Keeping Memory Alive through Digital Games

Relating to Real World Memories through Game Narratives in THROUGH THE DARKEST OF TIMES

JÖRG FRIEDRICH

Abstract

This article describes the development process of the game THROUGH THE DARKEST OF TIMES and its aim to connect players with real-world memories and historical events. It explores the use of digital games as a medium for conveying individual and collective memories, fostering a culture of remembrance, and enhancing understanding of historical situations. The authors discuss their approach of integrating historical events and resistance fighters' biographies into the game, while maintaining a balance between entertainment and critical reflection of the past.

INTRODUCTION

THROUGH THE DARKEST OF TIMES, the game I have been working on for the last three years with my colleague Sebastian Schulz, and later with a team of seven, is a game that lets you lead a civilian resistance group in Third Reich Berlin, trying to resist the Nazis, help the persecuted, educate the people, and weaken the regime, all while evading capture by the Gestapo. It is also an experiment: a game, that aims to entertain and excite its players, while simultaneously contributing to the commemoration of the recent German past.

Figure 1: Early Concept of the resistance group meeting in the back room of a bar

Source: Paintbucket Games/HandyGames

THE QUESTIONS

The questions about how history will be made accessible to future generations are still to be answered. Games enable users to become an active party in historical-like situations, with unprecedented intensity. Individual experiences can surpass the efficacy of 'classic' history lessons. Ultimately, digital games are very likely to have a significant impact on which events from history are communicated, how they are understood, and how this understanding is passed on within a culture.

The questions we were asking ourselves while developing THROUGH THE DARKEST OF TIMES were all variations of 'how?', specifically:

- How can real memories find their way into a medium, which allows recipients to build upon them to create their own stories?
- How do we fulfill the players' need for agency, while maintaining the integrity of the topic at hand?
- How can game mechanics be used to enhance the understanding of a historical situation?
- How can video games contribute to building and sustaining a culture of re-membrance?
- How can entertainment and a critical reflection of the past be balanced?

COLLECTIVE MEMORIES

Most historical strategy games are based mainly on what I call collective memories: The broader historical facts, as they are usually taught in history lessons. Which king ruled from when to when; which countries were conquered; which new political order or regime was established or abolished. These are important facts, no doubt about it, and it is good that one can play games that cover these events. Games are a good tool for conveying these systemic and cause-and-effect mechanisms to the players.

Figure 2: Germany invading (then) Czechoslovakia, disaplyed on a strategic map

Source: Paintbucket Games/HandyGames

Having your troops at your border might make the neighbors angry. Economical needs might push countries to declare war. These are the types of mechanics that are well-covered in games.

Before continuing, here are some questions to consider:

- Did you make a significant decision today, one that changed world history?
- How about this week?
- This year?
- How about ever?

Games provide a specific experience, not achievable through another medium: The ability to step into the shoes of many different characters, for example, rulers or generals making tough decisions in the heat of war. This is something most of us would never have the chance (or misfortune, depending on your point of view) to do in our day-to-day lives. It is a fantasy, and an interesting one. But history is more than that. History is the sum of all the little individual experiences and memories of the millions of people who did not change the fate of the country, but who simply tried to live their lives. What about them? Aren't they worth a look? Aren't their stories worth being told?

With THROUGH THE DARKEST OF TIMES, we wanted to explore not only the collective memories, but also connect to individual memories of an era: Memories of people who happened to live in Berlin when Hitler became Chancellor, and who were opposed to the dictator when most of the country fell for him and his ideology. People without influence or power, people without special skills—ordinary people, who refused to fall for an inhumane regime when almost everyone else did—which made them so very extraordinary after all.

TRANSFORMING THE PAST INTO THE PRESENT

Figure 3: Once a day in 2017, we took one historical event that really happened on that same date in 1933, and transformed it into a tweet

Source: Paintbucket Games/HandyGames

HISTORICAL EVENTS AS TWEETS

In the early days of THROUGH THE DARKEST OF TIMES, when it was still a side project of Sebastian's and mine, we were both still working other full-time jobs, and had only very little content of the game to show—and content is king, as every social media expert will tell you.

A large part of my research involved reading historical newspapers from 1933, the year Hitler came into power, and finding events for the game's timeline. How fast some things happened in 1933, and how closely certain events resembled

those currently taking place, surprised and sometimes shocked me. I imagined that this might be the case for many others, too.

Every day, I checked the news of that same date in 1933—for example, if it was the 1st of May in 2017, I looked at the 1st of May in 1933. I picked one event which I found particularly fitting and tweeted it using the game's Twitter account. These tweets simply took an event and re-told it in rather short, neutral language—but the events spoke for themselves.

For as small an account as ours, the tweets were quite successful. Not only were they re-tweeted frequently, but people also approached me in person and told me how shocked they were by how closely the events from Hitler's first year in power sometimes hit home. It also reached the right people: Historical content posted by an indie game account led to an overlap of gamers who were into history, and historians who were into gaming. This cross-section represented exactly the audience we were hoping to target.

This proved to be useful as a marketing tool, and as a catalyst for us to empathize with these people from the past: It helped us better understand how dissidents must have felt in 1933 when they had to slowly watch their country change and turn against them; how they must have stood in shock and likely disbelief, telling each other that this will be over soon.

Our followers on Twitter who weren't that familiar with German history often demonstrated these reactions when they read the tweets. Some of their reactions made it into the game as brief sentences of your group's members, who comment on the latest atrocities of the regime. They reassure each other, that this time, Hitler took it too far and will be brought to justice—a reaction we are still seeing today when a society switches to autocracy, and democrats simply cannot believe it is happening until it is too late.
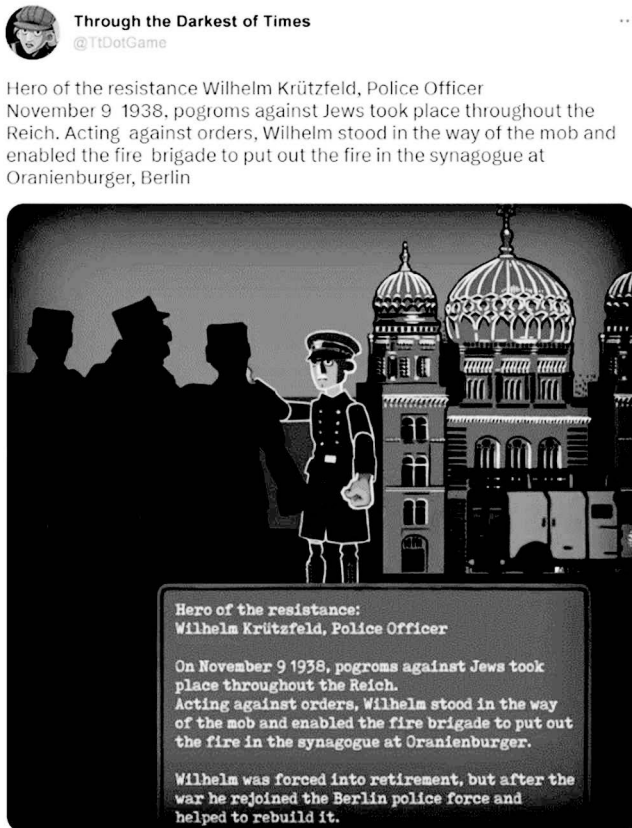
HEROES OF THE RESISTANCE

The tweets about historical events did, however, pose a problem: since they almost always covered negative events, people were reluctant to like them, which damaged the algorithm. We needed something that could still chronicle the darkest of times but was positive enough to remain relatable to our audience. The solution was so obvious, that once we thought of it, we wondered why we had not thought of it already: we would make posts about the resistance fighters themselves: The men and women, whom we would like to commemorate with our game.

Instead of daily historical events, we switched to making weekly posts featuring short biographies of historical resistance fighters, complete with their

character portraits as they appear in-game. While most of the characters suffered tragic fates, every post described at least one successful resistance action for which each person was responsible. These posts received a great deal of positive attention and helped us spread the word about our game, while still educating our audience, and supporting the tone and intention of the game.

Figure 4: In 2018, we switched from daily events to only highlighting people who had resisted the regime.

Source: Paintbucket Games/HandyGames.

THE AVERAGE RESISTANCE FIGHTER

Figure 5: The character editor where players create their own resistance fighter

Source: Paintbucket Games/HandyGames.

The game's heroes are the resistance fighters, the player-avatar, and the other members of the group. To design these characters, we needed to understand their real-world counterparts. We needed to find out:

* When does someone make the decision to risk their life to fight an inhumane regime?
* Is it despair or hope that drives them?
* Pride? Anger?
* How do they keep their courage up?
* Is there something that connects them?

While we did read standard literature about civilian resistance groups, we were mainly interested in firsthand accounts and historical documents; interviews, letters, and accounts from relatives and friends. Luckily, there was a lot of material we could explore, especially in Berlin.

We found the blog and podcast DIE ANACHRONISTIN by Nora Hespers, the granddaughter of resistance fighter Theo Hespers, who was active in Cologne and murdered by the Nazis in 1938. Nora, a journalist, was in the process of publishing her grandfather's diaries. When we reached out to her, she was very enthusiastic about our project. She not only offered to help us on the historical-research side,

but also the practical-artistic side: It is her voice you hear in the trailer, and voicing over the entire game.[1]

We read through collections of interviews with Berlin resistance fighters that were only printed in small quantities, and in which they described their feelings of anger towards the regime and the people who fell for it, their neighbors, co-workers, or relatives. They spoke of their hope for change, their hope that the world would come to help them eventually, and of their despair when they realized that no one would come to the rescue; that they were alone.

Did we find an answer to our question, what motivated these people to fight? More than one. Many! The answers to the question as to why someone would risk their life to fight an inhumane regime were as diverse as the civilian resistance groups themselves. Many were political, of course. Democrats, socialists, communists, and conservatives, who despised what the new regime did, who despised it so much, felt compelled to take action.

Some were spiritual—or believed in a higher goal, a higher cause. A cause that did not need to be religious—although many were Christians. Some were humanists. They believed in humanity and were convinced that humans were able to build a better world—and that this would happen sooner or later; that the Nazis were just a temporary detour on humanity's path to a brighter future.

Of course, there were people who were affected by the discrimination of the Nazis. Some were angry at the regime because it had stripped them of their culture—Berlin in the 1920s was a place of progressive lifestyles, clubs and parties, experimental music, and art. The Nazis discarded this and replaced it with their made-up pseudo-historicism, a homogenous culture that they called 'German'. They enforced cultural dominance.

Most resistance fighters were also into progressive art and music. Some came from these types of subcultures and got into the resistance because they did not want to accept that the Nazis were taking their lifestyles from them. There were plenty of different motivators to consider for the upcoming heroes of our game.

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1   Nora visited us several times in our office in Berlin, the earliest to memory having been in Spring of 2018. Everything she shared with us is also in her podcast, DIE ANACHRONISTIN.

INDIVIDUAL MEMORIES

A question we received quite frequently, mainly from folks who were not game design professionals or avid gamers, was "But can you play as [enter well-known resistance fighter or group here]?" This is a clear example of the primary difference between a game and a movie: If THROUGH THE DARKEST OF TIMES would have been a movie, it might have just re-told the biography of one of the many civilian resistance groups, like for example the Red Orchestra. But THROUGH THE DARKEST OF TIMES is a game, so naturally, we wanted to utilize the strengths of a game.

So, what about the individuals within the groups? During our research, we amassed a sizeable collection of individual memories and considered how we could implement them into the game. One way would be to let players play as one specific historical character and limit the player's choices in such a way that the outcome would match up with the biography of that person. This of course would have limited player freedom substantially, so we decided against it.

Another option would have been to let players play as a specific person but to allow them to make whatever decisions they liked. This was better, but it didn't feel right to let players change the biographies of these people who really existed. Somehow, this felt acceptable for collective memories, like those of a state, but not for individuals—especially individuals, who had often suffered as brutally as the ones we were discussing.

Figure 6: In TTDOT, players might get arrested and interrogated

Source: Paintbucket Games/HandyGames.

Ultimately, we went with fictional characters, later with procedurally-generated characters. Rather than reproducing the exact events and memories of existing people, we tried to build mechanics and dynamics that would lead to situations, which would call the fitting event to mind.

For example, we learned from the diary of the resistance fighter Theo Hespers, that once caught, interrogated, and tortured by the Gestapo, he gave the names and actions of resistance fighters who were already dead, or who had already been discovered. As a result, we added this as a mechanic in interrogations. Saskia von Brockdorff, the daughter of a member of the Red Orchestra, told us about a letter that her mother wrote to her when she was five years old, her mother was imprisoned and knew she would have to die soon.[2] Instead of simply retelling this heartbreaking story, we created a simulation where members of your group could have children. The group mentions these children, talks about them, and discusses how terrible it is for someone with children to have to die. The events for the group bemoaning a mother who dies and leaves her child are individually written and get triggered following specific rules and mechanics, creating a narrative simulation.

CONCLUSION

So, what about the initial question: Can games in general contribute to commemoration, and was THROUGH THE DARKEST OF TIMES successful in doing so? Just like any other medium, games shape our idea of the world, the present, the future, and the past. So, the question shouldn't be whether they contribute to commemoration, but rather how good they are at doing so.

I believe there are plenty of good examples out there, but it is not up to us, the creators, to decide whether our game is successful in doing so or not. What we can do is try to translate these topics in an appropriate and respectful manner. In my opinion, we have achieved this goal.

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2   Saskia von Brockdorff we met at a Zeitzeugen workshop in Berlin in 2019.

Interviews

Hespers, Nora. Interviewed by Jörg Friendrich & Colleagues, 2018.
von Brockendorf, Saskia. Interviwewed by Jörg Friedrich & Colleagues, 2019.

Podcasts

Die Anachronistin podcast, created by Nora Hespers.