

WWII Games Become a Vital History Lesson as the Greatest Generation Dies Out

How should video games depict WWI and WWII? We spoke to veterans, historians, and developers to find out



By [Samuel Horti](#)

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Charles Scot-Brown, 94, is watching Call of Duty: WWII's soldiers storm Omaha Beach. "It's basically authentic," he says. "Whoever designed that knew something about what they were doing." And he'd know: at just 20 years old, he left his native Canada to take charge of a platoon of soldiers in the 51st Highland Division of the British Army, leading them onto Sword Beach on D-Day. He then fought in the Battle of the Bulge, and I show him the game's depiction of that, too. "I would say it should sell," he says.

And how right he is. Despite releasing late in 2017, COD: WWII was the best-selling game of the year in most markets, and made \$1 billion in sales in its first seven weeks. It's hardly an anomaly – World War I game Battlefield 1 sold an estimated 15 million units during the quarter after it launched.

But as war games continue to rack up huge numbers, the number of World War II veterans dwindles. In the US alone, nearly 400 die every day. With direct family ties to the war all but severed, experts believe that video games will play an ever-increasing part in shaping our knowledge of what happened in both World Wars, in the same way that war films have in the past.

So how should developers face up to that reality? Should they change the way they make games about war? And do they have a responsibility to talk about war in a certain way? I spoke to World War 2 veterans, historians, academics and developers – including Call of Duty: WWII developer Sledgehammer games – to find out.

I meet Mac Joyner, another veteran, at the Sunnybrook Veterans Centre in Toronto, where he lives. He flew Lancaster bombers in an eight-man crew, somehow surviving 30 bombing runs. His squadron consisted of 30 aircraft and by the end of the war, taking into account reinforcements, 45 had been lost. He spends a lot of time visiting schools to pass on stories about the war, and he's concerned that as veterans die out, the public will know less and less about what happened. "I'm worried it will be less accurate, and glorifying it to the degree that [people] see war as being personally remote."



Mac Joyner Mac

Joyner

Scot-Brown echoes that concern. “Some of the kids didn’t even know what D-Day was,” he says, talking about his own visits to schools. “It’s all very well to be a lovely country...and do all the good things, but you’ve got to teach your own bloody history, because if you don’t know the history of your own country, how can you have any pride in it? They haven’t a clue. Even the European kids.”

And it’s not just kids: Matthew Seelinger, chief historian at the Army Historical Foundation, tells me that drumming up interest in the World Wars is becoming increasingly difficult. “We’re at a point

where we're going to take whatever [help] we can get," he says. "We had [WWII veterans] on our board of directors, people we came to know well, but we've pretty much gone to all of their funerals now."

Perhaps video games can provide some of that help, and academics believe that they are playing a bigger role than ever in shaping what the public think about what the wars were like. Dr. Debra Ramsay, lecturer in film at the University of Exeter, wrote books about how modern media affects the perception of war, and says she can see in her students that games are "as significant potentially as what they do or don't learn in school, or the films they see". Mitch Yockelson, a military historian and a professor at Norwich University in Vermont, believes that to a lot of young adults the World Wars seem like "ancient history", and that video games could act as a "hook" to get them interested.

Dr. Ramsay argues that games are more powerful than any other form of media for telling stories about the war. "Games bring those wars into the present. What you get is a first-hand experience of a simulated environment of war. It's very much about responding to those environments, and getting a faint glimpse about what it must've been like to face an overwhelming artillery barrage, or try and fight in Gallipoli in Battlefield 1. I'm not saying it's the same by any means ... but there's definitely a recognition that games do something that other forms of media don't."

II Activision

It's a power that Dr. Martyn Bignold, clinical psychologist at UK veterans' charity Combat Stress, also recognizes. "Broadly, it is becoming one of the ways our collective consciousness is shaped about those events, in the way that in the past it'd mostly been through films. But psychologically, it's much more powerful, that sense of agency and being involved," he explains.

He's interested in the way that video game technology – particularly virtual reality – is being used in exposure therapy to treat veterans with PTSD. He tells me that if games were able to do more to show the "real challenges of being in combat, the mental impact of war, that would be a good thing".

So how should developers harness that power in their games? The veterans I speak to are clear: they want war to be portrayed as it happened. “It’s good for [people] to see what war is like,” Scot-Brown says. “War is not pleasant. It’s dirty and stinky, and you’re showing it [in those games].” That means games should shoot for realism and, when possible, historical accuracy.

As we watch the footage of different war games play out, he provides a running commentary of things that wouldn’t have happened in real life. “We would’ve thrown a grenade on either side”, he says as Allied forces storm a bunker, followed by, “He wouldn’t be behind him. He should be in the front because he’s got the fast firing weapon that will knock a guy out.”

But he understands that, as with filmmakers, developers are out to make money, and therefore need artistic license. “When the infantry or any group of people are fighting a battle, every man is 10 yards apart from the other. If they [made games] the way the battle was fought, you’d have two guys on the screen. They have to be able to sell it. So you have to jam them in together, and they have to take certain leniencies with it.”



Joyner

Mac Joyner Mac

Joyner is impressed with the realism of both Battlefield 1 and Call of Duty: WW2. “I visualized cartoon men hopping along. It’s very realistic.” However, he has long been concerned that war films make the violence of war feel remote, and he feels the same way about games. “I’m worried that the young person who’s operating [the game] is so detached from it. They don’t have that fear...they get all the excitement and none of the consequences.”

The academics and developers I speak to talk of a “balancing act”: on the one hand war games should be authentic, and contextualize the action, but on the other, they must entertain. Dr. Ramsay believes that this “tension” will always exist, but she believes that “as the medium develops there will be a different kind of emotional register”. She describes Battlefield 1’s campaign as a good example. “I ended up crying my eyes out. Games are capable of eliciting those kinds of emotional responses, the emotions that we normally associate with representations of war.”

It’s a tension that developers are increasingly aware of. Glen Schofield, co-founder of COD: WWII developer Sledgehammer Games, says the company was mindful of the fact that for some gamers, this might be the first time they’d seen any media related to World War II, and that it would, therefore, inform their views of its history.

“There might be 17, 18-year-olds who are playing the game who don’t know anything about WWII, and have no connection,” he says. In the same way that Schofield said he watched Saving Private Ryan and “walked away with a deeper understanding of the pain they went through”, he hopes that players would feel similarly after playing Call of Duty. And for that reason, it’s important to “tell it as it was”. The team had a historian working with them who had interviewed dozens of WWII veterans, and they would often change aspects of the game to ensure they were authentic, such as a last-minute switch of the helmets that the soldiers wore when they stormed the Normandy beaches. They also tried to portray racism and show concentration camps, which – however heavy-handedly you might think it was handled – shows that authenticity is a concern.



Battlefield 1

Revolution EA

Schofield believes the way developers talk about war is changing. Advances in graphics and the size of development teams means developers can see their games “as a piece of art,” rather than just focusing on mechanics and player enjoyment. “I look at entertainment as evoking an emotion. It doesn’t necessarily mean it’s always fun. We wanted people to choke up at the end, and walk away saying, ‘Wow, that was an experience.’ For the next installment ... who knows where the thought process will go.”

The 2012 shooter *Spec Ops: The Line* explicitly tried to make players think about the horrors of war, and the way that they are portrayed in other video games. Timo Ullman, managing director of developer Yager, suggests that there is still a “disconnect” between the realities of war and AAA games, and that titles portraying war in a more realistic, perhaps more distressing way than anything currently on the market could find success. He cites *This War of Mine* and *Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice* as evidence that audiences are more willing to pay for games that aren’t fun in the normal sense of the word.

“[The industry] is trying on all kinds of levels to broaden the way we deliver entertainment in games, so it’s absolutely going in the right direction,” he says. “Games are still a relatively young medium, so we haven’t seen anything yet.”

Spec Ops: The Line focused on the mental strain soldiers experience in war, and it’s a topic that Mac Joyner would like to see

every game tackle, even if in a small way. His favorite war films are those that show the mental struggles servicemen faced when risking their lives. “Some guys can’t take it. They cannot fly, won’t fly. We had the same problem. Our tail-gunner did three trips and he just wouldn’t fly. The RAF would strip your rank off and your badges and discharge you and transfer you into some menial job in the army. [Our tail-gunner] wrote a letter to one of the older guys in our crew. He said: ‘I may be a coward, but at the end of the war I’ll be alive, and you’ll all be dead.’



Battlefield 1 EA

“You wake up every morning and say you’re probably not going to be alive the next day. I’d like to see some of that, talking specifically about wartime air force, I’d like to see it in every [film or game]. You wake up every morning and say you’re probably not going to be alive the next day.”

He also suggests that games should feature commentary from veterans that took part in the conflict to help provide context.

“Maybe a commentary before or after, especially by a person who had experienced it. [But] I don’t know if you could get the person that’s operating to listen to it.”

Games are getting braver with their stories, but it’s often too easy to forget that real people died in the battles you’re enjoying, especially if you’re playing a strategy game or deep in the nitty-gritty of a multiplayer shooter. Showing veterans talk about their experiences would make a player stop and think, if only for a second. And as I’m writing this piece, I can’t help but to return to a phrase that Charles Scot-Brown repeatedly uses during our interview: “This is what we fought for.”



Charles Scot-

Brown Charles Scot-Brown

“I want people to know what happened. I don’t care what they think of it. That’s their prerogative,” he tells me. “That’s what we fought for, so you can have your own ideas. If they want to play the games that’s up to them, because that’s what we fought for. So people would have the freedom and they could do what they want to do.

“It cost us. And if people learn what it cost us, maybe it will be of more value and they’ll treasure it a bit more and they’ll make sure nothing happens to that right.”