

British Journal for Military History

Volume 10, Issue 3, November 2024

Killing to commemorate, dying to remember? Authenticity and the practice of memory in Isonzo

Chris Kempshall & Vanda Wilcox

ISSN: 2057-0422

Date of Publication: 8 November 2024

Citation: Chris Kempshall & Vanda Wilcox, 'Killing to commemorate, dying to remember? Authenticity and the practice of memory in Isonzo', *British Journal for Military History*, 10.3 (2024), pp. 69-90.

www.bjmh.org.uk



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.



The BJMH is produced with the support of **Goldsmiths**
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Killing to commemorate, dying to remember? Authenticity and the practice of memory in *Isonzo*

CHRIS KEMPSHALL & VANDA WILCOX*

Independent Scholar, UK, & John Cabot University, Italy

Email: chriskempshall@gmail.com & vwilcox@johncabot.edu

ABSTRACT

First World War video-games have grown in importance and popularity since the centenary of 2014-18. But what does it mean to both develop and play these games? What vision of history is being constructed or transmitted between developers and players? Drawing on interviews with both these groups, this article examines the game Isonzo set on the Italian Front – an unfamiliar setting to most in the anglosphere – to explore the constructions of memory and historical meaning which the game produces.

Introduction

Historical computer games lie at an important and perhaps unique intersection between historical knowledge and popular understandings of the past. Games with historical settings often rely on player's existing understandings of events. At the same time, developers frequently seek to introduce audiences to substantial new information or concepts through their work. Whilst there are similarities between the mediums of film and games, the latter – especially historical combat games – require a different form and level of active engagement and participation from their audiences than is traditionally involved with watching films.¹ To play a game is not a passive

*Chris Kempshall is a public historian who specialises in transnational experiences of allied warfare and modern media representations of history. He is a Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Army Leadership, RMA Sandhurst. Note: In the period since the submission of this article Chris Kempshall has begun working as a historical consultant for BlackMill Games. Vanda Wilcox is an historian of Italy and its empire in the era of the First World War. She teaches at John Cabot University, Rome.

DOI: [10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v10i3.1830](https://doi.org/10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v10i3.1830)

¹Jo Bryce and Jason Rutter, 'Spectacle of the Deathmatch: Character and Narrative in the First-Person Shooters', in *ScreenPlay: Cinema/Videogames/Interfaces*, ed. Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska, (London & New York: Wallflower press, 2002), pp. 66–80;

undertaking, and developers and gamers both expect the experience to be proactive. What can we learn, therefore, from the intentions of developers and from the understandings of their audience through games that focus on the ‘lesser known’ or under acknowledged aspects of the past?

Using the game *Isonzo* (Blackmill Games, 2022) – which is set on the Italian front of the First World War – as a case study, this article explores the ways that historical videogames can create a space through which players interact with the history and memory of war. Through undertaking interviews with the game’s primary developer and survey questionnaires with volunteers from the player base, we explore the extent to which the game allows for a form of memory work rooted in players’ perceptions of historical accuracy. We argue that both the developer’s intentions and players’ reactions show that a commemorative, even reverent, function is not incompatible with the performative ‘killing’ enacted within the game itself. Although players are ‘participating’ in the imagined violence of war, they may still also believe that they are undertaking some form of commemorative or solemn activity. Furthermore, notions regarding the game’s ‘accuracy’ or authenticity become essential components of the more emotional commemorative functions.

Given the limited place of the First World War’s Italian Front within anglosphere understandings of the conflict, the preconceptions and ‘memories’ that players bring to the game are likely to be built upon other spaces and aspects of the war.² As a result, the developers of the game – as our interviews make clear – believe that they are undertaking an important educational task by showcasing the war in new ways to diverse audiences. As such, *Isonzo* provides an important opportunity for historians to explore the relationship between developer intentions and player expectations within historical games.

The Italian Front in Popular Culture & Memory

Until quite recently the Italo-Austrian theatre of the First World War has been widely downplayed as a side-show in the English-speaking world, as it has in France and

Chris Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, (Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p.13.

²See Vanda Wilcox, ‘Introduction’, in *Italy in the Era of the Great War*, (Leiden: Brill, 2018), pp. 1-13. Popular histories of the war have neglected Italy – even the eminent John Keegan, in *The First World War*, (London: Hutchinson, 1998), dedicates it very few pages, which are filled with stereotypes and errors. The incredibly influential A.J.P Taylor’s *The First World War: An Illustrated History*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1963) has only 3 pages on Italy out of 296 (pp. 89-90, p. 196). Today, a search on Amazon.co.uk finds over 50,000 books on the First World War but only 188 results for a search on “First World War” and “Italy”.

KILLING TO COMMEMORATE, DYING TO REMEMBER?

Germany. Only within the former combatant nations has it been taken seriously either by scholars or the public. Italian memory of the war was hijacked during the fascist dictatorship for political ends; though afterwards many people turned against this simplistic patriotic narrative, it still took time for alternative memories to emerge. Since 1968, a major strand of Italian academic and popular memory has focused on repression – the brutality which army and state exercised towards their own people, who were less than enthusiastic about the war.³ As a result, the First World War is less prominent in popular memory in Italy than in some other former combatant nations.⁴ The dissolution of Austria-Hungary in 1918 has meant that on the Habsburg side there could be no unifying national memory of the Italo-Austrian theatre. The successor states of the Habsburg Empire, while celebrating the war's contribution to their national independence, have often been reluctant to commemorate the military service of their peoples within the multinational Austro-Hungarian armies.⁵

Although there was one early and globally celebrated depiction of the Italian front in Ernest Hemingway's 1929 novel *A Farewell to Arms*, successfully filmed in both 1932 and 1957, there were relatively few other international cultural representations in the twentieth century.⁶ Few of the great classics of Italian war literature from the 1920s and 1930s – poetry, novels or memoirs – were translated into other languages; the triumphalist films of the fascist era were not popular outside Italy. From the 1950s,

³Nicola Labanca, 'Historiography 1918-Today (Italy)', in: *1914-1918-online. International Encyclopaedia of the First World War*, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2019-10-10. DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.11416](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.11416). Translated by: Thom, Martin.

⁴On the historiography underpinning these cycles of memory, see Marco Mondini, 'L'historiographie italienne face à la Grande Guerre : saisons et ruptures', *HISTOIRE@POLITIQUE* 22, no. jan-avr (2014), https://www.academia.edu/6428800/Lhistoriographie_italienne_face_à_la_Grande_Guerre_saisons_et_ruptures Accessed 2 August 2024.

⁵See, for instance, James Kapfl, 'Sites of memory, sites of rejoicing. The Great War in Czech and Slovak cultural history', *Remembrance and Solidarity* 2 (2014), pp. 109-146: <https://enrs.eu/article/sites-of-memory-sites-of-rejoicing-the-great-war-in-czech-and-slovak-cultural-history>; Gregor Joseph Kranjc, 'The Neglected War: The Memory of World War I in Slovenia', *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 22:2 (2009), 208-235, DOI: [10.1080/13518040902918105](https://doi.org/10.1080/13518040902918105).

⁶Others include the Helen Hayes and Clark Gable movie *The White Sister* (1933, Victor Fleming); *The Doomed Battalion*, and parallel German version *Berge in Flammen* (Luis Trenker, 1932); Mark Helprin's novel *A Soldier of the Great War* (1991); and more recently, Andrea Molesini's prize-winning *Non tutti i bastardi sono di Vienna*, (2010) (English ed. 2016)..

Italian popular culture depictions of the war have frequently been satirical and either ambiguous or openly anti-war. Some important Italian First World War films like Mario Monicelli's Oscar-nominated tragicomedy *La Grande Guerra* (1959) or *Uomini contro* (Francesco Rosi, 1971) did meet with international success, especially in France. Overall, Italy continued to be one of the war's so-called 'forgotten' fronts, particularly in the British and American public imagination. Perhaps this is unsurprising considering that the first dedicated single-volume history of the Italian war in English was not published until 2008.⁷

Curiously, the first mass-circulation cultural product to bring the Italian front to a global audience since Hemingway's novel and its film adaptations, was a 2016 video-game: *Battlefield 1*. This First Person Shooter (FPS) game brought an unprecedented global vision of the war to the videogaming public, with sections of the game set in northern France, the UK, Gallipoli, the Hejaz and on the Italo-Austrian front. International audiences responded favourably and were often enthusiastic about 'discovering' this front.⁸ Within Italy, reaction was mixed: while gamers were often excited to find their country's history represented within a major international franchise, many First World War hobbyists were scandalised, as were local political figures within the former front-line areas.⁹ The focus of complaints varied. Some argued that it was wholly inappropriate to ever convert the traumatic experience of the First World War into a game, and that an event involving mass death should not be played at. Never before had the Italian public seen their own historical sites turned into a space for imagined play, as had for years been done elsewhere. Complainants found the very notion disrespectful.¹⁰ The president of the National Alpini Association, a veterans' group for the elite mountain Alpini soldiers, issued a formal condemnation of the game, which he and others saw as 'dishonouring the sacred soil' of the

⁷Mark Thompson, *The White War: Life and Death on the Italian Front, 1915 - 1919*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2008).

⁸See, e.g., The Daily Dot Review, <https://www.dailydot.com/debug/battlefield-1-review/>. Accessed 17 February 2024.

⁹For gamers' reactions, see reviews from specialist websites such as <https://multiplayer.it/recensioni/175225-battlefield-1-il-bollettino-della-vittoria.html>. Accessed 17 February 2024. Politician Sergio Berlato of the far-right Brothers of Italy party, by contrast, demanded that the game 'be stopped': see 'Videogame di guerra sul Grappa. Esplode la polemica degli Alpini', *Corriere del Veneto*, 21 October 2016. Debates in Great War enthusiast communities such as the Grande Guerra 1915-1918 group on Facebook were revealing.

¹⁰For the debate within the National Alpini Association see <https://www.ana.it/lalpino/le-opportunit-di-un-videogioco/>, Accessed 17 February 2024.

KILLING TO COMMEMORATE, DYING TO REMEMBER?

battlefields and as an ‘insult to those many lives sacrificed for the fatherland’.¹¹ He was particularly concerned by the game’s focus on killing and on ‘blood everywhere’. Other critics were more concerned about its many historical inaccuracies and ‘arcade-like’ style, which they considered inherently misleading.¹² By the time *Isonzo* was announced in March 2021, many aspects of this rather sterile and alarmist debate had faded from view, and the majority reaction within Italy was cautiously positive. Even Great War enthusiasts who were themselves uninterested in videogames tended to see it as a way to interest younger people in the history of the war.¹³ In fact, in 2023 the National Alpini Association, so hostile to *Battlefield 1* in 2016, enthusiastically collaborated in the production of a new locally-made First World War videogame.¹⁴ In Italy as elsewhere, war-based videogames are now a mature genre.

The Emerging Nature of First World War Computer Games

The current popularity of First World War computer games can largely be traced to the emergence of new titles around the war’s centenary. The most notable examples are *Verdun 1914-1918* (2013), *Valiant Hearts: The Great War*, (2014), and *Battlefield 1* (2016).¹⁵ These works have already received considerable academic attention in the centenary period.¹⁶ However, the conflict did not cease to serve as a source of

¹¹‘Videogame di guerra sul Grappa’; see also *La Stampa*, 25 October 2016.

¹²‘Abbiamo provato la missione Avanti Savoia di Battlefield I: è imprecisa, ma non oltraggiosa’, *Wired*, 28 October 2016, <https://www.wired.it/gadget/videogiochi/2016/10/28/battlefield-1-missione-avanti-savoia-imprecisa-non-oltraggiosa/>

¹³See reactions in the ‘Grande Guerra 1915-1918’ Facebook group, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/60371965880/posts/10158356873980881>. Accessed 17 February 2024. Accessed 3 August 2024.

¹⁴‘La Grande Guerra in 3D, un videogioco ricostruisce il Fronte verticale del Lagazuoi’, *Corriere del Veneto*, 27 December 2023.

¹⁵‘Verdun 1914-1918’, Steam (Apple OS X, Linux, Windows), PlayStation 4 (2016) and Xbox One (2017 (M2H & Blackmill Games, September 2013)); ‘Valiant Hearts: The Great War’, Microsoft Windows, MS Windows, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One (Ubisoft Montpellier, 25 June 2014); ‘Battlefield 1’, Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Battlefield (EA DICE, 21 October 2016).

¹⁶For wider context, see: Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*; Chris Kempshall, ‘Pixel Lions – the Image of the Soldier in First World War Computer Games’, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 35, no. 4: The Great War and the Moving Image (19 October 2015): pp. 656–72,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2015.1096665>; Jakub Šindelář, ‘Playing through to Europe? Depiction and Reception of the First World War in the Videogame Valiant Hearts’, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, August 2022, 1–14,

inspiration in 2018 and both developers and players appear to have found something compelling within the war that continually draws them back. Many games developers have revealed the extent to which they were already invested and immersed in histories relating to the War, which they then attempted to introduce to their games.¹⁷ The popularity of some of these games, particularly *Battlefield 1*, means they now act as a point of entry into the war for many players who might previously have first encountered it only at school. The visions of the war that players either bring to, or take away from, these games often reflect existing dominant ideas or, in some cases, wider culture wars on the internet.¹⁸ This is particularly noticeable when it comes to concepts of race and the notion of the First World War as, in the words of Stefan Quiroga, a 'white mythic space' where any non-white characters and races are perceived to be encroaching.¹⁹

Rather than fading away following the conclusion of the centenary in 2018, First World War games have begun to spread their focus onto different aspects of the conflict. As games enter previously unfamiliar areas, we can begin examining what both developers

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2022.2097206>; Debra Ramsay, 'Liminality and the Smearing of War and Play in *Battlefield 1*', *Game Studies* 20, no. 1 (February 2020); Iro Filippaki, 'Great War Games: Notes on Collective Memory, the Adynaton, and Posthumanism', *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses*, no. 31 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.14198/raei.2018.31.11>; Adam Chapman, 'It's Hard to Play in the Trenches: World War I, Collective Memory and Videogames', *Game Studies* 16, no. 2 (December 2016); Chris Kempshall, 'The Evolution of First World War Computer Games', in *The Edinburgh Companion to the First World War and the Arts*, ed. Ann-Marie Einhaus and Katherine Isobel Baxter (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2017).

¹⁷Chris Kempshall, 'War Collaborators: Documentary and Historical Sources in First World War Computer Games', *First World War Studies* 10, no. 2–3 (2019): 225–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19475020.2020.1774914>.

¹⁸Sarah A. Aghazadeh et al., 'GamerGate: A Case Study in Online Harassment', in *Online Harassment*, ed. Jennifer Golbeck (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), pp. 179–207, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-78583-7_8; Bridget M. Blodgett, 'Media in the Post #GamerGate Era: Coverage of Reactionary Fan Anger and the Terrorism of the Privileged', *Television & New Media* 21, no. 2 (February 2020): 184–200, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419879918>; Jennifer Golbeck, *Online Harassment* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-78583-7_8.

¹⁹Stefan Aguirre Quiroga, 'Race, *Battlefield 1* and the White Mythic Space of the First World War', *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses*, no. 31 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.14198/raei.2018.31.12>; Stefan Aguirre Quiroga, *White Mythic Space: Racism, the First World War, and Battlefield 1* (Location: De Gruyter, 2022).

KILLING TO COMMEMORATE, DYING TO REMEMBER?

and players believe they are creating or participating in through them. Blackmill Games, the developers of *Verdun 1914-1918*, an online first-person shooter, in which the player joins others online as a platoon to collectively fight against a similar group playing as their enemies, did not stop after portraying the war's most famous Western Front. New iterations took the war firstly to the east, in 2017's *Tannenberg*, and then south to the Italian Front in *Isonzo* (2022).²⁰ Neither front is well-represented in British, American, or French understandings of the First World War and the experiences of the Russians, Germans, Italians and Austro-Hungarians who fought there are rarely reproduced in mainstream media designed for those audiences.²¹

An attractive aspect of the First World War for computer games developers was the fact that the war existed in a relatively fixed form within the minds of their target players, but that large parts of the conflict were obscured by dominant narratives. These knowledge gaps created significant opportunities for these developers to explore new content that could educate, move, or shock their players.²² If this was true for games like *Valiant Hearts*, then it is even more so for titles like *Isonzo* which are set in a theatre about which many players know nothing. In these circumstances, what are developers trying to show their audience? How do they introduce them to a new area of the war and what knowledge do they attempt to instil in their game? Similarly, what existing understandings do the players bring to a game like *Isonzo*? Do the games strengthen or challenge their perspectives and, if these games do indeed act as a gateway for exploring historical memory, then how do the players approach this and what 'memories' are they bringing with them? It is these questions that this article primarily explores.

***Isonzo*: Intentions of Developers**

The intentions, ideas, and interests of developers are often key in understanding historical computer games. Jos Hoebe – the CEO of BlackMill Games and the primary creative force behind the games *Verdun 1914-1918*, *Tannenberg*, and latterly *Isonzo* – has a long-standing existing interest in the First World War. Importantly, he wishes to use his games as a vessel for both *remembrance*, as a form of almost reverent

²⁰'Tannenberg', Microsoft Windows, OS X, & Linux (M2H & Blackmill Games, November 2017); 'Isonzo', Microsoft Windows, OS X, & Linux (M2H & Blackmill Games, September 2022).

²¹Popular media on Italy often uses the language of 'the forgotten front', see e.g. Cassar, George H. *The Forgotten Front: The British Campaign in Italy 1917-18*, (London: A&C Black, 1998); Morris, Jane. 'The Forgotten Front'. *The Economist*, 19 January 2017. <https://www.economist.com/1843/2017/01/19/the-forgotten-front>. Accessed 3 August 2024.

²²Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, p.35.

reproduction, and something more akin to constructed *re-enactment*, which spreads awareness.²³



Figure 1: Autumn foliage in the landscape in *Isonzo*.²⁴

To understand Hoebe's design choices in *Isonzo* and his other games, we must first explore how concepts of history are presented in-game. It is immediately clear that both the research behind the game, and the depiction of history within it, are highly visual processes for Hoebe and his team. Given the medium of computer games this should not be too surprising, but the lengths to which the developers went to try and create a visual fidelity is as interesting as it is impressive. Hoebe and his team would 'scrape the internet for historical material and books, if available,' with a focus on 'as much visual material as possible'.²⁵ The process could be highly inventive. To accurately depict weather and scenery for the Caporetto maps, the team calibrated the amount and colours of the tree foliage by cross-referencing Erwin Rommel's personal account of the battle with drone footage found on YouTube of a similar area at the right time of year (Figure 1).²⁶

²³Jos Hoebe, Questions regarding *Isonzo* – Blackmill Games & M2H, interview by Chris Kempshall and Vanda Wilcox, Interview, 14 December 2022.

²⁴All screenshots reproduced with permission of BlackMill Games.

²⁵Ibid.,

²⁶Ibid., See Erwin Rommel, *Infantry Attacks*, (London: Greenhill Books, 1990).

KILLING TO COMMEMORATE, DYING TO REMEMBER?

Hoebe sought to create a visual environment through which understandings of the past can be transmitted. He described placing as many ‘faction-specific’ objects or elements within the game as possible, from propaganda or recruitment posters from the featured combatant nations, the inclusion of different types of national music on the game’s soundtrack, right down to the in-game bandages having the correct ‘faction’ [i.e. national] label upon them.²⁷



Figure 2: Detail on uniforms designed to give authenticity.

Hoebe and his team undertook this work even though they believed ‘people don’t notice it’.²⁸ He considers the individual objects themselves to be not hugely important, but together ‘everything combines and then it will make the whole picture’.²⁹ He explained that it would have been both easier, and potentially more recognisable, to re-use objects from the British army – which they likely already had versions of from *Verdun* – to populate the game but ‘then all of those things combined they will make a difference and leave an impression. I also think it does better justification to the front if you see the faction-specific stuff’.³⁰ This suggests that Hoebe believes the feeling or impression of accuracy and authenticity are transmitted through the collected environment, rather than located within individual objects or uniforms (Figure 2). By themselves they are just small, often overlooked, curiosities – but

²⁷Ibid.,

²⁸Ibid.,

²⁹Ibid.,

³⁰Ibid.,

together they create a cumulative and immersive whole within which players operate. This supports the concept of ‘authenticity lite’ which dictates that computer games aim to construct a view of the *spirit* of how players *believe* the past existed.³¹

This was not the only way that *Isonzo* aimed to deliver historical meaning and information to the player base. Hoebe believes various groups within his audience want different levels of historical education from the game. The visual aspects are generally important across the whole audience, but also of particular relevance to ‘the slice of people who we want to educate indirectly’ by ‘creating a picture without being overtly educated on it’.³² Alongside this group, who are almost learning by osmosis, is another who are very interested either in history generally or this setting more specifically, who ‘just reads up on it and wants to be educated’. Hoebe notes that the information about different battles and locations provided on the loading screens is intended for this information-hungry audience, along with the accurate depictions of the various weapons.³³

While acknowledging this audience and the need to provide them with information directly, Hoebe offers a nuanced view on how far he is prepared to service them. He notes that there are, within the fanbase of this game and others like it, groups of ‘reenactors who know every belt buckle’. He says of these groups and their interests,

These are such detailed very niche specific, I wouldn’t say it’s history I mean you can know everything about the working of weapons and what type etc but that’s not – that’s a bit different from understanding and deducing the context of history, those are two separate things, it’s almost like being a doctor versus being someone who does medical research or something – they’re different things altogether.³⁴

Hoebe’s understanding of ‘doing history’ – or of being a historian – leads him to declare that the form of detail-heavy, slavish re-enactment embraced by some of the audience is *not* ‘history’. He distinguishes between real historical understanding and a more superficial awareness of the past. He added that while

I don’t think people expect you to know everything about the different types of Enfield rifles and what was deployed where and what time’

³¹Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, p.8.

³²Hoebe. This was achieved through ensuring that the dimensions of towns were right, correct uniforms were depicted, and there were different maps available to play on.

³³*Ibid.*,

³⁴*Ibid.*,

KILLING TO COMMEMORATE, DYING TO REMEMBER?

he believed such details to be

in the bigger context irrelevant, but here where it's in your face and has to be put in and linked with game mechanics as well it has to be accurate.³⁵

Hoebe is not suggesting that different weaponry is irrelevant to the way the war is waged, but rather that it is marginal to his communication of the central ideas and historical lessons that he finds important. Since in FPS games like *Isonzo* the player spends a great deal of time looking at their own weapon, these must be accurately depicted – but they are not transmitters of any key historical knowledge.

Instead of relying on objects to do more than create a general historical setting for the game, Hoebe creates a sense of historical time and place by using 'unique' in-game events. In *Tannenberg* attacks by wolves occur randomly on different maps and places of opposing factions would have to form temporary truces to fight them. This idea was based on some probably apocryphal stories from the Eastern Front.³⁶ In *Verdun*, for many years, each 11 November the game has instituted a two minute silence as 'a reminder of the gravity of the subject and [to] pay your respects to the past', while also including a 'Christmas Truce' mode each December where players throw snowballs at each other and play football in No Man's Land.³⁷ These events propose that the game's subject matter is important and weighty enough to require a form of reverence; at the same time the game allows players to act out combat – often graphically – creating a contradiction common to this type of game. The desire to provide the 'right' kind of remembrance is in creative tension with the requirements of mock killing.

Hoebe believes his games serve a wider purpose than mere entertainment, saying that 'we/I have a unique opportunity to shape how people see the Italian Front – that's also

³⁵Ibid.,

³⁶Ibid., The 'Wolf Truce' event draws upon stories published in the New York Times in 1917 and is designed to create a horror film-esque atmosphere: *Tannenberg: Wolf Truce Event Trailer!*, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dwDXkextcVg>. Accessed 3 August 2024; 'Tannenberg – The Wolf Truce Returns! – Steam News', 26 November 019, <https://store.steampowered.com/news/app/633460/view/1629669614123129707>. Accessed 3 August 2024.

³⁷Hoebe; 'Verdun 1914-1918'; 'Christmas Truce Event :: Verdun General Discussions', <http://steamcommunity.com/app/242860/discussions/0/619574421263154332/>. Accessed 3 August 2024.

a big responsibility'. Exploring his motivations, Hoebe reveals a distinct vision not just of the war in general but of his own role in spreading information about it, that effectively places him as an auteur figure,

So far there hasn't been a *Saving Private Ryan* on the Italian Front, so people don't have a big perception of it other than *Battlefield 1* who dipped their toes in it. I get to shape how people see it and in that way you have to do justice by the material and then try to be as accurate as possible and cherry pick – or especially not cherry pick – the correct things to highlight. So that people have a correct image of it. I think that's where the value is of what we're doing.³⁸

Because of the nature of the audience and the appeal of games like *Isonzo*, Hoebe has a greater platform for the dissemination of his ideas about the war than do most academic historians. His sense of 'responsibility' implies both a respect for the realities of the historical record and a concern for people's perceptions of the past – in other words, popular memory of the war; perhaps it also incorporates a responsibility to the war dead, or to their living descendants. Given Hoebe's earlier remarks that a laser-focused interest in military materiel is not really 'history', we might ask what he does actually consider 'history' to be, and how he is undertaking it through the game. Hoebe believes he has a responsibility to the memory of the war to tell the truth, or a truth, about it. But concepts of 'truth' relating to any historical event are, as First World War academic historians know, highly complicated and protean.³⁹ What is the 'truth' that *Isonzo* is transmitting to its players?

Certainly, there can be no major accusations levelled at the game for the way it approaches the landscapes and visual fidelity of its setting. The work that has gone into reproducing the various battlefields and villages is extraordinary; Hoebe reports some Italian players contacting the team to say, 'my town is in there and it looks exactly like how it looks in real life' (Figure 3).⁴⁰ Despite this, how much real knowledge does the game provide about the nature of the Italian Front? Loading screens offer important and useful contextual information about specific moments but can disappear much quicker than it takes to read them. The combat depicted is often violent and gruellingly attritional, played out in harsh conditions, but it is not necessarily that different from the experiences of playing *Tannenberg* or *Verdun*. However, simply by placing the

³⁸Ibid.,; *Saving Private Ryan* (DreamWorks Pictures & Paramount Pictures, 1998); 'Battlefield 1', 1.

³⁹On how memory of the war has changed over time to become an evolving 'truth', see: J. M. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Daniel Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory*, (London: Hambledon and London, 2005).

⁴⁰Hoebe

KILLING TO COMMEMORATE, DYING TO REMEMBER?

spotlight on an aspect of the war, which is little understood in the anglophone world, Hoebe is already disseminating a vision that combines awareness, knowledge and understanding of this theatre. He speaks repeatedly about the importance of bringing attention to something that has been so heavily overlooked.⁴¹



Figure 3: Townscapes recognisable to Italian players of Isonzo.

Hoebe describes *Isonzo* as being ‘a very history-minded game’ and this is perhaps a helpful way to acknowledge the tensions between authenticity and enjoyment which any game must navigate. There can be absolutely no doubt of the craftsmanship that has gone into constructing the game. The focus on visual sources as basis for research may seem like anathema to some academic historians, who often privilege the written word over the static (or moving) image, but it has allowed the team to undertake a staggering reconstruction operation. The range of objects, posters, and ephemera with which they have populated their game means they have effectively curated a truly transnational digital gallery. Arguably, therefore, the game should be understood as an example of memory work rather than history, since it is primarily focused on bringing attention to past events rather than overtly analysing them for historical ‘truth’. It is the outcome of a creative attempt to draw out understandings and visions of the Italian Front based on the recollections and material available, to then create something that looks and feels how we *think* the war in this place should. But the intentions of the developers are only one aspect of this process; to assess how successfully the game

⁴¹Ibid.,

achieves its aims, we must also examine what the players take away from their experiences.

Isonzo: Responses from Players

A global release for a game can ensure global reactions and responses. Examining online reviews and commentaries allows us to consider perspectives from players across different societies, who inevitably will have different responses to historical topics. Online spaces also make it possible for encounters between, for instance, Italian and Austrian commentators, thus allowing both for the diffusion of national cultural responses to the game and, paradoxically, contributing towards the emergence of transnational or international memory cultures around the First World War.⁴²

In researching this article, we used a variety of methods to gauge player response. We conducted an anonymous online survey of players, recruited from dedicated communities on Reddit and Twitter, which garnered 149 separate responses – Survey A – while in-depth follow-up questions – Survey B – were sent to selected respondents, of whom 26 replied.⁴³ Respondents came from the UK, USA, Canada, Italy, Slovenia, Ireland and more. We also gathered spontaneous reactions from communities of players and reviewers on Twitter, Facebook, Reddit and YouTube. The sheer number of discussions online make a systematic analysis impossible; only a small selection is considered here. YouTube reviews and reaction videos, together with their public comment sections, offer a particularly rich source for community responses since they are so open, unlike closed Facebook groups, for instance, and attract such large numbers of participants.⁴⁴ These sources suggest that Italian gamers generally responded to *Isonzo* within an explicitly national framework, as a reflection on Italy's national history; the post-war dissolution of Austria-Hungary makes such a reaction impossible from the other side of the conflict. Italian responses were more likely than others to display reverence and to invoke explicit memorial functions;

⁴²Eugen Pfister, 'Why History in Digital Games Matters. Historical Authenticity as a Language for Ideological Myths', in *History in Games: Contingencies of an Authentic Past*, ed. Martin Lorber and Felix Zimmermann, volume 12 ,(Bielefeld: Transcript, 2020), pp. 47–72, p. 60

⁴³Google Forms:

Survey A carried out May 2023, https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1WmmE-x2RWQ7e1OE4dgcRSurFAtXZVttOx_S6vkenQM0/edit?ts=647f47c0&pli=1,

Survey B carried out October 2023,

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdRjgwBxtRdzm85x0vAYn_Oy2xOLS9C9vjWyhyF-VKFBQhj_w/viewform .

Respondents to Survey A were 96% male, and to Survey B 100% male. More than 80% were aged 18-35. Full data available on request to authors.

⁴⁴Quiroga uses a similar methodology in *White Mythic Space*.

KILLING TO COMMEMORATE, DYING TO REMEMBER?

however, they were also most likely to make historically-informed jokes and irreverent remarks about specific individuals, such as chief of general staff Luigi Cadorna, renowned for his embrace of attrition and his brutal disciplinary policies. English-language channels and communities were generally more focused on the mechanics of the game itself, rather than its national-historical significance, perhaps unsurprisingly. However, many international reviewers and commentators also explicitly seek to link *Isonzo* to their wider frame of reference about the First World War.

Accuracy & Realism

Historical accuracy featured highly in commenters' and reviewers' responses and survey respondents followed suit. Survey A collected 149 responses:

- 99 reported that historical accuracy was extremely (5/5) or very (4/5) important to them when choosing to play a videogame with a historical setting.
- 96 reported that it was extremely or very important to them in choosing to play *Isonzo* specifically.

Respondents repeatedly suggested that accuracy was an essential underpinning for the game's immersive function. Though highly invested in perceived accuracy, players were not necessarily equipped with much prior knowledge of the game's material. Over 60% claimed to have had either no knowledge at all or very minimal knowledge of this theatre of war before the release of *Isonzo*. Despite this, when asked to assess the game on a 1-5 scale where 5 represents 'extremely accurate' and 1 represents 'not at all accurate':

- 61% selected level 4 (very accurate)
- 14% selected level 5 (extremely accurate).

Given how poor many respondents' self-reported level of historical knowledge of the front was, it is worth asking on what basis players believed they were actually capable of assessing the accuracy of the game. In essence, a game makes certain truth-claims or presents certain forms of evidence to persuade players that it is accurate, which players then accept or reject. However, this judgement is based less on real historical knowledge than on a set of prior assumptions, formed by familiar cultural points of comparison – in other words, historical memory.

Asked to select all the aspects they looked for in assessing accuracy, players' most common response was 'weapons and equipment' (95%) followed by 'uniforms and clothing' and 'maps and landscape', each selected by 84% of respondents. Physical environments in the game such as buildings (churches, stations) and dug-outs were

also perceived as essential for creating a credible, accurate representation for 75% of respondents. These clearly contribute to what Eugen Pfister has termed ‘a feeling of pastness’ within the game, that is to say a sense of authenticity rather than necessarily of accuracy, rooted not in knowledge but ‘primarily by comparing the representation with other popular culture representations’.⁴⁵ These findings appear to fully vindicate Hoebe’s focus on the visual as a key mechanism for creating an environment of authenticity, as well as his argument for the accumulated effect of multiple, carefully researched small elements in building historical context. In the absence of real prior historical knowledge, it appears to be the careful curation of visual detail which convinces players of authenticity. At the same time, the responses of more informed local players show that Hoebe’s team has gone above and beyond the ‘standard’ iconography. In-game information, such as narrative or descriptive text panels, original film footage or historical photographs, was important to 49% of respondents as a means of assessing accuracy. These information-hungry players, discussed by Hoebe, in fact often complained that the text panels in the loading screens were available too briefly for their liking. For 45%, the dynamics of gameplay were seen as a measure of accuracy while only 30% saw storyline as an important criterion in this respect. By contrast information about historical or military advisors, or discussion about the research process, was of much less interest to players.

Social media responses reinforce these findings. One of the largest Italian YouTube gaming channels, “Parliamo di Videogiochi” or PdV [Let’s talk about Videogames], which has over 488,000 subscribers and a significant presence across social media, focused on accuracy in its review of the game.⁴⁶ Reviewer Francesco Miceli praises the ‘almost maniacal historical care with respect to uniforms, weapons and accessories’ and above all maps. He describes the visual representation of the front-line as almost uncannily accurate,

what springs to the eye to anyone who has visited those places – and I recommend you should do so at least once in your life – is the precision with which the settings for the fighting have been reconstructed, starting with the real locations of the conflict.⁴⁷

Reflecting Hoebe’s own experience, numerous responses come from Italians who state they are resident in the former battlefield regions and who highly praise the

⁴⁵Pfister, pp. 63-5

⁴⁶Parliamo di Videogiochi, *ISONZO un tragico segmento di storia italiana*, 28 Sept. 2022, Video, YouTube. 11:47. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GH6BhbDEn2k>. Accessed 3 August 2024 – all translations from Italian by V. Wilcox.

⁴⁷*ISONZO un tragico segmento di storia italiana*.

KILLING TO COMMEMORATE, DYING TO REMEMBER?

accuracy of the game's depiction of landscapes. Another player explained why this accuracy was so important to him,

As a history buff from a military family . . . , it was a treat for the eyes to see the accurate history of the uniforms, the weapons, . . . even the secondary equipment such as the bombs, the knives, the mace. [...] It is a pleasure for the eyes and the mind. . . . It really reflects one of the most brutal wars in history, in all its horror. I play it a lot with a friend and we often find ourselves saying phrases like: 'Poor guys for going through all this'. To think about the sheer horror of the gassings, the deafening noise of the bombing, the blind luck of not being among those men to be hit. When, bitterly unfortunately, it all really happened. And who knows how many of our (and not only!) poor soldiers still lie in the damp earth, carrying with them all the suffering of a terrifying war.⁴⁸

In-game 'realism' and the sense of the historical and emotional weight of events are thus intimately intertwined; however, the 'horror' of thinking about the real events and engaging in an act of nationally-framed memory ('our ... poor soldiers') does not diminish the 'pleasure' which the player takes in the game (Figure 4).



Figure 4: The 'horror' of fighting and dying on the Italian Front.

⁴⁸User @roschach3617, comment on *ISONZO un tragico segmento di storia italiana*, 2022.

Like film, games offer both visual and aural experiences. Where international responses focused mainly on visuals like uniforms and weapons, many Italian reactions mentioned the soundtrack. The voice acting was praised as bringing additional authenticity, in contrast to the poor-quality dubbing experienced in many other internationally-produced games. However, a surprising number of Italian commenters noted the ‘unrealistic’ usage of correct standard Italian: *real* Italian soldiers of the day spoke in a huge range of dialects, often mutually incomprehensible. There was also the complete absence of swearing and – many noted with disappointment – blasphemy. An authentically Italian soldier, these commenters propose, was foul-mouthed and spoke in slang and dialect! This suggests that realism and authenticity are to a considerable degree in the eye (or ear) of the beholder.

Survey responses confirm the importance of ‘perceived accuracy’ or authenticity-lite, rather than genuine historical knowledge. When asked what they had taken away from the game, respondents suggested feelings were important – but they had to be rooted in this perceived accuracy: ‘it felt [like] immersion of history of a time what felt long past’. The game worked by ‘bringing the experiences to life in a way that books/pictures could not’, wrote another. If seeing is believing, playing is even more so: ‘Visuals have added a better idea of scale to the Italian front. Pictures are one thing, "video" another’.⁴⁹

The First World War in public memory: Narratives & Tropes

Several well-worn narrative tropes, long established in collective memory of the First World War, are attached to *Isonzo* by players. PdV revealingly entitled its review of the game *Isonzo: a tragic segment of Italian history*. Arguably the fighting on this front was much more tragic for the defeated peoples of the Austro-Hungarian, or indeed the local Slovene civilian population, but the review is framed in national terms. The idea of the war as tragic is common internationally, as reflected in survey data: 85% chose to associate the term ‘deadly’ with the Italian front and 69% selected ‘futile’.

As well as fixating on tragedy, personal and familial connections are important in Italian responses and often are rooted in patriotic language. PdV host Francesco Miceli commented in his review that in over 30 hours of gameplay, he had not once played as the Austro-Hungarians, showing a level of personal identification with his in-game character rooted in nationality. He notes that,

as an ex-soldier it was quite moving to play *Isonzo*... not only because it’s the Italian army and you can see regimental cap badges and symbols which still exist today, but also because each [playable] class [of soldier] is specific to our army.⁵⁰

⁴⁹Survey A, May 2023, three anonymized respondents (70,21,5).

⁵⁰*ISONZO un tragico segmento di storia italiana*.

KILLING TO COMMEMORATE, DYING TO REMEMBER?

The use of 'our' is telling here; equally, it is realistic details in the game which create the emotional connection for the player. Numerous commenters also invoked their own military service, this is of course unverifiable but not implausible in a country where conscription was only abolished in 2004, so most able-bodied men over the age of 40 have served at least briefly in the armed forces. 'I'm an Alpino, and to see my unit in such an amazing and accurate shooting game is an immense joy, considering that my regiment played a leading role in lots of operations like the capture of Monte Nero,' wrote one.⁵¹ Personal experiences, historical memory and ludic enjoyment are thus united.

Narrative assumptions about the nature of combat in the First World War determine players' assessments of accuracy: the very difficulty of the game, and the high chance of one's avatar being killed at any time, led one survey respondent to call this 'the most realistic iteration of a World War I front' – noting 'Most other FPS titles allow you to act as a super soldier, but in Isonzo, no matter how much skill or game knowledge you have, a stray bullet can always stop you.'⁵² On PdV, Miceli says admiringly that 'the most dramatically realistic element is the cruelty of the fighting and the very few chances to advance and survive for more than a few moments.' The implication is that the most universal experience of the war is of death rather than survival, and that a game which is likely to cause the player to 'die' many times is inherently more accurate than one where they easily survive. In reality, around 10-15% of mobilised men died in most First World War armies.⁵³ The player will be 'immersed in a reality where dying like flies was unfortunately the sad destiny of many young and very young men from all over the world, including 650,000 Italians', Miceli concludes, invoking a reverential memorialising note.⁵⁴ The game's memory work is powerfully linked to its perceived accuracy and precision – even though in fact this is not actually rooted in historical reality. This assumption allows 'dying' in-game to become a form of memorialisation of those who died in reality.

From gaming as memory to traditional memorial forms

For many players the game was a prompt to engage more deeply with the First World War, both on the Italian front and more generally. Survey A found that 96% of all

⁵¹User @cortyy4470, comment on *ISONZO un tragico segmento di storia italiana*, 2022.

⁵²Survey B anonymised respondent 17.

⁵³Pierluigi Scolè, 'War Losses (Italy)', *1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2015-03-16. DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.10571](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10571). Translated by: Mazhar, Noor Giovanni

⁵⁴*ISONZO un tragico segmento di storia italiana*.

respondents sought out further information about the Italian front thanks to playing the game. Most Survey B respondents agreed that *Isonzo* and other games in the series had increased their overall interest in the First World War. Some carried out online research and reading while others were moved to more memorial or commemorative responses and of course, the two categories also overlap. Real-world interactions were not uncommon, with several respondents visiting Italian and Slovenian battlefield locations in person or planning to do so. Others began collecting First World War militaria after playing the game, a commemorative activity reflecting some players' great interest in the minutiae of physical equipment, as identified by Hoebe.

If for international players, *Isonzo* represents a major learning opportunity, for Italians and others from the former battlefield region the decision to invest in the game was motivated by a commemorative impulse. Italian and Slovene survey respondents were clear that it serves a memorial function,

Most Italian families had a family member that served. The war in the Dolomites is actually a point of obsession for me.⁵⁵

Similarly,

The history of the Italian Front is very important to me since I am Slovenian and ... [it is] a vital part of our national identity which is why I am pleased that it is finally getting some spotlight.⁵⁶

The game operates within the context of these players' existing deep connection to their own national history. Social media commenters explicitly connected the game to the real First World War service of their ancestors,

I'm definitely going to buy this, to be able to explore for myself what my grandfather lived through in 1917, because he was born in 1899 and he was among those 18-year-olds called up to the front. He fought in both world wars but unfortunately I never got to meet him because he died in the late 70s before I was born. Of those experiences all that remains to me is the diary grandad wrote at the front, during the First World War.⁵⁷

The writer connects a real-life memory object, his grandfather's diary, to the memorial space of the game. *Isonzo* offers him an opportunity to imaginatively 'explore' his grandfather's experience. Such personal connections perhaps underpin Hoebe's

⁵⁵Survey A, May 2023, anonymous respondent 124.

⁵⁶Survey B, October 2023, anonymous respondent 6.

⁵⁷User @zodiark93, comment on *ISONZO un tragico segmento di storia italiana*, 2022.

KILLING TO COMMEMORATE, DYING TO REMEMBER?

remarks on the ‘responsibility’ of making this type of game: his care and attention to creating an ‘authentic’ experience seem to resonate with his audience in that they feel able to project such intimate emotional bonds onto the game.

Players from further afield found that *Isonzo* played an important role in amplifying their overall historical memory of the war, just as Hoebe intended. British and Irish survey respondents considered it a useful corrective to the ‘Fritz and Tommies’ myth and to an exclusive focus on the 1916 Easter Rising respectively.⁵⁸ American and Canadian respondents valued the increased awareness and understanding they believed the game could bring about; some explicitly embraced *Isonzo* as a form of memory work, which would ‘ensure that WWI isn’t completely forgotten about’. Although the game is focused on the act of killing, and gameplay can be gory,

Playing the game reminds me why it is important to respect human life and always respect the fallen no matter what nation they fought for. [A] hero’s sacrifice knows no color or bounds.⁵⁹

YouTube commenters also invoked high diction commemorative tones, and even strongly emotional reactions such as tears: ‘The memory of our grandfathers who died in battle in that war will always remain in our hearts,’ wrote one.⁶⁰ In an interesting link between different memorial media and tones, another simply posted the very famous and evocative First World War poem by Giuseppe Ungaretti, ‘Soldati’.

Conclusion

There has been a tendency, particularly among non-gamers, to assume that ‘violent’ first-person shooter games appeal to audiences and developers primarily because of the opportunity to inflict death upon others.⁶¹ In reality, however, both developers and players recognise that games can exist as spaces for the construction, experience, and dissemination of historical knowledge. Such games allow players to undertake what they believe to be real and meaningful thinking about the past. Historical understanding is transmitted through an idea of ‘historical accuracy’ which is not

⁵⁸The Fritz and Tommies narrative places the common experiences and paradoxical transnational solidarity between ordinary British and German soldiers at the heart of the First World War; see Peter Doyle and Robin Schäfer, *Fritz and Tommy: Across the Barbed Wire*, (Stroud: The History Press, 2015).

⁵⁹Survey B anonymised respondents 24 and 22.

⁶⁰User @elle64streaming56, comment on *ISONZO un tragico segmento di storia italiana*, 2022.

⁶¹Patrick M. Markey and Christopher J. Ferguson, ‘Teaching Us to Fear: The Violent Video Game Moral Panic and The Politics of Game Research’, *American Journal of Play* 10, no. 1 (2017): 99–115.

located simply in individual objects. Instead, it is disseminated through the cumulative positioning of many details that collectively provide a more tangible version of 'authenticity lite' that is based upon a *feeling* of historical reality. The result is a noticeable difference between the constructed memory of the past and actual historical knowledge.

The 'responsibility' to 'get it right' when it comes to the game's historical content has motivated the *Isonzo* developers to focus on visual fidelity to the battles of the Italian front, while also providing a sense of what Hoebe deems most important about the era portrayed and the place it ought to have within wider collective memory. This commitment is recognised and appreciated by the audience: the more they perceive the game as accurate, the more they find it offers them an immersive memory space with scope for real personal emotional connections to the past. For many players, the violent nature of the game's content – where they regularly kill each other – is not incompatible with more respectful and even reverential attitudes to a historical war.

Indeed, for those players from Italy, the game can take on pilgrimage-like aspect, where participating in the combat is just another aspect of 'visiting' the battlefields and paying homage to those who died there. In this sense play and ludic enjoyment can exist alongside historical reflection and commemoration, potentially creating a mutually reinforcing cycle of memory.