

# **Survival as Species Narrative: (Supra-)Referentiality in Humanitarian Crisis Video Games<sup>i</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

Survival is one of the main drivers of action in video games. The gamer's quest to survive zombie attacks, to end the siege of the earth by aliens, to fend off wild animals and human 'savages,' and to outlive and curb global natural disasters makes games not only appealing, but, more importantly, possible/playable. Among these instances of survival, the focus of the present article is on Humanitarian Crisis Video Games (HCGs) – a rather recent development in the ludisphere that casts a critical look at historically significant humanitarian crises of various degrees and their repercussions on the local and individual levels. HCG games place emphasis on the individual (actors who have caused, denied, and fallen victim to disasters in the making) in their encounters with local, national, or global disasters in the Anthropocene. Providing a detailed, comparative analysis of the different ways the siege of Sarajevo is rendered in *Saragame* and *This War of Mine*, the article categorizes HCGs into 'referential' and 'supra-referential' games as they take inspiration from specific events in modern history, such as September 11<sup>th</sup> or the recent refugee crisis, in order to tell the tale of individual suffering and survival as a common human fate in a world closely and chaotically wired through globalization.

## **Author Keywords**

Humanitarian Crisis Video Games (HCGs), Referentiality, Supra-Referentiality, Civilians, Survival, Historical Video Games, Serious Games, Psychogeography

## **Introduction: Individual vs. Global in Humanitarian Crisis Video Games**

From serious game titles such as *Stop Disasters* (UN, 2007) and *Disaster Watch* (Christian Aid, 2006), *Food Force* (United Nations World Food Programme, 2005), *Citizen Ship* (Christian Aid, 2005), and *Darfur is Dying* (Susana Ruiz, 2006) to the commercial hits *This War of Mine* (11 bit studios, 2014) and *This War of Mine: The Little Ones* (11 bit studios,

2016), survival in the face of real-life disasters has come to be a topic of much speculation and contention in the world of video games.<sup>ii</sup> Constitutive of what Mary Flanagan (2013) refers to as ‘critical play’, HCGs cast a critical look at the processes of globalization and gamify its repercussions on the regional, the local, and the individual levels. As Flanagan maintains, critical play is the central feature of games and gaming experiences that urge game developers and players

to create or occupy play environments and activities that represent one or more questions about aspects of human life. These questions can be abstract, such as rethinking cooperation, or winning, or losing; or concrete, involved with content issues such as looking at the U.S. military actions in Cambodia in the early 1970s.

Flanagan, p. 6 (2009)

HCGs take survival, in the form of individual competition and collective cooperation, as the jagged, hard-wired, history-long link between the various scales of being human (individual, tribal, urban, national, etc.) in a globalizing world on the brink of environmental and/or human disasters. These games posit individuals or collectivities of individuals (agents who have caused, denied, and fallen victim to humanitarian crises in the making) vis-à-vis local, national, regional, or global disasters and ‘jump scales’ in order to test their drive to survive and their will to outlast historically consequential, naturally inevitable, politically impenetrable, and/or economically devastating disasters once they knock the door.<sup>iii</sup>

HCGs ludify natural and human disasters sampled out of contemporary history. These titles are often developed for ethical/educational purposes and are mostly made available online for free. They might carry a direct take-away moral/political message for the players. They also might ask the players to reflect upon an ongoing conflict/disaster that the game is about or to re-examine their part in unravelling or curbing a historical disaster which the game is a simulation of. To begin, HCGs’ playable characters are mostly unarmed or poorly armed civilians whose basic needs such as food, clean water, and shelter forces them to venture out into natural or urban dystopias and improvise in the face of fortuitous violent encounters introduced by the game at unforeseen moments. As such, the individual’s encounters and experiences of a disaster and their affective and strategic responses to it are formulated into a set of survival scenario possibilities that players can work with in order to unfold their own narrative of survival. This way, the individual responses of the playable characters function as the polygonal link between the locally occurring natural, economic, or political disasters and their global-scale (actual or potential) repercussions, while the links that hold the chain together are the individual playable characters who are managed and modified by the player. The games’ playability depends entirely on individuals’ ability to form complex, anthropocentric networks of scales in which disasters unfold, mutate, migrate, and destroy, before they ultimately (hopefully) recede.

Despite their deep roots in historical events with large scale aftermath for larger groups of people, these games’ prime focus is on the individual scale that is the most affected by humanitarian crises. It is the individual that interconnects concrete events of historical significance or issues of local import to more abstract global flows and universal processes in meaningful, accessible ways. After all, from the perspective of critical game players, the only comprehensible link between the scales involved in times of crisis is the human perception, the human condition, the human field of affective responses, and the human drive to survive. It is the individual, as one unit among billions of units of humankind, that turns disasters such as war into common human problems across the globe, denationalizes the debates on the environment, and reminds us – despite our uncommon pasts and presents – of our common

home, our common fate, our common future. Emir Cerimovic, the child-survivor of the siege of Sarajevo as an iconic event in the Bosnian War of the 1990s, maintains in the cinematic trailer of *This War of Mine*, “I know one thing. It might happen to anyone. War always happens at somebody’s doorstep.”<sup>iv</sup>

Once we disregard the individual, we would fall victim to our readiness to distance, to other, to forget, to dissolve into historical narrative, and to shrug shoulders when disasters are labelled ‘global’. In the world of video games, the disregard for the individual and individual stories has mostly showed itself in titles that focus on the ghastly glory and unexamined excitement of – historical or imaginary – armed conflict without offering the possibility to delve into and understand the affective side of the experience from the perspective of the unarmed, the disabled, the nonpartisan, the accidental victim, the non-hero figure. In fact, the abstract global in this sense does not necessarily raise more awareness as to the immediacy, tangibility, and response-worthy-ness of disasters. Rather, without mapping it onto the lives of individuals, the label ‘global’ can and does often times turn disasters into something even more abstract, remote, and unthreatening for gamer communities than they actually are.

### Survival as Species Narrative

On the other hand, it usually is regional, sub-national disasters affecting individuals and their daily lives, that constitute the working pieces of humanitarian crises: the global functions as a key aspect of HCGs as long as it succeeds in drawing our attention to the liminality of our one and only planet and its vulnerability beyond our differences in geographical coordinates, historical trajectories, religion, skin color, sexual orientation, and language. As Ursula K. Heise (2017) puts it, to accept the arrival of the Anthropocene as a critical point of contention in the humanities requires calling into question the obsession of the field with “historical, cultural, and linguistic differences” (p. 1) in favor of a much more urgent attention that it demands to be paid to “global scenarios of change and risk” (p. 2). In the present discussion, anthropocene does not mean the exclusively ecological epoch in the history of the planet earth, which has been a source of intense debate among various camps of geologists and ecologists. My understanding of the term has roots in the environmental humanities as discussed and developed by scholars as prominent as Ursula K. Heise (2016), Diane Ackerman (2014), Heather Davis, Etienne Turpin (2015), Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino (2016), Jon Christensen, Michelle Niemann (2017), and Caroline Schaumann and Heather I. Sullivan (2017), among others.<sup>v</sup> As Heise (2017) asserts – and this is where my notion of the term and its epochal significance come from – whether or not geologists concede to the use of the term to mark the beginning of a new era in the life of our planet, “the Anthropocene has turned humankind at large into the protagonist of a new deep-time narrative, generated heated debates over the merits of such a species narrative as opposed to an emphasis on economic and geopolitical inequality...” (p. 1). In this sense, HCGs push us as players and game critics to call into question the borders on our individual world maps and to develop a more accurate understanding of how our and others’ experiences, decisions, encounters, and moves on the local level and in and out of our personal and communal comfort zones connect, problematize, and change the shape and force of the global. It is further an invitation to qualify our use of the term ‘global’ in dealing with disasters and in understanding the limits of and the possibilities offered by the Anthropocene.

HCGs could be analyzed in two broad categories. On the one hand stand what I term ‘referential’ titles such as *Inside the Haiti Earthquake* (2010), *Saragame*, and *Ayiti: The Cost of Life* (2006), that take a specific place and time of historical significance to commemorate the victims or, in the case of ongoing conflicts and disasters, to raise awareness and elicit

responsible action in the players. On the other side stand ‘supra-referential’ HCG titles that – while inspired by a specific event that has a place in our collective memories – rid the event of its specificities and render it generic. The central feature of this categorization is that the first category can convert or at least gesture toward the second category as is the case with the online newsgame *September 12th: A Toy World* (Newsgaming/Gonzalo Frasca, 2003).<sup>vi</sup> Though originally a thought-provoking newsgame about the initial phase of the U.S. invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, *September 12th* is now considered by artists and educators alike to be an incisive commentary on the absurdity and inconclusivity of the so-called ‘global war on terror.’ The logic of the game is in its unplayability, as Gonzalo Frasca states in the introduction to the game: “This is not a game.... This is a simulation. It has no ending. It has already begun.”<sup>vii</sup> The most significant feature of *September 12th* is how the game has, over time, departed from referentiality to a rather supra-referential title. This transformation has roots in Frasca’s ability to foresee the future of those acts of occupation as what turned out to become an unmapped grid of battlefronts at which the so-called ‘war on terror’ is fought. In its current form, the global war on terror is in fact a multitudinous site wherein the proactive survival strategies of the Western armed gamer clash with the reactive survival strategies of the unarmed Middle Eastern civilian and those of the armed, hard-to-recognize terrorist. Therefore, while originally a referential game, a timely and much contested response to the historically significant unilateral act of war by the United States under President Bush, *September 12th* has over the years gestured towards a non-referential (or, at least, poli-referential) HCG with players who carry various political consciousnesses, narratives, and memories about the ongoing war more than a decade since its beginning. In the current political climate, the game functions as a platform to contest, reflect upon, and play with the globalizing phenomenon of terrorism, parties to which have multiplied, rather sinuously, beyond any clear markers of nationality, religion, ethnicity, gender, or geography.

In order to better understand the transition from referentiality to supra-referentiality, I take a closer look in the remainder of this article at two games that take inspiration from the same event in contemporary history: the siege of Sarajevo in the 1990s.<sup>viii</sup> The first, *Saragame*, is an indie, free, referential title developed by Bosnian Emir Cerimovic who lived under the siege for one year before his family managed to flee.<sup>ix</sup> The second, *This War of Mine*, is a commercial title inspired by the siege, developed and released by the Polish developers 11 bit studios.<sup>x</sup> As will become clear below, while *Saragame* is a strictly referential title, *This War of Mine* stands for what was already referred to above as the evolution from referential to supra-referential HCGs. What follows is a comparison of these games in the journey that siege of Sarajevo takes as a historical event, simulated and ludified in *Saragame*, to a game of global intent in which Sarajevo is transformed and mapped onto a city, any city, across the globe.

### Historical (Supra-)Referentiality in *Saragame* and *This War of Mine*

*Saragame* is a semi-autobiographical, flash-based, single-player, 2D title developed by one of the survivors of the siege of Sarajevo. In the words of Emir Cerimovic, the game’s developer, in *Saragame* “[w]e play a teenager on his own in Sarajevo between 1992 and 1995. Trought [sic.] expressionist draws and animations, an artistic “boring” game, where war is more real than in any modern “realistic” game.”<sup>xi</sup> The game relates the day-to-day, precarious, tedious routine of the life of a teenager who had to survive during the siege on his own. In fact, the game is, Cerimovic argues, “a testimony of the [B]osnian war.”<sup>xii</sup> The game functions as a personal memory-telling, triggered by exposure to a traumatic set of circumstances in the

Bosnian War and yet created as a retrospection by a solo observer/survivor of that same war – an autobiographical account of survival sketched in black and white (Figure 2). Beyond its function as a testimony, it gives the impression that, following Paul Ricoeur's (2004) notion in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, it is a ludic site of revisiting what cannot be forgotten. The game does not attempt, in my view, to simply commemorate the Bosnian War. Rather, it tells a relatable story of survival based on highly individual memories.



Figure 2 Still from *Saragame* (flash, Emir Cerimovic), <http://www.emircerimovic.com/>.

On the other side stands the successful commercial title *This War of Mine*, a 2D single-player game developed and released by 11 bit studios in 2014. The game is a prime example of HCG in that it interweaves the individual (the unarmed, unidentifiable civilian) and the historical and yet expandable local (an anonymized city under siege) into the universal human drive to survive and the global (the experience of living and surviving in any urban space as a site of conflict in modern times). As a game which can be categorized both as serious and critical, *This War of Mine* makes it possible for players to create and live out their own story of survival as civilians struck by armed conflict – non-militant individuals who constitute the disempowered party dragged into unequal interactions between politicians, war strategists, guerrilla forces, and the military.

### ***War and Survival***

Cerimovic's motto in *Saragame* is: "Reality of war is boredom." By way of explanation, he states that "you can only walk around in a closed area, go for water or wood (no electricity, no food, no windows, hard winter, no tap water, shelling, snipers, fear, ...) sleep, draw, read with a candle as only light...."<sup>xiii</sup> The game's only playable character, the left-alone teenager, has limited moves available to him. He can basically enter or leave his shelter, walk to the left or right in a limited area by daylight, collect water and wood, return home, eat, and sleep and in this way pass a day. He may also play on his guitar, read, or draw, as Cerimovic mentions in the introduction to the game. Figure 3 depicts in part the Sarajevo of the teenager's survival days, drawn from memory. It consists of half-deserted buildings, burned cars, debris, smashed windows, the river Miljacka, blood splashed on buildings' walls, and a

graveyard that seems to be expanding into the woods (*Figure 3*). The game's Sarajevo is home to mourners, silent street vendors, stray dogs, armed individuals, and lone adults and children who walk around, bent forward in fear and in search for food.



Figure 3 Still from *Saragame*, Emir Cerimovic, <http://www.emircerimovic.com/>.

With “In war not everyone is a soldier!” as *This War of Mine*’s motto, on the other hand, the development team at the 11 bit studios started the production with strong traits of referentiality to the siege of Sarajevo while the released product stands as a supra-referential HCG, a strategy video game that takes place in a city – potentially any city – across the globe. Initially inspired by the siege of Sarajevo (that lasted 1425 days between 1992 and 1996) as the longest city siege in contemporary history, the game is set in the fictitious city of Pogoren, Graznavia (*Figure 4*). With a total of twelve playable characters and numerous NPCs such as snipers, neighbors and old acquaintances, the game allows the player to devise various strategies and collect specific items (food, medication, books, etc.) to help their team of one to four characters survive a siege that can last for an unknown number of days.<sup>xiv</sup> Survival to the end is too hard to achieve as the game statistics confirm: within a fortnight of the game’s release, the developers reported that “less than 11 per cent of players managed to see the end of war” (Yin-Poole, 2014).





Figure 4 Plan of Night -- *This War of Mine* wiki – <http://this-war-of-mine.wikia.com/wiki/Scavenge>

### ***Civilians and Survival***

In sum, while *Saragame* delves into the corridors of memory to ludify the horrors of a chapter in contemporary European history, *This War of Mine* expands on that same history to offer an incisive commentary on the practicalities of survival and the effects of conflict on personal life stories as disasters unfold. The game is a product of, and yet successfully questions the boundaries of, the 21<sup>st</sup>-century ‘ludisphere’ that is dominated by armed conflict and cashes in on shooter characters in battlefields and city streets alike.<sup>xv</sup> Pawel Miechowski of 11 bit studios recaps the general mood among various player communities, a mood that is contradicted by *This War of Mine*’s gameplay: “... we have this *Call of Duty* feeling, and then bang, no, it's not about this, it's about the other side.”<sup>xvi</sup> The game violates expectations in a world mainly associated with the glories of war, unrestrained instances of violence, and near-to-real cinematic featuring of gore. As Matt Peckham (2014) asserts,

The version of war we're often sold involves abstract military numbers, splashy interactive news maps and easy slogans on bumper stickers. In real war, whatever the reasons and however noble the rhetoric, it comes down to individuals like the ones in *This War of Mine*: People like you or me trapped in appalling scenarios, their social constructs crumbling, needing basic shelter, food, a bed to sleep in, pills or antibiotics, and perhaps most of all, a reason in all the madness not to check out for good.

The academy pays a disproportionate level of attention to the armed side of civil conflicts (both in and out of the ludisphere) and leaves civilians mostly to the passive margins of victimhood.<sup>xvii</sup> “Civilians,” maintains S. Barter (2016, p. 2), “typically feature as hapless bystanders, either abused dependent variables or candidates for aid.” As the two titles under study here forcefully demonstrate, not all groups of civilians respond to conflict in a similar manner. Hence the necessity to disaggregate the term ‘civilian’ to understand the variety and to bring into relief the spectrum of survival strategies (which in the case of *This War of Mine* includes helping, trading with, robbing, looting, even killing fellow city inhabitants that could

be old neighbors, former colleagues, unknown distant relatives, etc.) utilized by the unarmed, seemingly neutral, and yet not necessarily a-political, apathetic, helpless civilians in times of conflict or when natural disasters hit. As *Saragame* and *This War of Mine* demonstrate, civilians might seem discreet or rendered voiceless, but their life stories overflow with affect and its subsequent emotional verbalizations, shaped by the harrowing decisions they need to make, and their suspended, postponed, or questioned political beliefs.

In general, there are two ways to survive as civilians who are afflicted by war or rendered immobile by a siege: to flee in a timely manner to the countryside or the neighboring cities or countries; or to stay and try to survive through various acts of competition and cooperation. Following the realities of real-life conflicts, while the poor, the old, the very young, or the disabled individual is left behind to struggle to survive in the city under siege, the wealthy youths or well-connected socio-political elite of that same city have long left the site of conflict for safer places in the neighboring countries or the West. Those individuals, such as the solo character in *Saragame*, who either do not get the chance to leave or decide against leaving, have either already lost their lives, been forced to take up arms or to re-learn how to continue living in a city they hardly recognize. The playable and non-playable characters who stay behind in the historical Sarajevo of *Saragame* or the fictive Pogoren – the generic city (Koolhaas, 1998) – of *This War of Mine* belong to that small minority of survivors who neither emigrated nor joined the armed forces. Instead, they stayed and tried to re-learn a new routine and to adopt a new set of skills in order to outlast the crisis. In the games examined here (but more so in *This War of Mine*), their daily activities of cooking, eating, reading, experiencing feelings of sadness, disillusionment, or distress, and fighting boredom, as well as their nocturnal business of scavenging, looting, getting wounded, hurting others, and sleeping, are narrated, managed, and meant to bring about various narrative endings.

What is ludified in these games are some aspects of day-to-day survival – that option among many in what has been referred to in the literature on civil wars as “a broad menu of civilian strategies” (Barter, 2016, p. 14). The games do not make any explicit references to mass rape, the existence of the black market and war profiteering, nor to any instances of cannibalism, nor do they allude to genocide in their handling of their main theme (i.e. civilian lives in times of conflict). Both games are in fact sites where life stories of one or more unarmed civilians unravel, laid open for us to cooperate with, help (or fail to help) survive, commemorate or forget, but never judge. Both games try to cancel out the possibility for the players to judge the civilians who stayed as necessarily less smart, sophisticated/capable, or alert to dangers, although they perhaps have been less well-connected or wealthy, more patriotic, or perhaps afflicted with reasons which kept them behind (like younger disabled or older sickly family members to take care of), or simply less lucky to find the right window of opportunity to flee.

In fact, before the game starts, the survivors have been forced to pause their dreams and halt their daily habits in order to adopt a new routine and learn to scavenge, loot, even hurt and kill friendly and hostile NPCs. By the time the game starts, the civilians have already started to learn to pursue a mostly indoor, nocturnal life as – with snipers on the loose – they are left with minimal possibilities in daytime. They are not gang members or drug dealers who would habitually prefer the veil of the night, nor are they the permanent homeless from before crisis hit the city. Rather, until second notice when a ceasefire is declared or the siege is removed, they are the ‘temporarily displaced’ who have no option other than to compete and occasionally cooperate in order to survive (*Figure 5*). Individuals’ identities are torn in these HCGs as well as in real-life crises between who they used to be, their hobbies, interests, and personal and family problems, and those who they have become under the force of crisis in



the city as a site of survival (individuals who, in the case of *This War of Mine* are defined by their survival skills: good at scavenging, good cook, good at running, etc.) with largely unknown futures.

Unlike in *Saragame* whose playable character keeps to himself and leads a secluded life in silence, the playable characters of *This War of Mine* enjoy a wider range of survival strategies and social contact, a complex fusion of cooperation and competition. Created based on initial inspiration from the article “One Year in Hell” (2015) by an anonymous survivor of the Bosnian War that offers practical tips on survival, *Besieged: Life Under Fire on a Sarajevo Street* (Demick, 2012), and numerous first-hand accounts of survival in a wide range of civilian conflicts throughout history, *This War of Mine*’s characters ignore or outright disregard various laws and customs as they break in and loot supermarkets and hospitals, refuse to help a neighbor in need, even commit murder in order to get hold of much-needed food, medication, and other supplies.



Figure 5 Still from *This War of Mine*, the ending.

A wide range of survival affordances are at *This War of Mine*’s playable characters’ disposal to aid them in their attempts to re-introduce order to the city space, to re-assess and re-access their mental maps so that they can make sense of and explore the city at night, etc. However, unlike state or paramilitary forces, these civilians’ seemingly disruptive actions are done in pursuit of survival in the face of macro-level changes and with the purpose of bringing order and meaning to the unsettled everydayness of their lives. Both *Saragame* and *This War of Mine* call on the universal human will to survive at the same time that they leave the players with varying degrees of immersion into various benevolent or pathologizable actions undertaken by civilian urban dwellers. As Rob Zacny (2014) writes in the case of *This War of Mine*, “You’re not a spectator. Your choices decide how the narrative goes.” Matt Peckham (2014) of *Wired* echoes the same sentiments in writing about the pleasure of playing the game which he believes “is at its best when it’s reflecting your actions back to you.” The playable characters are led by players in their struggle not only to stay alive, but also to remain mappable, identifiable, respectable individuals with some future prospect to look forward to once normal conditions are restored – a range of possible scenarios as the post-

ceasefire consequences of the in-game characters' survival-oriented actions (crime, moral event, gift event, survivor event, and aid event).

### *Cognitive Maps of Survival*

Both in and out of the ludisphere, escalation of conflict forces civilian populations of cities under siege to engage in second-order disruptive acts which, though not comparable in scale and scope with those performed by state power, enemy armies, or the guerrilla forces, do subvert common practices, tear up mental maps, and threaten social order in tangible, immediate ways. In times of crisis, it is through devising, updating, and reading highly personal and out-of-breath 'cognitive maps' that non-combatant citizens navigate the city under siege, making brilliant or blundered moves, calling on familiar places and people, claiming new routes as their own, while trying to survive. According to the psychologist Edward Chace Tolman (1948), the thinker behind the notion of cognitive mapping, individuals might develop two types of mental maps: a 'comprehensive' cognitive map – developed and maintained under normal conditions – which is a 'broad and comprehensive' map of connections and spaces; or the narrow 'strip map' which is the result of "over stressful experiences," "over motivation," and "frustration." According to Tolman, to develop strip maps is a human universal, a survival strategy that operates "according to the too narrow and too immediate Pleasure Principle" (p. 264). Later in the century, Kevin Lynch (1960) made extensive comments on the notion, introducing the concept of 'legibility' as key to developing usable mental maps as the charge of urban planners: "We have the opportunity of forming our new city world into an image-able landscape: visible, coherent, clear" (p. 91). In this sense, legibility is a universal call to human communities to make urban spaces legible, that is readable, navigable, and liveable, especially in times of crisis. The most interesting contribution to the concept is provided by Fredric Jameson (1991) who politicizes cognitive maps as the navigation tools of a lost postmodern subject in the face of the ruthless forces of late capitalism. He takes cognitive mapping out of the discussions on ideal urban planning and places it onto a quilt of global dimensions. For Jameson, cognitive maps are the means for individuals to survive their encounters with the world at large – highly political and ideological.

In a similar manner, *Saragame* and *This War of Mine* focus on the affective experience of and encounters in urban spaces once the sole purpose of the residents turns out to be survival. This is the goal of psychogeography, the subfield of geography that concerns itself not with the actual legibility of urban spaces but rather with the subjective understanding of urban spaces by individuals and based on their varying sentiments, deep-seated repulsions, or traumatic schemes of feelings. Sarajevo under siege, to borrow from psychogeography, is a barely legible urban space. As the games effectively communicate, under siege, the city infrastructure stops functioning, its entire neighborhoods shut down posing as walls and dead-ends that deny access to the adjacent neighborhoods, blocking access for residents of A to C via B – all while its residents continually evolve and adjust as they examine their affectual belonging to the crisis-in-the-making.<sup>xviii</sup> In this reading, and in the shift from *Saragame* to *This War of Mine*, Sarajevo is flagged on the map of the world only to be rendered nameless as Pogoren (any city). What puts Sarajevo on the global map is crisis – a withering of individual privacy and security and urban order and cohesion formerly pinned in place through liberal state-imposed civil laws and social customs which used to gesture toward minimizing anonymity, regulating movements, and punishing subversiveness. Any map of the world in crisis is, in turn, potentially flagged by a multitude of generic cities and is rendered illegible due to an over-amassing of conflicting interests and coinciding crises in its post- and neo-colonial corners.

### *History and (Supra-)Referentiality*

The overlaps between these two titles extend beyond the featuring of Emir Cerimovic as the developer of the former in the cinematic trailer of the latter and a source of information about the siege of Sarajevo to the research team at the 11 bit studios. More importantly, the two titles are comparable as they best bring into relief the differences between personal recollections of a specific moment in contemporary history and the commercial extrapolation of a range of personal memories of the same historical event into a memento to civilians in wartime as they call onto the human universal ‘survival’ at any moment and any place on the surface of the earth. The link, and the point of difference, between *Saragame* and *This War of Mine* is in their moving between referentiality and supra-referentiality. It is, to be more precise, a complex move from the Sarajevo of history books, of world maps, of popular imaginary, of the news about the ultimate unravelling of the Cold War in the Balkans in the wake of the breakup of Yugoslavia to a generic city under siege, “interesting yet unspecific” (Kwiatkowski, 2016, p. 692).

If, as history has taught us, war can happen to anyone, and if human beings are spread on the face of the earth, then – by extension – war can happen anywhere. This is what the game too reiterates: “that just about anyone could find themselves in this situation. It’s not a game about hardened badasses lone-wolfing it through war, but ordinary people who thought their lives would be about anything but this” (Zacny, 2014). Crisis, the game in its supra-referential quality reminds us, is imminent, unpredictable and probable to erupt, almost completely free from the dictates of geography and history. All you need is a multitude of human communities with clashing interests (whatever those interests may be that the game might not deepen to share with its players) for wars to erupt and for humanitarian and environmental crises to follow.

As mentioned before, *This War of Mine* takes place in a made-up, nocturnal city, a modern non-place where state power is temporarily suspended. Unlike Sarajevo in *Saragame*, Pogoren is a generic city, “a basic simulation of a real city during the conflict” (Kwiatkowski, 2016, p. 695), whose inhabitants live ‘after hours’ in and out of a basic, identifiable set of locations immediately associated with urban life in its generic, global form: different neighborhoods where residents of various socioeconomic backgrounds live (or used to live and have now turned into abandoned ghost houses), supermarkets, schools, hospitals, houses of prayer, recreational facilities, construction sites, military outposts, and airports.<sup>xix</sup>

The developers of *This War of Mine* intentionally went beyond the siege of Sarajevo and the Warsaw Uprising as moments of crisis in contemporary history to create a supra-referential HCG in an urban setting that is mappable onto any corner on the surface of the earth, familiarized through its minimalized resemblances to any actual city, and repeatable. *This War of Mine* is a memento paying tribute to a specific moment in contemporary history and yet it narrates the story of civilians under siege in any historical moment – a gesture, to borrow from Ursula K. Heise, toward creating a ‘species narrative.’ And this is where the term ‘generic city’ finds its place. The generic city that Rem Koolhaas (1998) theorizes is an actual city, a by-product of late capitalism, a residue of Western civilization now spread to four corners of the earth – an urban setting which is ripped off of historical identity and specificity, is imitable and importable. Though inspired by his model, ‘generic’ as the modifier of city in the sense I use in this discussion, however, differs from Koolhaas’s in that the generic city of *This War of Mine* is best synonymized to city as a ‘generalized’ space, as ‘non-localizable,’ ‘non-specific,’ ‘repeatable,’ and hence ‘globally mappable.’

In this understanding, then, *This War of Mine* functions as a supra-referential title because its setting, the generic city, and the experience of living in it in times of crisis are features of human life in the age of globalization (Figure 7). While the game creates no world of its own, it does re-create a version of the generic city as a common setting in which more than half of humankind live their 21<sup>st</sup>-century lives. As Matt Peckham maintains in the *Wired*, “It’s all imaginary, a blighted urban made-up-scape, but it could be Sarajevo, or Gaza, or Fallujah, or Ukraine. It could be where you live.” The list simply has to be much longer. As a result, as the playable characters move about at night with their mental maps of the city made available to the players, the urban as a global experience is negotiated in the game.

Cities are spaces where globalization is lived, pinned to the everyday, experienced, understood or ignored, and its inherent inequalities adopted or resisted by urban dwellers. In its globality, the generic city is not New York or Tokyo – the ‘global city’ that Saskia Sassen (2013) theorizes. It is not defined, for example, in terms of its capacity to focalize finance. And yet, in Koolhaas’s sense, it is home to millions who live in old and emergent urban centers across the globe, making urban life a global experience in modern times. According to Gyan Prakash (2008), even though city dwellers experience urban spaces as “local lifeworlds,” these spaces are “globally situated” in a network of urban spaces across the globe (p. 2). While the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been dubbed ‘the urban century’ (Graham, 2011, p. 2-3), with the advent of the new millennium, cities have been characterized by urban theorists as “the nexus of the emergent global society” (Knight and Gappert, 1989, p. 326). In the globalized urban spaces of today, Prakash (2008) reminds us of our inability to draw a clear line between urban and rural, and by extension between urban and purely natural, the result of which is to claim that to live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to lead an urban life.

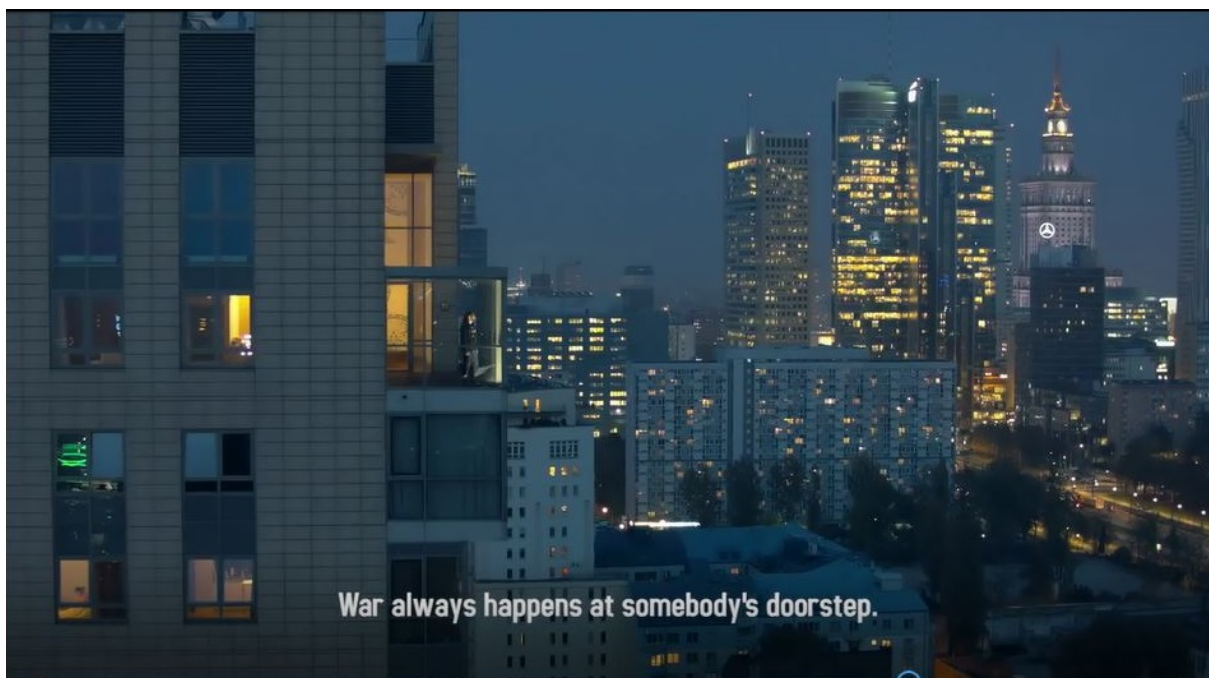


Figure 6 "War always happens at somebody's doorstep." Still from *This War of Mine's* Launch Trailer, *The Survivor*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gotK5DLdVvI>

To take one step further in the discussion about urban spaces as global sites of conflict at the same time that they are deemed to be the most probable of human homes in the third millennium, we should pay attention to cities as the most anthropocentric sites of the Anthropocene being unfolded. Even when cities are not hit by an external conflict and do not foresee a near-future experience thereof, they are still sites of perpetual conflict and disaster.

Even (or, perhaps, especially) after ceasefires are declared and tsunamis have ebbed, urban dwellers still have to grapple with a myriad of individual, eco-ethical, political, and outright moral questions while driving in city highways, at the supermarket, in their neighborhoods, or during national holidays – questions that are different from those faced by urban dwellers during war only in terms of degree, brutality, and long-term consequentiality. As Graham (2011) makes clear in his analysis of urban militarism as the latest reincarnation of crisis as a daily feature of cities – either in the global north or in the global south or at the borderlands in between – cities are spaces of constant warfare. This warfare “is manifest in the widespread use of war as the dominant metaphor in describing the perpetual and boundless condition of urban societies – at war against drugs, against crime, against terror, against insecurity itself” (p. XIII-XIV). This is evident in how similar the obsession of the West at the current neo-colonial moment is to the various high-tech, militaristic security solutions and warlike urban policing practices that have militarized Gaza as well as New Orleans, London as well as Mogadishu, reflecting the fact that cities, regardless of their size, geographical coordinates or the historical moment at which we examine them, have been deemed as “intrinsically problematic spaces” (p. XVIII).

### **Conclusion: Toward a Categorization of Historical Video Games**

The objective of this paper has been to examine a sub-category of critical play, that is, humanitarian crisis video games as they take inspiration from specific events in modern history such as the humanitarian crisis in Darfur or try to draw attention to the recent refugee crisis, in order to tell the tale of individual suffering and survival as a common human fate in a world closely and chaotically wired through the forces of globalization. As demonstrated, the adoption of the theme of survival as a human universal makes HCGs globally appealing, relevant, and playable, while the attention that they pay to the individual survivor legitimizes their attempt at establishing a set of universal ‘species narratives.’ HCGs posit individuals or collectivities of individuals vis-à-vis simulated local, national, regional, or global disasters and call upon the players’ drive to survive and their will to outlast crises. Furthermore, HCGs have the ability to establish an anthropocentric network of scales in which a disaster/crisis befalls a community and is responded to by individuals. They emphasize, beyond the appeal to humans’ ‘selfish gene,’ the significance of taking an ethical stand toward global disasters which have brought us to a new age of Anthropocene, while also drawing attention to game developers’ and players’ roles as responsible and empowered agents of change on a global level. What is more, HCGs potentially trouble the wholesale discourse on globalization propagated by popular media; in other words, the global matters in HCGs only as they raise awareness among players of the vulnerable nature of our common home on earth, even when we do not inhabit the same spaces and do not hold common worldviews.

With a detailed examination of the siege of Sarajevo in the two games *Saragame* and *This War of Mine*, the article further introduced two sub-categories of historical video games: referential (usually a simulation of real, historically significant events during or after a particular ongoing conflict) and supra-referential (titles that tell the tale of various historical events abstracted from their specific setting and mapped unto the entire course of human life on earth). These categories equip the discussions on historical video games with the means to understand the complex interactions between the ‘real and the ‘ludic’, between the ‘historically specific’ and the ‘universal’ in a medium that has, since its inception, been characterized as ‘half-real’ (Juul, 2005). As the comparative examination of *Saragame* and *This War of Mine* makes clear, historical events such as urban crisis can be treated at once as not only local (a falling urban jungle) but also global (any falling urban jungle). Unlike the referential *Saragame* which pays tribute to the survivors of the Bosnian War, the supra-



referential *This War of Mine* takes inspiration from contemporary history to tell a tale of global resonance. In so doing, the game turns Sarajevo's residents into individuals without names and their personal stories of survival into stories of humankind and its fate in general. Even if it is not about the entire course of human history, *This War of Mine* definitely remains valid as both a memento and a critique of the 20<sup>th</sup> century human condition and the disillusionments that the century imposed on its residents.

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<sup>i</sup> A longer version of this article, entitled "Überleben im Anthropozän: Wege zu einer Definition von Humanitarina Crisis Digital Games," with an emphasis on video games and global history, has appeared with Köstlbauer, J., Pfister, E., Winnerling, T., & Zimmermann, F. (Ed.s), *Weltmaschinen: digitale Spiele als globalgeschichtliches Phänomen*. Mannheim: Mandelbaum Verlag, 2018. The author wishes to thank the editors of the volume for their kind agreement that the chapter is published in the original English and with some modifications.

The author also wishes to thank Niko Rohé for his comments on an earlier draft of this article as well as the anonymous reviewers at *Loading...*

<sup>ii</sup> See, for instance, Shamdani, S. (2017). Affect at play: Politics via videogames. *Loading...The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association*, 10 (16): 1-14. Also of interest is Murphy, D. T. (2016). Hybrid moments: Using ludonarrative dissonance for political critique. *Loading...The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association*, 10 (15): 1-12.

<sup>iii</sup> For a discussion of scale in human geography, including a multi-sited analysis of the notion of scale-jumping, see Marston, S. A., Jones, J. P. & Woodward, K. (2005). Human geography without scale. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 30 (4), 416-432.

As a brief note on scale jumping, it is worth recognizing that as an approach to the question of scales in human geography, to jump scales means to take a phenomenon or its consequences from the (individual, local, national, global) scale in which it is operative in order to examine its effects on, and make sense of it in, another scale. Originally proposed by Neil Smith (1992) and criticized over the past two and a half decades as an instance of scalar rigidity, a metaphor that reinforces the taken-for-granted vertical hierarchies of scale, scale jumping helps us understand the HCG under a sharper light.

Smith, N. (1992). Contours of a spatialized politics: Homeless vehicles and the production of space. *Social Text*, 33, 54-81.

<sup>iv</sup> 11 bit studios. (2017, June 12). This War of Mine Launch Trailer – The Survivor. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gotK5DLdVvI>.

<sup>v</sup> For an overview of the discussions in the humanities on the Anthropocene, see Ackerman, D. (2015). *Human age: The world shaped by us*. New York: W. W. Norton. Also see Davis, H. M. & Turpin, E. (2015). *Art in the anthropocene: Encounters among aesthetics, politics, environments and epistemologies*. London: Open Humanities Press.

Other titles of interest include:

Oppermann, S. & Iovino, S. (2017). *Environmental humanities: Voices from the anthropocene*. London: Rowman et Littlefield International.

Heise, U. K., Christensen, J. & Niemann, M. (2017). *The Routledge companion to the environmental humanities*. New York: Routledge.

Schaumann, C. & Sullivan, H. I. (2017). *German ecocriticism in the anthropocene*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>vi</sup> The game can be accessed online at <http://www.newsgaming.com/games/index12.htm>.

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>viii</sup> Below is a selection of titles that touch upon the various aspects of the siege of Sarajevo from historical, anthropological, economic and spatial/urban perspectives:

Macek, I. (2011) *Sarajevo under siege: Anthropology in wartime*. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Donia, R. J. (2009). *Sarajevo: A biography*. London: Hurst.

Jestrovic, S. (2013). *Performance, space, utopia: Cities of war, cities of exile*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Andreas, P. (2008). *Blue helmets and black markets: The business of survival in the siege of Sarajevo*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Bartrop, P. R. (2016.) *Bosnian genocide: The essential reference*. Guide Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio.

Rusek, B. and Ingrao, C. (2006). The 'mortar massacres': A controversy revisited. In T. A. Emmert (Ed.) *Conflict in South-Eastern Europe at the end of the twentieth century: A "scholars' initiative" assesses some of the controversies*. London: Routledge.

<sup>ix</sup> To access and play the game, see Emir Cerimovic. "Games," accessed June 12, 2017, <http://www.emircerimovic.com/>.

<sup>x</sup> For further details about the game and its various features, see <http://www.thiswarofmine.com/>, accessed June 10, 2017.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid. "Games," accessed July 12, 2017, <http://www.emircerimovic.com/>.

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xiv</sup> For further details about the titles and its gameplay, see "This War of Mine Wiki," accessed June 10, 2017, [http://this-war-of-mine.wikia.com/wiki/This\\_War\\_of\\_Mine\\_Wiki](http://this-war-of-mine.wikia.com/wiki/This_War_of_Mine_Wiki).

<sup>xv</sup> In Celia Pearce's words, ludisphere is: "a 'virtual world system', encompassing the totality of networked games and virtual worlds on the Internet."

Pearce, C. (2006). *Playing ethnography: A study of emergent behaviour in online games and virtual worlds*. London: University of the Arts London. P. 28.

<sup>xvi</sup> Petit, C. (2014). Tackling the horrors of war from a civilian perspective in This War of Mine. *Gamespot*. Retrieved from <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/tackling-the-horrors-of-war-from-a-civilian-perspective-in-this-war-of-mine/1100-6418503/>.

<sup>xvii</sup> The following titles, among others, examine civilian behavior in times of domestic or international conflict:

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Garbett, C. (2016) *The concept of the civilian: Legal recognition, adjudication, and the trials of international criminal justice*. London: Routledge.

Zweiniger-Bargielowska, I., Duffett, R., & Drouard, A. (2011). *Food and war in twentieth century Europe*. Farnham: Ashgate.

Atkin, N. (2008). *Daily lives of civilians in wartime twentieth-century europe*. Westport: Greenwood Press.

For an examination of the question of pacifism and pacifist runs in video games, see Mayar, M. (2016). A case for serious play: Virtual pacifism in historical digital games. *Militär und Gesellschaft in der frühen Neuzeit*. 20, 119-137.

<sup>xviii</sup> For a sense of how I understand affect (at the performative intersection of bodies in conversation with the everyday and the worldly, especially in the face of the disruptive forces of not-belonging as a result of extraordinary encounters such as a siege or a civil war), see the introduction to *The affect theory reader*.

Seigworth, G. J., & Gregg, M. (2010). "An inventory of shimmers." *The affect theory reader*. Durham: Duke, 1-25.

<sup>xix</sup> Taken from "List of locations" *This War of Mine Wiki*. <http://this-war-of-mine.wikia.com/wiki/Locations>.