruct my play experience. Likewise, being an autoethnographic text, the analysis is focused on the narrative experience of the play, even though that experience is without a doubt influenced by the underlying rules and mechanics of the game. These mechanics create a certain tension in the game as the player is pressed for time and resources and restricted in what and how they can solve problems. I also use present tense in my gameplay descriptions for greater immediacy.

Because the autoethnographic study was done during my second playthrough, I was better prepared. I knew what to expect, both from the mechanics and from myself. I could steel myself emotionally and was not as stressed because I had learned from my first playthrough how the mechanics worked and what the game allowed me to do. This shift reflects Elisabeta Toma's finding that ambiguity or uncertainty becomes a mechanical resource in *This War of Mine* (2015, 212) because the player doesn't know for certain how to play the game until the second playthrough, having learned the hard way in the first.

My second playthrough lasted longer than the first, about eleven hours and was spread over two days in early October 2015. I sequestered myself when playing it, turned off all my usual social media, and ignored the forums and wikis that could help me with the game, although, admittedly, I skimmed some of them after my first playthrough. I wanted to do this on my own, without the aid of others.

The playthrough starts with a household consisting of Zlata, a student; Cveta, a schoolteacher who loves children; Anton, an elderly mathematics professor; and Pavle, an athlete and a fast runner. I am allowed four characters because this is my second playthrough. They all have different skills that will be useful for survival;

Pavle, in particular, will be helpful because he is a fast runner with the largest carrying capacity.

I manage to stay out of trouble for the first few in-game days as I explore the neighboring houses. Early on, a sniper wounds Pavle while he is scavenging, and that makes me jumpy. Still in my first play session but fifteen days into the game, Pavle kills someone in self-defense while scavenging. I searched through that particular house earlier and know there are valuables left, and there are parts of the house that I have not yet searched, but at the time of my search there was a sniper keeping me from exploring the area. As I have Pavle dodge the sniper this time, my pulse is racing when I notice someone moving around the house. I remember the notes left in the house, indicating that someone actually lived there, and realize that he must have been hiding. I try to make Pavle run, but the man throws a punch at him—I instinctively return the attack. When I mash the mouse button to force the combat system to respond, Pavle strikes once with the crowbar, hitting the man hard. The man cries out and throws up his arms in surrender, but I have already pushed the button twice, and the crowbar comes down again, killing the man. It is not just a case of self-defense; it is killing an innocent who is defending his home. Back at the shelter, Pavle becomes depressed and unwilling to carry out any further actions. The different characters are programmed to react differently to certain actions in the game. Most of them will be depressed from killing innocents. They will slow down work or even be entirely unresponsive. Pavle has all of these reactions, which affects the rest of the household negatively and makes it difficult to get everything to run smoothly because the rest of the household start worrying about the depressed character. At this point, the player must have the others talk to the depressed character to cheer him up and return him to "peak efficiency." In my playthrough, Anton tries to cheer Pavle up, while Zlata wonders how anyone will be able to live with themselves after the war. As a player, I tell myself that killing the man was an act of self-defense, that it was unavoidable and not really my fault—none of which I actually believe. I feel guilty. I am complicit in murder.

Tobi Smethurst and Stef Craps argue that "games have the capability to make the player feel as though they are [sic] complicit in the perpetration of traumatic events" (2015, 277). Through the interactivity as well as reactivity of the game, the player gains a sense of responsibility for what transpires. In this instance, when Pavle kills the man in his home, I feel responsible for Pavle's actions; they are after all my own, performed through keyboard and mouse. The feeling of complicity is a recurring factor throughout my playthrough of *This War of Mine*.

More hardships and doubts follow as winter approaches. In my journal, I question whether the game is designed to make ethical behavior difficult or if that is the nature

of war. Is the game rigged against being "good"? Is war? These questions, of course, play into the subject matter of this chapter. If war makes ethical behavior difficult or impossible, then a game that makes it hard or impossible *not* to compromise your ethics to survive is an accurate simulation. At least, it is a representation of the realities of war that resonates as truthful. As the situation becomes more tense and difficult, what would normally be clear-cut ethical lines begin to blur. Is it okay to steal from some people more than from others? Is it more ethical to risk a character's life by stealing from or killing bandits who can defend themselves or to keep the character safe by only preying on the weak and defenseless? This difficulty becomes a recurring theme as the game progresses and suggests that *This War of Mine* is what Sicart calls an ethical game because it forces the player into ethical reflection (2009, 212–215).

When attempting to scavenge Sniper Junction, Pavle is wounded by a sniper but survives and manages to get inside the nearby apartment building with the help of a wounded man. Once he is there, I can hear a baby crying. The room is dark, with a single light source shining down on a baby stroller. Whether the baby has been abandoned or the parents are just hiding, I cannot tell. The encounter sticks with me for a while because it makes me reflect over the fact that children are orphaned, mutilated, and killed in war. Children are usually conspicuously missing in war games. They are filtered out to create an ideological and morally "pure" playground for a war simulation, and, as mentioned earlier, this filtering constitutes a form of selective realism in which some elements are chosen to be truthfully represented, whereas others are downplayed or left out; "the [war game] genre plays into discourses that sanitize warfare and present it as a struggle limited to soldiers and armies" (Pötzsch 2015, 162). In *This War of Mine*, children remain reminders that they are also victims, whether as the crying baby or as the children coming to your door pleading for your aid. In the latter circumstance, you can choose to forsake resources or a certain amount of time of one of your characters for the chance that the children later may return a favor. The crying child in the carriage haunts me and serves as a reminder of what the game is about. Although it may have been a cheap rhetorical ploy to blackmail me through emotion, it works. When I later return to Sniper Junction, I look for the carriage, thinking that I may have overlooked something I can do for the baby, but the baby is gone. Picked up by its parents? Dead? Stolen? I would not expect a child to stay or survive in an actual situation like this, but I cling to the hope that the simulation is somehow lacking, that the baby would still be there and that I can comfort it. But, alas, not finding the baby feels like a defeat somehow.

As winter arrives, things intensify and get harder. I need to keep everybody warm, and after some days I start burning supplies I could have used to build things. Being

an academic, I try hard to avoid burning books, but some have to go, and I find this appalling. The idea of burning books strikes a certain nerve. It is the eradication of the written word, of knowledge and accumulated culture. It makes me think of the book burnings of totalitarian regimes and religious bigots. I burn everything else before this becomes an option, even when it means I am not able to build any tools or fortify the building. I still make the mistake of spending resources on building a comfortable chair—that is when I run out of firewood and have to scavenge some dangerous areas for more firewood.

The primary concern during the winter is Pavle's injury. This hurts my scavenging efforts, but I can still send out Zlata and even Anton if necessary. There are many of incidents during the winter that make me think that I may not make it to the end of the game. My characters are starving in spite of rationing food found early on, and they are falling ill due to the cold. Several scavenging runs are unsuccessful, but I start trading with different groups in the city. I cook moonshine and barter it for whatever I need—mostly at a local brothel, which I do not feel good about at all. It is obvious that the girls are being kept there against their will. I do not see them, but I can "hear" their voices as text floating over the building where they are kept, and I see men leaving the building after having satisfied themselves. The trading station is outside, so I never see the women themselves. I get only simple indications of their existence and the impression that they are ill-treated captives. The brothel confirms my preconceived notions about wartime prostitution and trafficking. I have read enough about sexual crimes in war zones to make my stomach turn, and I have heard women tell their own stories of what they have been forced to do in wartime. My instincts tell me to react—to do something, to turn the game into an action-adventure in which I save these women, but I fear it will not work. As someone who is invested and complicit in the fates of the characters in my household, I fear risking their lives. So I trade, and I turn a blind eye, wishing I could act differently.

When winter ends, I hope that things will change for the better. The situation, although still bad, is looking up. Cautiously optimistic, I send Pavle to scavenge in an abandoned church. The sortie does not quite go as planned because I am surprised by one of the armed thugs there. The thug manages to get off a few shots before Pavle beats the thug's head in with a shovel. Another bandit has heard the shots and comes looking. He does not see Pavle, but he is standing in Pavle's way. Pavle grabs the first bandit's shotgun and blasts away and does not stop shooting until the second bandit lies dead on the floor. Pavle is badly wounded and only barely manages to get back to the safe house. My heart is racing. This was way too close. I am not sure whether Pavle will recover.

Pavle is telling himself that they were bandits, and it is okay that he killed them because they have killed so many others. It was also self-defense. His bad morale, however, takes second seat to the fact that he is gravely wounded. He needs bandages—a lot of them. Everybody is happy he is alive but very worried. They all feel sorry for what he had to do and for his condition. I cannot say I blame them. I cannot help feeling that it was my fault. Was scavenging the church a necessary risk? Should I have instead tried robbing someone who could not defend himself? At this point in the game, I am pretty sure I will not make it. The fact that the game now enters its most dangerous phase, the Crime Wave, during which the shelter is constantly being raided, does not disprove this feeling. I am really desperate; I trade away everything that I do not have an immediate need for. Who needs ammunition ingredients when you do not have the tools to make ammunition? If I cannot use a resource to make food or take care of immediate needs, I am willing to barter it away.

After a brutal raid on my safe house, I become desperate for medical supplies and food. At the same time, children are at the door, begging for canned food. I decide to send Zlata to the brothel, but this time it is not to trade. I have seen a way in past the guards that will allow me at least to scavenge the place. I make Zlata sneak around the back and enter through a second-floor window. At this point, I am willing to steal from these guys. They are bad guys, creepy human traffickers, and I want to—no, I need to—win the game. Stealing from these guys just might be my best chance. Zlata manages to slip in through the top floor and is sneaking around when she is discovered. My judgment is that she can defend herself and get out, as Pavle did. I am wrong, and she is shot while swinging the crowbar at the guy who found her. She falls over dead.

The household falls into a depression, and their already scant resources are dwindling. I wanted to do better. I did not want Zlata to die, and it feels like losing the game. I know that people die in war. I know this on an intellectual level, but Zlata's death is an emotional reminder. And the fact that it was my decision—my misjudgment and my poor gameplay skills—that led to it makes me responsible for it. I am complicit in Zlata's death, as I was complicit in Pavle's murders. *This War of Mine* could be accused of blackmailing my emotions by enforcing a tragic and dark narrative played out in a war setting where mere survival is a success. This interpretation is aided by the game's paratext, the description of the game's theme and trailers, which instruct the players that it is meant to make them feel bad. As with Greek tragedy, the audience knows what to expect, and the game makes the player complicit in all the tragedy that occurs. So it is only natural that I feel really bad at this point. At the same time, however, I return to the game. I am not ending the session. I need to play this through to the end.

Luckily, soon after Zlata's death, the war comes to an end on. A simple slide tells me that the war is over. The slide is followed by a summary of the playthrough and short descriptions of the fates of those belonging to my household. I take a deep breath, and I feel my shoulders relax. I did not realize how tense I was during the last hours of game-play. I watch the summary with a sense of melancholy and emptiness that overshadow my feeling of accomplishment. Even though I am relieved and happy at having succeeded, I still feel bad for the questionable acts I have been complicit in, and I cannot shake the knowledge that even though *This War of Mine* is just a game, it reflects the reality of so many people living today. Civilians are still the victims of war all over the world. Unlike with a classical Greek tragedy, however, with *This War of Mine* there is no catharsis (Aristotle 1996), there is no relief from discomfort; instead, the negative feeling lingers on like a dissonant note (Aldama and Lindenberger 2016), which runs parallel with the pleasurable feeling of having played through the game with moderate success and the feeling that it has been a meaningful experience. I tell myself it will be a long time until I play it again.

Making You Feel

But what can be learned from this experience? First, I had a *positive negative experience*: an experience that is distressing but gratifying because it provokes reflection (Hope-ametsä 2008; Montola 2010). There is a seriousness that goes beyond the gameworld and the rules—what Kristine Jørgensen calls "play-external seriousness" (2014): the experience is not confined to the game but extends into the real world and allows me to reflect on real-world issues. While playing *This War of Mine*, I associated what happens in the gameworld to the real world in part because of the paratext and because the representation of war seems truthful. With respect to the terms discussed earlier in this article, *This War of Mine* is a realistic game in spite of its lack of behavioral realism or realisticness (Galloway 2004) or maybe even because of it. Creating furniture or making guns is a much more complicated process than is portrayed in the game, and the real world allows for a wider range of actions than does *This War of Mine*. The game mechanics resist you rather than aid you when you are in combat. You have to be precise in clicking your target and remember to change in or out of combat mode, and the reaction time is slow. When Pavle kills the innocent man, it is because I clicked the mouse several times in frantic self-defense before the hitting animation started, thus forcing Pavle to hit the man more than once. The same occurred when Zlata was killed. Although this slow reaction time can rightly be described as poor combat mechanics, the poor execution also seems intentional because it strengthens the sensation that the

protagonists are civilians and not soldiers trained for this situation. This is how combat is for most of us. At the same time, it is frustrating and scary. In playing *This War of Mine*, you fear entering combat more than you would in playing other games in which your characters are excellent and trained combatants.

Likewise, the graphics of *This War of Mine* are restrictive and "cartoony," far from the vivid photorealistic worlds found in conventional wargames (Pötzsch 2015). Both the mechanics of the resource system and the graphics serve to create a dissonance between themselves and the game's themes. On the one hand, you are just playing around with a house and its inhabitants, like a simple clone of *The Sims* or, more accurately, *Little Computer People*; on the other hand, you are dealing with the bleak and brutal realities of war—grief, violence, and survival. This dissonance highlights my understanding of the latter and, it could be argued, strengthens the game's transgressive aspects.

This War of Mine is a game that strives toward social realism. The designers' aim is to transport the player to a warzone so that they can experience it as a civilian would (Skipper 2014; Preston 2015). In the forums on the game, it is "described and interpreted both as a realistic and critical depiction of war and as a game" (Toma 2015, 220). The game's representation of civilians in war seems credible to me, and I feel drawn into the misery of it all. I recognize the fight for survival against starvation, cold, injury, and illness as a real challenge in wartime. I recognize as realistic the moral and ethical tableau of the game's many scenarios and quandaries. In *This War of Mine*, the player is confronted with tough decisions about life and death, theft, rape, trafficking, and one's willingness to sacrifice for strangers and how much. These ethical dilemmas are part of war for civilians, which is an argument for *This War of Mine* as a social-realist game. At the same time, *This War of Mine* may force us to experience and admit these aspects of war, and it may even confront us with realities we have not completely considered or "which we would rather overlook" (Julius 2002, 189). It provides insight into a reality that we do not want to consider but that we now no longer can ignore. In this way, playing the game becomes a transgressive experience in a greater way than just making the player feel bad.

Elisabeta Toma finds that the game's constraints pressure the player "to make decisions which contribute to the emerging narrative of the gameplay" (2015, 213). This view echoes the statement that the dissonance between the lack of realisticness and behavioral realism, on the one hand, and social realism, on the other, serves to heighten the latter. *This War of Mine*'s mechanics and procedural rhetoric—that is, how the game's rules and procedures communicate a message and convince the player to act in a certain manner (Bogost 2007, 2–3)—revolve around resource management, and time is the most important resource because everything costs time, even the other

resources that are spent. The player spends time trying to find resources, harvest them, and spend them, and they spend time handling the health and morale of their household. Time is a very limited resource in the game, one that is crucial for the player's decision making. The player has only limited time each day to manage their household and each night to scavenge, and at the same time, the player does not know how much time they ultimately have until the game ends. When characters become wounded or depressed or are starving, they move more slowly or not at all, and, thus, the player's resources decrease. The characters' actions are placeholders for the actions they can take and the time they have to take them. The fewer effective characters, the fewer actions the player can perform and therefore the less time the player has available. Add to this that it costs time and other resources to keep slowed characters alive and eventually to return them to prime efficiency. Thus, the player must ration other resources and actions to fit within these boundaries and to get their characters to last as long as possible. Toma argues that the mechanical constraints combined with the narrative component, which we could refer to as the social-realist aspects of the game, make sure that every decision is a life-and-death decision, a very difficult one at that: "The message that the game thus sends is that life is difficult during wartime and details regarding time and resource management become [*sic*] to have a high importance for civilians, that food and safety may turn common people into killers and victims" (2015, 213). Just as I experienced in my household.

Miguel Sicart describes an ethical game as one that allows players to make their own ethical value judgments and perform in accordance with them (2009, 212–215). A game that allows players to reflect on whether their actions are ethical or not and allows them freedom of choice is considered an open ethical system. *This War of Mine* is thus an open ethical system. It will give players constant feedback, priming or instructing them to think a certain way about the choices they have made. The different characters in the game will respond differently according to how they are coded (*This War of Mine Wiki* n.d.), but their responses serve to make players reflect about ethics, with respect to how the game system is rigged. This reflection occurs because *This War of Mine* uses what Sicart calls *mirroring ethics*, meaning that the game is designed for the player to go through "an ethical experience similar to the one the game object encourages" (2009, 217). The player must experience the ethical dilemmas and conflicts of someone trying to survive a war, and no matter what choice they make or what happens, they are complicit.

Another factor that connects the player with the gameworld is empathy. Jonathan Belman and Mary Flanagan (2010) draw on empathy research in different disciplines to explain how games can be used to enhance a player's ability to empathize. A relevant

observation here is the idea of the mindful playing of games: for the player to be mindful and learn from a game, the game must prompt the player to empathize with the actions and characters in the game. The game's paratext informs the player that *This War of Mine* is about civilians: "In a war not everyone is a soldier." It is a subtle but apparently efficient prompt that makes the player approach this game from a different, more empathetic angle than other resource-management and war games. The player is prompted to play the game mindfully and seriously.

James Newman (2002) suggests that in playing videogames the player identifies with the gameworld rather than with the characters. In this regard, it could be argued that the player of *This War of Mine* empathizes and relates to the entire household, its fate and its chances of success, and not with the individual characters. This explains the commitment and empathy I feel as I suffer the travails of *This War of Mine* alongside the characters.

Along with a strong sense of complicity and the mirrored ethics, several other emotions are at work that make me feel for the characters and the world they inhabit: frustration, anger, sadness, panic, anxiety, and so forth—all enhanced by my personal background (on this point, see chapter 3 in this volume)—and I am tempted to say, "It all feels real to me."

Transgressive Realism

This War of Mine can easily be understood as a realist and, in particular, a social-realist game within the definitions I have discussed in this chapter. I argue that the game can be called *transgressive realist*, wherein realism is not only what is experienced as truthful but also something that can be considered a *positive negative* (Hopeametsä 2008; Montola 2010) or transgressive experience. The term *transgressive realism* has been used as the philosophical middle position between realism and antirealism (Braver 2012, 2015), but in the context of *This War of Mine* I use it to refer to the way the game convinces players of the truthfulness and authenticity of the play experience by making them feel bad. To be so convinced requires an understanding of transgression as something that evokes discomfort. These feelings are reported in the forums for and the reviews of *This War of Mine* (Toma 2015), and they are feelings I experienced while playing the game. The sequences involving Pavle's murder of the innocent man and later of the two bandits and then Zlata's death in the brothel struck a chord in me and stuck with me until the end of the game and beyond. These feelings were strengthened by my own biography and by the game's paratext, such as YouTube trailers and reviews, informing me of how I would feel about the game (Belman and Flanagan

2010; Boudreau 2012). This emotional response is also apparent in some of the negative responses that forum users had to the game, such as anger and frustration that the game is no fun, too punishing, unplayable and therefore not a game. The anger stems from being cheated out of the expected pleasure of a war game. To put it in a different way, the player has been transgressed against, but in a different way—perhaps by being confronted not only with unwanted emotions but also with unwanted realism and realizations about war (see Julius 2002, 189).

I suggest that when *This War of Mine* makes us feel bad, through mirroring ethics, empathy, and complicity, this negative emotion also feels truthful and real because it is real. This feeling creates the impression of realism in *This War of Mine* that runs parallel with its social realism, and it allows for further reflection on the experience, on the ethics of the situation, and how the game relates to the real-world situation that we are informed it portrays (Montola 2010; Jørgensen 2014; Aldama and Lindenberger 2016). When as part of the same research project from which this anthology sprang I co-organized a live-action, role-playing game that aimed to create *positive negative* game experiences, I found that creating discomfort for the players caused the game to be experienced as more realistic, even though the discomfort was purely mechanical and physical in nature (Bjørkelo 2016). Performing the game barefoot in a cold room, the players had a constant level of discomfort that bled (Waern 2011) into all the game's activities no matter how mundane, thus making it feel more realistic.

A counterargument can easily be made that because *This War of Mine* is realistic, players are more prone to have a purely negative emotional response rather than a positive negative one. This is a valid argument that I cannot dismiss. However, as is often the case, there is most likely a dynamic between the two processes at work. Where a game that feels real may provoke discomfort, this only serves to strengthen the sense of realism. The two form a feedback loop. In any case, I believe that transgressive realism is worth further exploration, not as a separate genre but as a tool to study the overlap between transgression and realism in an aesthetic context, focusing in particular on how social realism can be a potent vehicle for creating meaningfully transgressive game experiences.

My autoethnographic walkthrough of *This War of Mine* reveals a game that has several elements of transgressive realism. It is a game that tries to force an emotional response and ethical considerations from the player. The ethical challenges and experiences in *This War of Mine*—including murder, starvation, and sex trafficking—are intended to make the player feel bad. No matter what happens, the player is complicit in the wartime tragedies that occur. The worse the player feels about them, the more real the game feels. I suggest that the same can be said about scenes in other games,

such as the self-dismemberment scene in *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream 2010), in which the player, through performing this act in a very physical QuickTime event, becomes complicit in the act to the degree that they can almost feel the pain. The discomfort of the entire scene makes it all the more poignant and realistic, and it serves as an example of what can be called transgressive realism.

Conclusion

This chapter argues for use of the term *transgressive realism* to describe the relationship between negative emotions and what is perceived as truthful and authentic—in particular, when *real* negative or painful feelings make something *feel* more truthful and real. To put it simply, if the feelings are real, what evoked them must also be real(istic). The opposite and maybe more conventional argument may also be true: that what is perceived as real evokes stronger negative emotions. Transgressive realism is a dynamic process between the two. I argue that the concept is a tool, not a genre or a genre aspect, to be used when analyzing how negative emotional response is related to realism not only in games but also in other media in general.

For instance, the movie *Schindler's List* (Spielberg 1993) feels real because it is a harrowing emotional experience to watch, and we can assume it has been filmed with this intention. Our knowledge of the Holocaust, the film's plot and performances, as well as the technical savvy of the director, editor, and producers amplify a feeling of discomfort that makes the film feel realistic. Games such as *This War of Mine* and *Heavy Rain* do the same. Using the concept of transgressive realism allows us to see how transgressive content and *positive negative* experiences enhance the impression of realism in a work.