4 Replaying history: reading *Close Combat*

Close Combat [inc. *Close Combat* (1996), *Close Combat II: A Bridge Too Far* (1997), *Close Combat III: The Russian Front* (1998), *Close Combat IV: The Battle of the Bulge* (1999), *Close Combat: Invasion Normandy* (2000)]. Real-time strategy/wargame. As the titles indicate, various episodes are set in different military campaigns during the Second World War. The game is split between the strategic management of large formations on campaign maps and the tactical control (in 'real-time') of small numbers of troops on battlefield maps. At the strategic level the player controls options that may include resupply, reinforcement, the allocation of air and artillery support, and the movement of large units. At a tactical level the player controls a small number of units indirectly through the issuing of a limited range of defend, move, and fire orders which may or may not be carried out by the units on the ground. All versions of the game are playable as single and unrelated battles, or in a campaign mode that allows the construction of an extended narrative following several weeks, or even years, of conflict.

Of all the game-fictions selected as primary examples in this study, *Close Combat* is the least likely to be an instantly recognisable brand name even to those who spend their leisure time staring at a computer monitor. Its relative popularity as a games franchise might be indicated by the longevity of a series that had seen five episodes released by the year 2000, but it has hardly become a household name in the same way that *Half-Life*, *Tomb Raider*, or *SimCity* have. Its profile even among other real-time strategy games, itself an extremely popular sub-genre of game-fictions, is relatively slight.[1] The choice of *Close Combat* as an example, rather than a more typical

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example of a real-time strategy game such as *Command & Conquer* or one of its imitators, however, is due to its crossing of genre boundaries – this is a real-time strategy game, but it also has ambitions of historical representation. As an unashamed wargame, that foregrounds the accuracy of its reference to historically verifiable data, it undoubtedly appeals to a comparatively niche market when compared to games such as *Half-Life* or *Tomb Raider*, or even *Command & Conquer*. As noted in Chapter 1, this particular niche has its own problems of negative public perception that limits the size of its potential audience, but *Close Combat* also goes out of its way not to emphasise the extent to which it is 'only a game', but the degree to which it offers some kind of access to historical event through something its producers describe as 'realism'.

To consider *Close Combat* adequately we need to acknowledge its range of relationships: to the wargame, to narrative history, and to the un-narrativised historical event. Somewhere in the collision of these relationships, and at the moment of reading, a variant form of historical narrative is created that displays a potential unique to game-fiction. In its historical reference *Close Combat* makes the most of the erosion of the clear distinction between fact and fiction that continues to inform much contemporary critical and cultural theory. At the risk of falling into the kind of theoretical abstraction declared all too tempting in Chapter 1, it is worth noting that the potential redundancy of this distinction has caught the attention of many critics and theorists, including Paul de Man: 'The binary opposition between fiction and fact is no longer relevant: in any differential system, it is the space *between* the entities that matters.'[2] It is the new move that *Close Combat* makes within the 'space between' in game-fictions that is highlighted in this chapter.

In order to promote itself to a potential audience that will make historical as well as fictional demands of the text (not just how 'good a read' is this text, but how 'accurate' is it? Does the 'fiction' reflect the 'fact'?) it has consistently played on its seriousness and rejected the most obvious indicators of the game-fiction's

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playfulness in a way that none of the other games discussed so far have had to. In doing so it asserts both a level of scholarship that would not be out of place in more conventional historical works, and a firm relationship with historical data.[3] This chapter argues that the unprocessed historical field (where one might imagine that all the unnarrativised historical data from which written history is then composed is stored) is not just a toybox from which the game can borrow its playing pieces, but is shown what amounts to a duty of accuracy of representation by the games designers. This then places *Close Combat* in a position of intriguing tension in this 'space between' what is fact and what is fiction, and brings the question of what 'realism' might mean within historical game-fictions to the fore. This tension created between the fidelity it displays towards the historical field, and the liberties that are then taken with how a form of historical narrative may be constructed, can be seen to reflect wider changes in the way contemporary popular culture has approached questions of historical representation that need to be considered in some depth. Paul de Man, Hayden White, Dominic LaCapra, Linda Hutcheon and many others might have carefully mapped out the problematics of a simple fact/fiction distinction, but we still live in a world where the encounter of 'fiction' with 'history' is often read as a traumatic moment when written history is in danger of falling into 'falsehood' or 'deception'.

What this chapter explores with most interest are two distinct characteristics that can be found in a game such as *Close Combat*. Firstly we will look at it in relation to the more general sub-genre of game-fictions, the real-time strategy game, to which it belongs. Then we will consider it in terms of its reference to other historical texts that focus on matters military, and other texts sometimes labelled 'counterfactual' historical works. In looking at this game-fiction as a specifically historical text we concentrate on the ways in which *Close Combat* attempts to negotiate two ambitions that would seem to be incompatible with one another. On the one hand *Close Combat* attempts to address the desire for a level of

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scholarship comparable to that which informs the conventional historical work – it must be 'accurate', its attention to detail must satisfy an audience already likely to be conversant with the period in which it is set, its reference must always be to the historical record. On the other hand, this is not a narrative history or a historical documentary, it is a game-fiction. It depends on its ability not only to reflect or iterate historical detail from a supposedly 'objective' position (with its fixed distance reflecting that adopted by a certain type of military historian who concentrates on the details of the hardware over the human story), but for its most basic readability on its potential for departure from the historical record.

On the most basic level this can be expressed in shorthand form, and is primarily related to the playing of the game in its campaign mode – the starting conditions of the extended military campaign that is fought must begin from a moment of verifiable historical accuracy, but the reading experience within the individual battles that are played out must be one which allows, or even demands, divergence from the historical record. We must begin in something akin to the archive and end with a narrative story that may or may not tally with the historical record. The story that emerges cannot be compared to Leopold von Ranke's injunction to historians to 'show it how it really was', but might be thought of as historical in 'telling it how it might have been'.[4] I would not want to imply that *Close Combat* therefore has an educational potential as a means of delivering what are sometimes crassly termed the 'lessons of history', but I do feel that it puts this whole issue of how such historical texts might be read into question. In the process of examining how this particular 'space between' fact and fiction is exploited I will explore the possibility that this relates to wider contemporary debates surrounding the intersection between academic historiography and popular culture, debates that have seen the expression of anxieties about 'falsification' as much as about what is or is not 'appropriate' in the fictional work that would play games with history.

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History in real-time

In Chapter 1 *Close Combat* was described as 'clean' in its removal of human suffering, tragedy, and distress, as well as matters of politics and economics, from its representational frame. We should not get too excited, perhaps, by the lack of potentially distressing human detail within such a game-fiction, or rebel too quickly against the glorification of combat that might be expected to emerge from such an abstraction. *Close Combat*'s claim is always to the 'space between', and never to the irrecoverable historical event. As a narrative text it emerges from the historical record, but does not claim to be anything but partial in what it represents. As such, its claim for historical veracity or realism is similar to that made by the military historian, rather than to those texts that attempt, from a position of personal experience or not, to capture the act of testimony or witnessing of the veteran. This does not pretend to be recovering historical 'truth', but to be telling a 'historical' story. Despite the frosty reception his essentially counter-intuitive thoughts received in some quarters, Jean Baudrillard had an important (and related) point to make in *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*. When 'real' war appears to be indistinguishable from 'virtual' war we have cause for anxiety. As Baudrillard noted, 'The idea of a clean war, like that of a clean bomb or an intelligent missile, this whole war conceived as a technological extrapolation of the brain is a sure sign of madness.'[5] But the journey in the other direction goes nowhere significant – there is no comparable 'madness' in recognising an absence of real event beneath the visual images of *Close Combat*, only the sensible recognition of its fictionality. The delusion that Baudrillard protests against is the delusion that we mistake 'fact' for 'fiction', that we mistake war for videogame: in game-fictions like *Close Combat* we are never in any danger (at least in part because of this 'clean' representation of events stripped of all that inconvenient human detail that might turn the stomach of a television audience watching the nightly news with their dinners on their laps) of mistaking the videogame for real event.

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When popular fiction that represents warfare is acknowledged to be serious in its historical ambition, rather than simply using history as a framework on which to hang gung-ho emplotments and the body parts of the 'bad-guys', it sometimes transcends its negative associations. Indeed, those popular fictions that have most closely approximated lived experience (so far – we should never forget the illusory potential of technology, after all), such as Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, or the television drama *Band of Brothers*, are commonly assumed to have possibly positive didactic effects, just as narrative history has. If nothing else, the opening minutes of the film act as a reconfirmation of the truism that 'war is hell'. It certainly acts to confirm our expectation that war is often an assault on the senses as well as an assault on the body. When Spielberg's attempt at authenticity and verisimilitude was reproduced in the first-person shooter *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* (2002), with its own representation of the chaotic and confused storming of the Normandy beaches, the frequency of in-game death must have made the same simple point that allows the film to evade critique for suggesting that 'war is fun' – that there is something that is undeniably attractive in acting the historical voyeur at moments at which there is some consensus that human history is at a moment of 'crisis', but only a madman would see this as an attractive advertisement for actually being there on the day. To appreciate the excitement of the visual and aural spectacle of the war-film does not necessarily imply that the viewer might want to march down to the local recruiting office. Contemporary readers, even readers of Hollywood blockbusters and game-fictions, are more sophisticated than this.

If we have any concern that the accuracy of representation might somehow act the recruiting sergeant for those who crave such excitement, then it is worth noting again that even the first-person game-fiction is unable to sustain its own illusion of 'immersion'. We cannot even make the simplistic identification with the 'heroes' of the day that might be made by the viewer of *Saving*

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Private Ryan or *Band of Brothers*. We 'die', again and again – they (or at least some of them) live to fight on in the second reel or the next episode.[6] *Close Combat* takes one step further back from any possibility of a thrilling illusion of immersion. Rather than concentrate on offering up the linked moments of exaggerated visual spectacle that feature in such fictions, *Close Combat* cultivates a largely sober text–reader interface that amounts to the self-denial of an unproblematic potential for entertainment. Both visual drama and possible actions are subject to restraint in a text that remains firmly fixed in its own textual 'half-life' or mediated position between fact and fiction, and will not allow the same kind of mindlessness that the player of *Half-Life* can engage in.

There is undeniably very little of the cartoon or the dramatic in the visual experience of *Close Combat*, and even in terms of the real-time strategy genre it represents something of a restrained experience that has been interpreted by some as a form of 'tedium' that makes this a sub-genre of little interest compared to the shoot-'em-ups and beat-'em-ups that proliferate on game consoles.[7] Its central military conflicts are concerned not with an equivalent of the knockabout battles between *Command & Conquer*'s GDI and Brotherhood of Nod, but between German and Allied units during the Second World War. Yes, this entertains, and one must presume that the fiercest advocate of *Saving Private Ryan*'s educational potential would accept that it too was an entertainment, but it never allows the player to ignore its relationship to that war. In making such clear and direct historical reference it inevitably has a more complex relationship with the real than its lack of reliance on visual illusionism might otherwise suggest. As the frequent use of archive footage reminds us, this was a real war in which real people died.[8] This is fiction, but it is historical fiction and carries some of the burdens of a need for verisimilitude that has long been a condition of this form of representation.[9] The pleasure offered by *Close Combat*, its success as historical fiction, is located in how it measures up as a 'realistic', or perhaps 'plausible' representation of historical event, as well as in how the story unfolds.

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That the various episodes of *Close Combat* have as their subject military campaigns and operations that have also been the subject of big-budget big-screen treatments is no coincidence. The Normandy invasion (*Saving Private Ryan*, *The Longest Day* (1965)); Operation Market Garden (*A Bridge Too Far* (1967)); the invasion of Russia (*Cross of Iron* (1977), *Enemy at the Gates* (2001)); and the Ardennes offensive of 1944 (*The Battle of the Bulge* (1965)) have an inherent dramatic potential for this kind of telling. According to the received narrative recounting of the Second World War, all were high-stakes gambles, and only some of them paid off. They have been seen as moments of uncertainty, where plans might go awry, and small variations in conditions might have made a telling difference. All were, in short, isolated moments where it is possible to ask 'What if?' All hung in the balance, and offer for the viewer of a film treatment the frisson of seeing how the drama played itself out on a human level where the actions of the individual might have some consequence. The grand sweep of historical narrative becomes comprehensible in miniature, and the individual is presented as being able to 'make a difference' in circumstances where the outcome was so uncertain and not already decided by sheer weight of numbers or an imbalance in available *matériel*.

For the player or reader of the game-fiction text such moments of apparent historical indecision, where things might have gone one way or another, allow for the interpolation of the self who moves the mouse and adjusts the variables, a move that seems to restore the importance of individual agency that is so often swamped in the military histories that rely on the representation of an extended narrative sweep, presenting military forces as dehumanised machines. More recent American-led conflicts, particularly the Gulf War that had so exercised Baudrillard, would have made a poor game at a strategic level because of their dependence on a doctrine of overwhelming military force, where the military machine renders the individual inconsequential. There is an absence of any significant doubt with regard to broad outcome. The

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'What if?' of this kind of counterfactual enquiry takes a point at which there is no inevitability of outcome, even when narrativised in tellings that depend on establishing causality. It might have been so different – it might have turned out some other way.

Before examining the particularity of the 'realism' of *Close Combat* and its attempt to produce a specific form of verisimilitude in detail, however, we should remind ourselves that it makes no attempt at all at the visual simulation of a first-person point of view, and that it deliberately foregrounds the artificiality of the playing or reading experience. The interpolation of the reader does not attempt to place him or her 'in' the text, but allows him or her to ask questions of the text from a critical distance. The player or reader has the opportunity not to imagine that he or she might 'change history' through individual action, but that he or she might tell something other the received narrative account already told by so many others. In the 'space between' fact and fiction we are given licence to ask 'What if?' This is a game-fiction for armchair generals, and not for those who want access to an ersatz combat experience. It makes no more claim to being able to magically 'transport' the reader into the past than does the work of military history, and less than is claimed for genre war novels. There are first-person games that have eschewed the milieu of genre science fiction and been set firmly within the Second World War (such as *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault*), or used it for its visual reference with a far more relaxed attitude towards verisimilitude, such as *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* (2002), but this is not one of them.[10]

The management screens of *Close Combat* are not just where you find yourself when you 'die' as in *Half-Life*, or even when you wish to consult your inventory, as in *Tomb Raider*, but are an integral part of the game. In *Close Combat*: *Battle of the Bulge*, for example, the player has access to at least four different levels of management screen in which he or she can both acquire information and adjust variables. A 'Command' screen allows the alteration of 'realism settings' that affect the ways in which the game is

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played, a 'Battle Group' screen allows the perusal of broad unit details, which are then provided on a soldier-by-soldier basis on the 'Soldier' screen. A 'Strategic Map' allows the monitoring and movement of units on the whole Ardennes front. This might not be an answer to a Gradgrindian demand for 'facts, facts, facts', but it does satisfy any possible desire for 'data, data, data'. A fifth possibility, a 'Scenario Editor' that allows the player to change all the strategic details, allows any player an even more obvious illusion of 'authorship', allowing a change to be made to almost every aspect of the campaign mode of the game.

Given this absolute rejection of the mimetic possibility of immersive gameplay, we are in absolutely no danger of mistaking 'simulation' for 'real' in the encounter with a wargame like *Close Combat*, even if we can imagine this to be a future possibility for a game such as *Half-Life*. That the player adopts the role of a military commander is an obvious conceit. Where the camera of *Half-Life* had allowed a limited pretence that what 'Freeman sees' is what 'I see', the point of view of the in-game camera when playing out the battles of *Close Combat* is one unavailable within experience, and not located within an alternative psychology. There is no equivalent of a Freeman or a Lara Croft, no 'body' in which this point of view is housed. The all-seeing eye of the player floats at a fixed point above events, able to distinguish enough details so that he or she can discriminate between types of units and types of terrain, and so play the game effectively, but the player is always kept at a distance. Like the presence of the omniscient or near-omniscient narrator of literary fiction, this point of view reminds us of the artificiality of the vision we have access to, and acts to distance us from any possibility of mimesis.

The player of *Close Combat* observes from overhead, and is offered a bird's-eye view of a landscape that resembles the miniaturised world of the model railway far more than it does the real world. Although many real-time strategy games have made the most of technological advances unavailable to the early episodes

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of *Close Combat*, and deploy a three dimensional floating camera that can swoop and climb, (both *Shogun: Total War* (2000) and *Black & White* (2001) have done so to particularly impressive visual effect, for example) the movement of the camera available to the player in *Close Combat* is restricted to the simple possibilities of up and down, left and right. Even when the amount of the screen devoted to the portrayal of an ongoing battle is expanded to its maximum size it is not entirely given over to a view of the battlefield. At the bottom of the screen is an information bar that gives details of whatever unit was last highlighted by the cursor, as well as more general information about the current state of play, and a selection of recent messages from the troops. The cursor remains visible at all times, as it does when we are working within Windows. In the later games in the series, a left click offers important tactical information about each point of terrain (what it is, the amount of cover it offers, the height etc.). Rather than concentrate on pleasing visual effect, the utility of the screen image as a conduit of information is prioritised.

If all the possible pop-up information windows and menus in *Close Combat* are turned on, then the actual playing area becomes remarkably restricted, with a small summary map of the entire battlefield, information on the current activity, state of mind, weapon carried, ammunition remaining, etc, of each and every soldier in the unit currently highlighted. And this information can be almost overwhelmingly detailed – there are sixteen possible 'morale states' for each individual soldier in *Close Combat: Battle of the Bulge*, for example. *Half-Life* had rationalised the presence of on-screen information by asserting that this was part of the HUD (the 'Head-Up Display' that one finds in the helmets of fighter pilots, for example) built into Freeman's HEV ('Hostile Environment') suit. *Close Combat* offers no such rationale for the presence of so much on-screen data. The point of view available, and the concentration on the communication of this wealth of data, contributes to something about this type of game-fiction that needs to be

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emphasised, that *Close Combat* is a wargame, and that its form of 'realism' acts through the imposition of a vast range of limits on possible action and rules that constrain possibility, rather than on the conferring of the kinds of freedoms of reading that had been so central to the success of *Half-Life* or *Tomb Raider*. This game-fiction, in which important orders are often greeted with messages from the troops that they 'Can't go there' or 'We can't hurt that', is not going to appeal to those who were frustrated by Lara Croft's occasional 'no'.

Even the inclusion of the term 'real-time' in 'real-time strategy' game indicates a limit that constrains. Originally used to denote the difference between this form of text where the game moves on no matter what we do or do not do (in effect reading 'inaction' as an 'action'), and those earlier games which were based on two sides taking their turns independently, it has a slightly different effect in a game-fiction such as *Close Combat* than it has in a game less concerned with verisimilitude such as *Command & Conquer*. In most real-time strategy games the abolition of the turn-based system of the board game was a method of taking advantage of the technology of the computer to speed things up to match the expectations of a general contemporary audience not always prepared to suffer the plodding arrangement of units and orders that had characterised the more complex traditional boardgames. The old saw about warfare being comprised of long periods of inactivity followed by short periods of intense excitement would certainly apply to the experience of playing a Second World War boardgame such as 'Squad Leader', for example. The juggling of *Command & Conquer* units in 'real-time' is far more frenetic, and comparable to the circus performer keeping the plates spinning on their poles. In *Close Combat*, however, 'real-time' means that heavy armour cannot move at high speed, tired units or heavily equipped engineers limp about the battlefield, and generally slows down the game. On the one hand this is a gesture towards the form of realism that *Close Combat* establishes through comparison (it does not have the

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obviously absurd command system of *Command & Conquer* where units sprint from place to place with a cheerful response of 'Yessir'), and on the other it makes another claim for seriousness of intent. Demand instant gratification and you will be very disappointed as your heavy tank trundles forward with glacial slowness.

As the continuing popularity of chess indicates, the basic and restrictive 'rules' of war have long been recognised as providing a convenient rationale and structure that can be borrowed for a diverting game between two individuals. There is no need for a complex narrative justification for the game – two 'armies' meet on the battlefield and the aim of each player is to force the other to capitulate. All the possible moves are known to both players. There is no element of chance in this game, no rolling of dice, no betting of everything on the turn of the next card. The meaning produced through the playing of the game speaks not about one's understanding of military history or tactics, but about the comparative 'intellect' of the players. Players of chess have achieved an intellectual respectability that players of other wargames must regard with envy. Chess is surrounded with an aura of sophistication, and in its abstract complexity seems to belong, like the literature of high modernism or the installations of contemporary art, to an intellectual elite – or at least to a bourgeoisie who would like to believe they belong within that elite. Moving a carefully painted 1/72nd scale Airfix model of a Sherman tank across terrain made from polystyrene ceiling tiles while holding a tape measure in your other hand has never quite been seen in the same way.

And yet chess, as much as *Close Combat*, remains a stylised representation of war. As a signifier of intellectual superiority it even found itself functioning as a substitute for actual warfare when Fischer and Spassky fought their Cold War battles in Reykjavik in 1972. However abstract the pieces, even if one is playing with a novelty set with characters taken from *Alice in Wonderland*, chess remains a wargame, its poor bloody infantry being the pawns, its elite troops the rooks, bishops and queens, and its mobile cavalry

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in the form of the knights. This might never have been a very 'realistic' approximation of warfare as experienced on the front line, but it does reproduce the abstraction to which battles are often reduced in some forms of military history. The military historian might represent the progress of battles with little boxes and arrows on maps that do not reduce the specific geography that was fought over to the flat abstraction of an eight by eight chessboard, but he or she is similarly dealing with the stylised rather than the real, with conventions of representation that are analogous to a set of 'rules'.

Close Combat is not chess, being both more complex and straightforward as a game, with its myriad of statistics and variables working away behind the scenes, and in its reliance on the vagaries of chance, but it is similarly an abstraction of the experience of war that might portray and even name the individual soldiers seen moving across the screen, but does not so much refer directly to the 'real' but to the way that the real has been represented both within other games and within historical narratives. Its purpose, however, is not so much to produce a 'winner' or signal the intellectual superiority of human over machine, but to tell (and retell) a story. As a game-fiction it remains a primarily visual form of representation, despite the mass of words that appear on the screen and its demand for conventional literacy. As such it adapts the move available to the historian who would evade the potential complications of 'telling' (obviously 'subjective', with the historian controlling narrative) and appear to be 'showing' (apparently 'objective', with the historian apparently absent) what happens. This is not a move towards mimesis in this context, but towards the Rankean fiction of historical revelation of an existing narrative already embedded in the historical field. *Close Combat*'s integration of visual archive material and maps to make its claims for authenticity are nothing new, of course, and would even have been familiar to Harold Krebs, the traumatised First World War veteran of Ernest Hemingway's short story 'Soldier's Home' (1925):

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> He sat there on the porch reading a book on the war. It was a history and he was reading about all the engagements he had been in. It was the most interesting reading he had ever done. He wished there were more maps. He looked forward with a good feeling to reading all the really good histories when they came out with good detail maps. Now he was really learning about the war.[11]

And it is significant that while waiting for the publication of such ‘really good histories’ through which he might make sense of his personal experiences, Krebs takes refuge in the sports pages of his local newspaper. As a veteran who has experienced a collapse in his faith in ‘consequences’ Krebs’s need to look to games and the history books that are to come for his structures of meaning is understandably extreme. But it nevertheless dramatises the way in which both games (where events make clear sense according to agreed frameworks of rules) and histories that in their ‘good detail[ed] maps’ would prioritise ‘showing’ over ‘telling’, answer a basic human need. This abstraction of war as game with its own plethora of detailed maps in *Close Combat* similarly provides a way of engaging with the historical record in the search for some provisional and contingent historical narrative that might restore or confirm our own faith in causality and allow the individual some place, however problematic, within the narratives of history. The desire for such abstraction might not be particularly laudable, and telling war stories, whether by the propagandist, the bar-room raconteur, or the historian might erase the horror of the event in a way that might disturb us, as Krebs observes in ‘Soldier’s Home’. It answers the basic human impulse to create historical narratives, and to put our faith in those interpretative narratives where history pretends to just present us with ‘facts’ rather than risk narrativisation and the accompanying implications of ‘fictionality’.

If apparent sense might be made of the past through a reliance on the formalisation of mapping and the structure of games, then, it should not surprise us that games that make historical

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reference resemble historical moves to make sense of the past. In terms of other wargames, *Close Combat* owes most to those table-top wargames played with little lumps of lead cast to represent infantry and tanks and moved over a table top. Unless the player has an inordinately large monitor the scale at which *Close Combat* is usually played even reproduces the approximate scale of 1/300th 'microtanks' that is a standard in table-top wargaming. Chess has relatively few rules, while *Close Combat*, like the heavy rulebooks for such wargames, has many – but the rules of *Close Combat* are invisible and do not have to be learned in the same way as those of chess, or consulted at every stage of play as in table-top games. Instead they operate through an appeal to 'common sense' that is central to what the producers mean by 'realism'. As the manual for one episode explains:

> *Close Combat: Invasion Normandy* is a real-time strategy game that puts the emphasis on REAL. During a battle, you command up to 15 units ranging from squads of infantry to heavy tanks. The soldiers under your command act like real soldiers. If you order them to exert themselves, they get tired, if the enemy shoots at them, they keep their heads down, and when in danger they get scared. If a soldier becomes too scared, he may stop listening to orders; he may even surrender or desert.

There is something intriguing about this understanding of realism that also relates to the claims that had been made for the 'sophistication' of the artificial intelligence of *Half-Life*'s opponents. The artificial intelligence of *Close Combat*, like that of *Half-Life*, moves opposing units and issues orders as if there was a human opponent facing the player or imprisoned within the body of the machine. The comparative sophistication of the artificial intelligence in such circumstances is expressed in how closely the game-fiction offers a convincing analogue of a human opponent, while still allowing the narrative to progress.[12] But in *Close Combat* it also affects the in-game behaviour of the units supposedly under the control of the player. The test here is against whether what is attempted 'makes sense' according to what is known about small unit tactics and the

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behaviour of human beings in combat. In *Command & Conquer* it was often possible to win a game by throwing as many units as possible forward in a mad rush. Such attempts to replay the death or glory of the charge of the Light Brigade in *Close Combat* are not only likely to result in the same kind of defeat that occurred in the Crimea, but to be impossible.

The artificial intelligence of *Close Combat* provides its troops with something that expresses itself in behaviour that pretends to their possession of a sense of self-preservation. In order to take a heavily defended building the player would be best advised to lay down covering fire, use available terrain sensibly or lay down smoke barrages, and only charge forwards when enemy resistance is likely to have been minimised. We do not, however, have to think of such actions in the language of the 'rules' of the game – the mortar barrage will go on for four 'turns'; wait until the 'morale state' of the enemy drops from 'healthy' to 'pinned' etc. – but in the language already available to describe lived experience. Our troops are 'scared' or 'berserk', and the player can tell that by their actions without consulting the rules or the pop-up menus, they are not expressed as numerical modifications to the various equations that underpin the workings of the game.

The usual description of such an interface would refer to it as 'intuitive', but this is not really adequate. There are mystical assumptions about 'intuition' that would be out of place in reference to game-fictions. One does not need intuition to know that if one steps out into the road in the path of oncoming traffic one is likely to be run over. This is far more a matter of acting on the basis of prior observation of the world. Similarly 'common sense' dictates that the player does not order his or her troops to charge a machine-gun nest over open ground.

Counterfactual gameplay

In a sense, *Close Combat* shows a clear recognition that the counterfactual text essentially 'earns' its right to deviate from

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received historical narratives by establishing the credentials from which it starts. In its campaign mode it allows the player to watch the incremental increase of deviation depending on apparently minor variations on the details of the historical record. This might be thought of as the 'snowball effect' of much speculative fiction. Deviation from the observed world (what some science fiction critics would call the 'novum' that separates science fiction from other fiction) might be relatively minor – an important road junction held a little longer here, a bridge blown there – but its consequences as they are played out might lead to the construction of a very different narrative from that of the received historical account.[13] The snowball tossed away at the top of the mountain might appear insignificant at that moment, but the inhabitants of the village below might have good reason to fear the avalanche.

This calls to mind the Ray Bradbury story 'A Sound of Thunder' (most often read as concerned, supposedly, with temporal paradox rather than with the mutability of the historical text) where the careless destruction of a single butterfly by a group of time-trippers off exploring in the past plunges their 'present' into fascist tyranny.[14] *Close Combat* does not allow its own snowballs to grow so big, but it is possible to construct 'endings' that in their obvious fictionality represent a considerable shift from the 'facts'. Arnhem can be taken with all the bridges intact, and Allied armour can prepare to drive into the heart of Germany. The Normandy landings can be stopped in their tracks, and the Americans (and there are only American units included here, just as there were in *Saving Private Ryan*) thrown back into the sea. The German armies can drive through the Ardennes and set off in a race towards Antwerp, potentially altering not just the course, but the outcome, of the Second World War. Only in *Close Combat III*: *The Russian Front*, can the player not change the story of the historical event in a major way, with the final battle taking place at the fall of Berlin no matter how 'well' or effectively one plays out the individual fragments of the narrative.

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Even this episode of *Close Combat* shows recognition that it is the creation of an extended narrative, rather than the playing out of the individual events, that is central to *Close Combat*, as the manual for *Close Combat III* makes clear:

> Your men in the trenches respond like real soldiers – they react authentically to the stress of combat and are affected by their fatigue level, ability, physical and mental condition, and other factors. The game adds a role-playing element by making you the commander of a fire brigade – a special company of elite troops moving among hot spots on the Eastern Front. You are responsible for keeping your men alive and for advancing your own rank, which, in turn, increases the size and quality of your forces. As the four years of conflict pass and both German and Russian technology improves, you can add new and better weapons to your arsenal.

The counterfactual fiction might change some of the 'facts', but it never disposes of the need for causal narrative linkage between those facts. It might tell a different story, but it remains diachronic (sequential in time), progressive in its assumptions (moving from a beginning to an ending) and dependent on our understanding of cause and effect. What we do 'now' has 'later' effect. Time equates with improvement. This operates on the level of the individual component of our forces (we are responsible for keeping our men 'alive' to fight another day) as well as at the level of the campaigns of those episodes when we are invited to see the extent of the damage our counterfactual snowball can do.

All of this potential for multiple outcomes requires extensive computing power. What computers have always been good at, fortunately, is the storage of such vast amounts of empirical data. Unfortunately, software designers have not always been quite so good at providing a user-friendly interface, a 'front-end', that allows the recovery and manipulation of that data in a manner that meets the needs of the individual user. What a game-fiction like *Close Combat* seems to show the first glimmerings of is a text–user

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interface that allows access to a mass of data (the details of weapons performance, unit deployments, weather conditions, equations that model behaviour under set environmental conditions etc.) and operates through the application of apparent 'common sense' in that we do not have to remember the abstract 'rule' that will be applicable in a particular instant, but work with our knowledge of the observed world.

In a very small way the text then allows the construction of a counterfactual fiction, particularly when the readings of the individual textual fragments, the battles, are linked to form an extended narrative in the campaign mode. We approach the mass of empirical data not as the historian who would seek answers to basic causal questions of why one event follows another, but as the writer or reader of the counterfactual fictions who begs the question of what might have happened 'if' such and such a variable is changed. As it stands, such questions as can be asked of a game-fiction such as *Close Combat* are extremely limited in form (although they include some of the classic speculative enquiries of military historians, such as 'What if the German armoured units had been positioned right behind the beach defences in Normandy?' or 'What if the Americans had air support constantly available throughout the Ardennes offensive?') But this kind of text does not just allow such forms of enquiry, as conventional historical narratives do. Rather, it depends upon its audience having a desire to do so.

It might be worth spending some time considering the distinction between the historical work and the work of fiction that Hayden White had offered up in *Metahistory*:

> Unlike literary fictions, such as the novel, historical works are made up of events that exist outside the consciousness of the writer. The events reported in a novel can be invented in a way that they cannot be (or are not supposed to be) in a history. This makes it difficult to distinguish between the chronicle of events and the story being told in a literary fiction … Unlike

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> the novelist the historian confronts a veritable chaos of events *already constituted*, out of which he must choose the elements of the story he would tell. He makes his story by including some events and excluding others, by stressing some and subordinating others. This process of exclusion, stress, and subordination is carried out in the interest of constituting *a story of a particular kind*. That is, he 'emplots' his story.[15]

The reader of *Close Combat* might not function as the historian is understood, here, to function, but nor does he or she function as the writer of the literary fiction. The 'archive' or historical field in which she or she works is already subject to the choices of inclusion and exclusion that White notes, the basic emplotment is already extant in the selection of the individual moments of intervention that have been selected for us by the games designers (there is no prospect, for example, of outflanking the maps on offer, or of pulling in troops from other fronts). But it is in the possibility of intervening in the processes of stress and subordination, of being able to tinker with the footnotes and details of this emplotted narrative, as well as being able to construct a divergent narrative, that means that *Close Combat* stands out from other forms of historical storytelling. We might have to tell 'a story of a particular kind' (a progressive and diachronic military history), but we can tell it in a way that puts the responsibility for the 'process' of construction, as much as responsibility for the advance of our forces, in the person of the reader.

Close Combat does not just allow its players to compare the narrative they construct through the progression of the campaign game against the historical record, it insists that they do so. In *Close Combat II: A Bridge Too Far* this had taken the form of video clips of archive footage that can be played out telling not the story of the operation constructed through the playing of the game, but a documentary account of the received historical version of events. It is quite possible to be firmly in control of the bridge at Arnhem while watching an account of the surrender of those very

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forces on screen. In *Close Combat IV*: *The Battle of the Bulge* or *Close Combat*: *Invasion Normandy* the progress made within the game is always compared on the information screen that follows an individual engagement with historical event, and the player is told whether they are progressing 'better' or 'worse' than their historical counterparts. One is not in a contest against the computer's artificial intelligence, but with a historical narrative. This double move of deviation and reference is a characteristic feature of much counterfactual fiction. Unlike that speculative or extrapolative science fiction that it resembles in its imagination of possibility (although orientated not towards the future but the past) this form of game-fiction remains anxious to remind us that the deviation from the record and the events already constituted are not too extreme, and that this is an essentially historical enterprise that is not simply 'untrue' (like the fictionalisation of the capture of a German Enigma machine by American naval forces in the film *U–571* (2000) that was greeted with outrage in the UK as an example of the falsification of history that demanded an on-screen disclaimer to 'set the record straight') but brings us back to consideration of that record.

Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* had imagined a world in which the Axis powers had won the Second World War and partitioned the United States, but it offered up an alternative narrative through the casting of the yarrow stalks of the I-Ching and the 'novel' *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*, that reminded the reader that this was not a text that could be read without reference to received historical narratives. When Robert Harris also constructed his alternative world in which the Third Reich had won the war in *Fatherland*, his text focused on the danger of practices of 'fiction making' through the subordination of the historical event in its concentration on its protagonist's retrieval of evidence of the Final Solution. *Close Combat* might not have such textual ambition, or approach the sophistication of telling of either text, but it comes from the same place, departing from the received historical account in order to focus the reader's attention back upon it. *Close Combat*

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then remains a text to be read alongside the conventional historical work, and not in some way to supplant it.

Notes

1 A more obvious choice of representative Second World War wargame might have been *Sudden Strike* (2000), which has managed to reach a non-specialist non-wargaming general audience in a way that *Close Combat* has not. Although it is also a real-time strategy game viewed from an isometric top-down perspective, and similarly pays lavish attention to period detail, at least in terms of the visual representation of individual units, *Sudden Strike* does not display the level of narrative possibility that is the focus of this chapter.

2 Cited in Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 113. De Man's thinking about matters of rhetoric and narrative informs much of his volume of essays *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1983), but his essay on Georg Lukács might be of most interest to critics interested in this aspect of game-fictions, pp. 51–9.

3 I owe my understanding of how the historical work is written to Hayden White's account in *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press), that takes narrative theory (through Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957)) to historiography. See White's introduction TO *Metahistory*, pp. 1–43. White's work also represents an important development in the increasing recognition in the late twentieth century that as written text historical narrative required examination for what White terms the 'ideological implication' of the emplotments that it 'constructs' rather than somehow 'discovers' already extant in the historical field. White's *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) and Dominic LaCapra's *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983) will also be useful to anyone seeking to trace the beginnings of the internal debates that have taken place within academic historiography.

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4 For a conventional account of the impact that Ranke's mantra has had on academic historiography since the 1830s, see E. H. Carr, *What is History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), pp. 8–9. A less convinced account is on offer in Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History* (London: Macmillan, 1970), pp. 36–8.

5 Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, trans. Paul Patton (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 43.

6 The extent to which *Medal of Honor* makes deliberate allusions to this film might be apparent in the joke that did the rounds of Internet discussion groups shortly after a video of the Normandy sequence was released, referring to *Medal of Honor* as 'Quick-Saving Private Ryan'.

7 See Steven Poole, *Trigger Happy: the Inner Life of Videogames* (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), pp. 48–9.

8 I would hesitate to make any necessary association between *Close Combat*'s serious engagement with history and assumptions about the 'maturity', chronological or otherwise, of its readership. It is worth noting, however, that this is a form of game-fiction – the wargame – that has been largely confined to development for the PC, rather than on the various consoles that are the dominant mode of playing by younger players. *Tomb Raider* is a game that has always been available in both game consoles and PC formats, and *Half-Life* finally made the transition from PC to console in 2001. Like *SimCity*, or a spreadsheet-based game such as *Championship Manager*, *Close Combat* makes the most not of the graphics capabilities of the PC, but of its ability to crunch numbers.

9 What is meant by 'historical fiction' has long been subject to critical debate (see Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism*, pp. 113–15 for a brief account of some contributions in relation to the historical novel), but I use the term here in relation to game-fictions in the sense that there is a conscious foregrounding of historical verisimilitude within the contract of reading of the self-declared historical fiction.

10 And there is something troubling in the way that some fictions, and particularly *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992) (the first recognisable first-person shooter that attempted an illusion of potential immersion) and its sequel *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, use reference to the Second World

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War as another strategy to protect themselves from possible critique of their violent content. It is OK to 'kill' the on-screen enemies in both games because they are not 'human'. But rather than move to the presentation of the obviously dehumanised aliens of a game such as *Half-Life*, both *Wolfenstein* titles dress their enemies in Nazi uniforms. Such a move made with reference to the Third Reich would seem to be far more problematic than at first might appear, and somewhat tasteless in even such an obviously fictional text.

11 Ernest Hemingway, *In Our Time* (New York: Scribner, 1958), p. 72.

12 It should be noted that the artificial intelligence in most strategy games available in the late 1990s and early years of the twenty-first century is disappointing in this respect, with units making inexplicable moves, and failing to respond to the player with any particular evidence of forward planning. Chess computers might have been able to take on Grand Masters with some degree of success, but the AI of game-fictions rarely threatens to reproduce the human. There is no hunchback in the machine, as was allegorised by Walter Benjamin as 'historical materialism' in his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (see Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Cape, 1970), pp. 245–55, p. 245), and the interesting shift in expectation is that we are disappointed to find that there is no hunchback in the machine. It is the recognition that the beige box contains something less than a human player that generates regret – not the discovery of deception, but its absence.

13 See Adam Roberts, *Science Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 17–27. For a fuller understanding of the term 'novum' see Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (London and New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979).

14 This story, which is frequently anthologised, was originally published in Ray Bradbury, *The Golden Apples of the Sun and Other Stories*, New York: Hart Davis, 1953.

15 Hayden White, *Metahistory*, p. 6. Emphasis in original.

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