

# Even *Missile Command* Tells a Story

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*Beat Suter*

Many games without stories still manage to tell good stories. *Missile Command* (1980) is one of them and may serve as a good example for two kinds of narrative mechanics: gameplay mechanics that are used as narrative elements, and a political context that is embedded in such a way that players can experience an ethical dilemma about the consequences of their actions while under threat. In fact, a simple game like *Missile Command* confronts you with a surprising amount of ethical choices and moral depth (cf. Extra Credits 2012).

It is the year 1980, at the height of the Cold War. Politics and the older generation practice nuclear deterrence and generate an atmosphere of fear and anxiety. So much so that the younger generation declares a new ice age, starts a rebellion in the streets and adopts ironically absurd slogans. The possibility of nuclear war hangs over everybody. Any day could be the last one. Any day could be the “day after”. It is all forgotten now, but it was tangible and concrete then. These days, the nuclear threat is not so concrete, even though many missiles are still ready in their silos, and the leaders in control are as unpredictable as ever.

## PROTECT YOUR ENVIRONMENT

*Missile Command* is a game that lets you feel these things in an intensely immersive way. In this arcade game, you are under threat and use a trackball and a crosshair to fire missiles from three missile defense platforms, targeting and then shooting at incoming projectiles. You have to protect six cities from an unending rain of these intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). The graphics of course don’t seem too impressive. After all, it is 1980. Incoming missiles are single-pixel glowing dots, cities are bichromatic skyscraper silhouettes, and the sound of explosions has that great old Atari rumble (Extra Credits 2012). The noise and

the darkness of a 1980s arcade makes you feel like you are sitting in a bunker and the missiles are raining down on you. You are trapped and will most likely die in this arcade-bunker.

Believe it or not, if you look at it from the player's perspective, the game is non-violent. The player never launches a nuclear missile. You never fire at an enemy. The enemy, in fact, is unknown, and the game is entirely about trying desperately to save lives. The player, rather than assuming a dominant position as is often the case in games, is in a weak position here, with merely reactive and very limited options. There is not enough time to revel in nuclear explosions or heroically shoot down enemy planes, ward off spaceships or go after the enemies themselves. The player is simply at the receiving end of a nuclear strike, something that could have happened any day in 1980. In this way, the experience of playing the game is very human and down-to-earth.

## A DECISION GAME

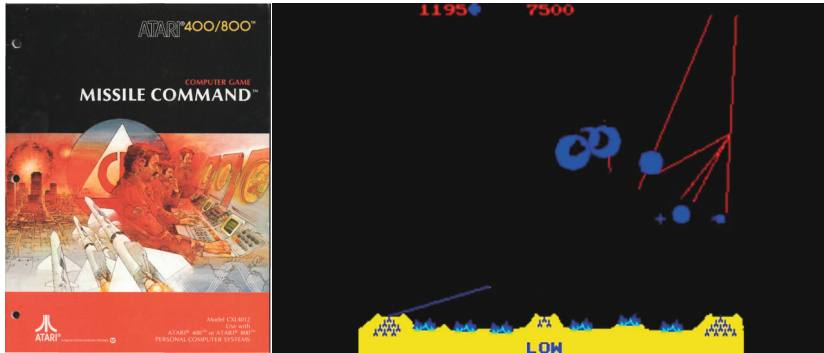
The player takes the role of a local missile commander who controls three bases of missiles and has to defend six cities close-by. This is something easy to identify with. Unfortunately, the missile bases have limited resources, yet there is a seemingly unlimited onslaught of incoming ICBMs. The player soon realizes that they cannot defend all six cities and have to make decisions about which ones and how many to defend. And they also have to keep the missile platforms alive in order to protect as many cities as possible. It is a tough dilemma: Do you sacrifice cities with civilians just to keep a military installation with your soldiers functioning? How many can you keep alive? Do you sacrifice two cities containing presumably millions of people, so that the other cities with their own civilians may survive? There is no time to think about this. The tension builds up. You have to make the decisions instantly. Maybe you can manage to keep one city alive?

"I always ended up sacrificing cities to save others, ran out of missiles, lost bases... no matter how hard I tried, I always, ALWAYS lost in the end. Now I know why." (Mind Fracture 2017 in: Extra Credits 2012)

You can't win the game of *Missile Command*. There comes the time when your last city burns and explodes. You can't win a nuclear war. The message is clear.

“To paraphrase Joshua from War Games, ‘Nuclear war is a strange game. The only winning move is not to play.’” (Mind Fracture 2017 in: Extra Credits 2012)

*Figure 1: Front of manual for the Atari 400 and 800 versions of Missile Command (left), defending against incoming missiles and blasting them out of the sky in the arcade version (1980).*



Source: Mobygames, screenshots (Suter)

Basically, in Missile Command, as in many arcade games of the 1970s and 1980s, the simple background story serves as a narrative framework for a crucial gameplay that totally immerses the player in an action and reaction scheme. But Missile Command works in a much more direct way. The narrative framework is fictional, yet at the same time it reflects realistic political and mass psychological conditions and forces the player into a quasi-real role. The fiction is so closely interwoven with reality, and especially with people's real fears, that players experience emotional tensions themselves. This was definitely the intention of the developers of Missile Command.

## MISSILE COMMANDER IN BUNKER WITH TRACKBALL AND RADAR

The screen interface remains very technical and simple, as in many other simulation games Atari produced at that time. And if you look closer, you realize that the arcade machine interface seems to be designed in order to familiarize the player with operating a radar screen. An important component is the trackball that makes sure there is free and quick movement for the cursor. Developer Dave Theurer refers to military history when he states in an early memo that the screen

would mimic a real radar display: “The color monitor will display a radar scan view of the coast and the offensive and defensive missile action. [Missiles] will appear as a blip on the monitor as the radar beam scans over them. A cursor will be displayed on the screen and guided by the trackball.” (Temple 2016) This brings the player even closer to a realistic situation of defending their environment from a bunker and making difficult decisions. In this respect, it is an early ethical decision-game, maybe even a serious game.

Game designer David Theurer recalls having had nightmares – first as the inspiration for the game, but also during its development. “Missile Command embodied the Cold War nightmare the world lived in. [...] I had nightmares about nuclear attacks”, Theurer said in an interview with game critic Alex Rubens in 2013. “During that time, I lived near Moffett Field, where the Air Force would randomly launch spy planes, which made a tremendous roar when taking off. I’d wake up, and while half asleep, hear the launch sounds and for a moment wonder if it was an atomic blast.” (Rubens 2013)

## REAL NIGHTMARES

Theurer’s nightmares were recurring events during the development of the game for Atari. This was a very sobering experience for the game designer. “I would dream that I was hiking in the mountains above the Bay Area, with the fabulous views of the San Francisco Bay. In the dream, I’d see the missile streaks coming in and know that the blast would hit me while hiking there on the mountain.” (Rubens 2013). This internalization of the events in the game naturally also had to do with the obsessive way Theurer went about his work, creating numerous scenarios and reprogramming them again and again. And finally, they also helped him to focus on the essential events and elements the game needed. Various additional elements were then deleted in order not to dilute and endanger the immediate experience.

## ADAPTIVE NARRATIVE FOR A “SERIOUS GAME”

And finally, the closing point of the game stems from those nightmares. In line with the real political references, there was no sneering “game over” screen at the end, but a simple “THE END”. Symbolically, Theurer thus created a nuclear explosion with the appearance of the words “THE END” as the conclusion of the game. “Missile Command was a social commentary ahead of its time.” (Rubens

2013) A reminder that you will never be able to win a nuclear war. And a reminder that a real-world context may very well be able to generate direct emotional immersion in a video game as well as awareness for that context, while playfully simulating the immediate consequences and scenarios of precarious social and political situations.

The narrative mechanics of *Missile Command* are nothing less than the direct transfer of a real political situation into a scenario: the defense of one's own environment against an attack from outside. The player is given a decisive role in which he or she is faced with an immediate ethical dilemma. Dave Theurer had first planned a concrete geography in which six named Californian cities had to be defended. In that version, it was also clear that the enemy leading the attacks was called the Soviet Union. Just as he discarded parts of a more complex GUI with flashing scores, he also deleted the geographical references so that *everyone* could feel directly addressed. Thus, in the published version, the player is allowed to interpret their own geography and their own enemy.

## REFERENCES

### Literature

Temple, Tony (2016): "The Secret History of the Arcade Trackball." In: Arcade Blogger, July 29 (<https://arcadeblogger.com/2016/07/29/the-secret-history-of-the-arcade-trackball/>).

Rubens, Alex (2013): "The creation of Missile Command and the haunting of its creator, Dave Theurer." In: Polygon, August 15, 2013 (<https://www.polygon.com/features/2013/8/15/4528228/missile-command-dave-theurer>).

### Game

*Missile Command*, Atari, Atari, 1980.

### Video

Extra Credits (2012): Narrative Mechanics – How Missile Command Tells a Story. In: YouTube ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQJA5YjvH DU&t=323s&ab\\_channel=ExtraCredits](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQJA5YjvH DU&t=323s&ab_channel=ExtraCredits)).

