Grinding for war: Authenticity and experience in WWII MMOs

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World War II is undoubtedly the most thoroughly covered historical theme in the medium of digital games. The popularity of WWII manifested itself in a host of generic creations in the 2000s. These games oversaturated the markets, and eventually exhausted the subject matter. In recent years, major game developers and publishers have mostly shunned the topic. The more popular wartime genres have almost completely deserted the theme, while the niche games have continued to draw from this well-trodden source of inspiration. However, trends areicy and the current hiatus suggests that WWII might be making a return to the mainstream in the near future with modern and futuristic military settings that we saw in the late decade with the WWII-themed shooters. What once was considered innovative for a gaming genre is now growing stale and becoming a sign of stagnation. Smaller developers have adopted new business models and cooperated with modeling companies to reinvent the interest to WWII. There are also certain obstacles and challenges, stemming from the gaming culture itself, which impede design of historical wargames. For instance, the genre is not well suited for the current gaming system of short-lived, single-player experiences.

The game industry's fascination with WWII preceded the era of digital gaming. The earliest games about the war were published, when the global conflict was still ongoing and undecided. Germany was particularly prolific in producing propaganda games, which disseminated explicit political and national messages to boost the war effort. These titles were based on actual events or educated children through jingoistic perspectives. Most of these games belonged to racing game category. Some were militarised variations of existing designs. War and patriotism were also common themes in American board games. These were also used as propaganda tools in German-occupied Europe.

WII-themed games matured into a more sophisticated genre of WWII-themed games in the early-1980s. Harbinger of this change was a new line of tactical and strategic board games that had more serious attention paid to historical accuracy by comparison with their predecessors. The concept of wargames as relatively simple, generic marketing rhetoric, Avalon Hill, one of the pioneering wargame companies, endorsed its products as “thinking man’s games”, in which the outcomes were determined by intellect and strategy rather than luck. These hex-and-counter wargames were integral in disassociating games from toys and rebranding it as a hobby enjoyed also by adult audiences. The emergence of personal computers in the late 1970s and early-1980s brought the genre into digital platform. This transition was a logical evolutionary step for wargaming. It offered a solution to the problem of hyper-complexity, which had partly contributed to the decline of board wargaming in the early-1980s, due to computer handled the necessary calculations considerably quicker than a human player. Many of these early games were text-based, and they were designed and published by the companies that produced board wargames.

As the digital game technology evolved, various sub-genres adopted the theme. To generalise, historical games have two prevalent conventions to simulate history: they either recreate historical events or offer a gaming scenario that maintains the strategy game enabling historical realism. The genre invites players to change history and challenge established historical narratives, or, conversely, attempt to recreate history as it happened. In turn, real-time strategy game portrays specific historical episodes and campaigns. They are more combat-oriented and concentrate on the tactical aspect of warfare. Tactical shooters, in accordance with their name, have similar focus, but they depict combat from the first- or third-person perspective of infantry men. Vehicle simulation game aim to provide realistic experiences of manoeuvring historical military vehicles in battle.

The multiplayer online game, heretofore abbreviated as MMOs – are a more recent game category to handle WWII. MMOs usually incorporate elements of different game sub-genres, such as those of strategy games and first-person shooters. MMOs present a host of specific gaming conventions. As a result, their approaches in presenting history are not uniform. Compared to many other wargame genres, MMOs enable large scale battles, where thousands of players simultaneously partake on the same, persistent theatre of war. The multiplayer mode also adds a layer of complexity that, for instance, challenges construction of established metamathematics. These factors pose interesting questions to historicity. Game design is one of the definite mechanic and characteristic of MMOs. This activity refers to performing repetitive actions and tasks to progress in the game. The motivating factor behind game design is leveling up characters, earning/collecting in-game rewards and gaining access to all parts of the game.

The present article examines generation of historicity in first-playable WWII MMOs. The genre invites players to change history and challenge established historical narratives, or, conversely, attempt to recreate history as it happened. In turn, real-time strategy game portrays specific historical episodes and campaigns. They are more combat-oriented and concentrate on the tactical aspect of warfare. Tactical shooters, in accordance with their name, have similar focus, but they depict combat from the first- or third-person perspective of infantry men. Vehicle simulation game.

The NOTION OF REAL

The notion of realism is central to historical games, as the genre attempts to imitate and interpret real-world events, phenomena or conditions. The theatrical aspect of historical games is governed by the laws of aesthetics and science, as a result, their approaches in presenting history are not uniform. Compared to many other wargame genres, MMOs enable large scale battles, where thousands of players simultaneously partake on the same, persistent theatre of war. The multiplayer mode also adds a layer of complexity that, for instance, challenges construction of established metamathematics. These factors pose interesting questions to historicity. Game design is one of the definite mechanic and characteristic of MMOs. This activity refers to performing repetitive actions and tasks to progress in the game. The motivating factor behind game design.

AUTHENTICITY/EXPERIENCE

The potential importance of digital games as vehicles for rethinking history has been widely acknowledged. This perception is based primarily on the interactive nature of the medium. Games require active participation, existing an exigency that the players must be able to influence the outcomes, or even the game content itself, in a meaningful manner. In the context of historical games, the above-mentioned notion also suggests that players adopt the role of historians, who have the capacity to shape, or at least influence, the course of history.

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fidelity of simulation. The damage, flight and physic models, which are based on archive data and real world parameters, become increasingly more complex and true-to-life as the modes progress. Thus, the research. accumulated experience point can be used to train crew members. The players can also buy special currency with real money, which can be used for premium accounts, premium vehicles or to speed up

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War Thunder

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concerning perceived game realism in terms of modelling, simulation, visual verisimilitude, and historical accuracy. The bulk of vehicles in the game's technology tree are from the WWII period, but the

vehicle simulation games. The game creates a historical model that players experience by operating various kinds of tanks and aircrafts. This cultural background creates a horizon of expectations

insinuations to Nazi sympathising or glorification. In this context, the differentiation between the Wehrmacht soldiers and the political soldiers of the Waffen-SS is essential.

Therefore, WWII games are not free of controversy. Historical games are retrospective representations of recorded real-world events, phenomena and conditions. They are also unavoidably infused with

belief systems, prone to reflect the interpretations and biases of their designers and publishers. Thus, historical games should not be perceived as pure historiographic simulations, but as also their

ideological approaches should be acknowledged.[49] Transgression of cultural sensitivities has been a typical cause of public contention. However, mere offence is not sufficient enough to generate controversy, as they are manufactured through social interaction.[50] Arguably these cases have most likely been about cultural discrepancy than about intentional ill will. Game developers relay myths, tropes and narratives familiar in their cultural sphere, which are subsequently perceived as exaggerated or false by audiences with different conception of history.

There are also matters of national legislation at play.[51] Perhaps the most known example is the German criminal code, which prohibits the use and distribution of symbols of unconstitutional organisations. This definition naturally includes Nazi symbolism. The section 88a does not apply to acts and mediations that, for instance, serve educational purposes or promote art and science.[52] However, the medium of digital games does not meet the aforementioned criteria in the eyes of German legislation. Thus, publishers censor the German versions of historical games that feature such imagery to gain access to Europe's biggest game markets.[53]

The narratives of heroism, patriotism and good war dominate WWII games, whereas the narratives of victimhood remain absent. One major explanatory reason for this can be traced to the cultural status of digital gaming, which was still being negotiated during the heyday of historical shooters in 2000s. These are relatively safe themes for a medium that was being accused of desensitising players to real-life violence, or even transforming some of them into maso murderers. There have been few failed endeavours to design digital games about the Holocaust, but these projects have been quickly cancelled due to public pressure from various interest groups. The overarching reasoning for their cancellation has been that the Holocaust is not a suitable subject matter for the medium of games to handle.[54] This line of argumentation underlines the rhetoric of playfulness and frivolity, which remains integral for the normative debate about games as historical representations. Much because of this, the game developers have practised self-censorship or willingly avoided the theme.[55] Consequently, the Holocaust has been almost exclusively treated in neo-Nazi and white supremacist propaganda games.[56]

German single-player campaigns have been mostly absent in WWII tactical shooters, whereas the Germans have been a playable faction in multiplayer mode since the emergence of the genre in the late-1990s. Reciprocally, German campaign is a norm in other genres, such as real-time or grand strategy games, which offer more distanced perspectives into the simulated warfare. Perhaps the most evident consideration. Red Orchestra 2: Heroes of Stalingrad[57] and Iron Front: Liberation 1944[58] are rare exceptions in the tactical shooter genre. These games implement a set of artistic decisions that curb insinuations to Nazi sympathising or glorification. In this context, the differentiation between the Wehrmacht soldiers and the political soldiers of the Waffen-SS is essential.[59] The premise also has great importance, as it creates the atmosphere of the narrative. Both games are set in the later stages of WWII when the German war machine was stalling.[60]

CULTURAL AND LEGISLATIVE BARRIERS OF REPRESENTATION

One could assume that the inescapable presence of violence would be a source of controversy in games depicting one of the bloodiest conflicts in human history. However, this has been rarely the case. Nor have WWII-themed games been widely associated with the discourses of Baudrillardian nightmare, in which the players confuse reality with simulations of reality.[47] This type of debate is rehashed mainly for modern military shooters.[48] World War II remains a convenient theme for the medium of digital games to explore. The war is not recent or ongoing, and its metamorphic is well established. There is a clear division between ‘good’ and ‘evil’, albeit some aspects surrounding this mythology have been debunked. The six-year conflict falls into the category of just war, without the moral ambiguity of the Cold War era or modern asymmetrical warfare. Nevertheless, WWII games are not free of controversy. Historical games are retrospective representations of recorded real-world events, phenomena and conditions. They are also unavoidably infused with belief systems, prone to reflect the interpretations and biases of their designers and publishers. Thus, historical games should not be perceived as pure historiographic simulations, but as also their ideological approaches should be acknowledged.[49] Transgression of cultural sensitivities has been a typical cause of public contention. However, mere offence is not sufficient enough to generate controversy, as they are manufactured through social interaction.[50] Arguably these cases have most likely been about cultural discrepancy than about intentional ill will. Game developers relay myths, tropes and narratives familiar in their cultural sphere, which are subsequently perceived as exaggerated or false by audiences with different conception of history.

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WAR THUNDER: HISTORICITY THROUGH SIMULATION

War Thunder[41] focuses on aviation and armoured warfare in historical locations. The naval battles are at the moment in closed beta phase. The roots of War Thunder are deeply embedded in historical vehicle simulation games. The game creates a historical model that players experience by operating various kinds of tanks and aircrafts. This cultural background creates a horizon of expectations concerning perceived game realism in terms of modelling, simulation, visual verisimilitude, and historical accuracy. The bulk of vehicles in the game's technology tree are from the WWII period, but the vast arsenal also includes tanks and planes from previous and later eras.[52] The five bonefhill characters represent the two main alliances of WWII: the United States, the United Kingdom and the USSR of the Allied nations, and Germany and Japan of the Axis powers.

The most prevalent and popular gameplay component is the random multiplayer matches, which simulate well-known historical battles to a varying degree. These battles are isolated, as there is no continuation between them. War Thunder also features cooperative missions and dynamic campaigns. Regularly changing community events and tournaments also recreate historical battles. In addition to free-to-play content, there are two premium single-player campaigns, based on the key events of the Pacific theatre.[59] Gaijin is also developing World War Mode, which brings the battles to the global scale.

War Thunder remains true to the conventions of MMO. The main objective is to grind research points, in-game currency and experience points. These resources are received by damaging/destroying enemy vehicles, accomplishing given objectives and winning the matches. Grinding has two phases: first players grind for research points and in-game currency to unlock and purchase new vehicles. Then players need to grind research points for modifications. Researching and purchasing modifications is not mandatory, but these modules give significant performance boost, compared to stock vehicles. The accumulated experience point can be used to train crew members. The players can also buy special currency with real money, which can be used for premium accounts, premium vehicles or to speed up the research.

War Thunder has three game modes: arcade, realistic and simulator battles. These modes cater both casual and hard core gaming audience. The separating factor between the modes is the scalable fidelity of simulation. The damage, flight and physics models, which are based on archive data and real world parameters, become increasingly more complex and true-to-life as the modes progress. Thus, the arcade material is not only used as visual reference, but also in the underlying level of code. However, Gaijin has exercised artistic freedom, when it comes to certain titles. The fidelity of simulation has an impact on tactics and strategy, as well as gameplay tempo. Realistic and simulator modes for instance, remove visual aids, enforce historically accurate team compositions, and limit the number of maps and available vehicles per battle. Simulator mode also restricts the player perspective to first-person viewpoint.

Examples of the techniques and methods that WWII games employ in their attempts to create historical authenticity: rotoscoping (above) and remediation (below).
strategic component is central to the outcome of the war, it can be considered as a browser minigame for experienced players, which revolves around simplistic mechanics of deploying, reinforcing and
unbalanced battles, pitting smaller infantry units with minimal resources against larger motorised forces. Consequently, this aspect makes the experience of war seem more authentic.

lose all their major cities. The order of battle and the composition of troops depend on available resources the generals are willing to commit on specific battles. This prioritisation can result in highly
assault and defend. Every battle has an impact on the grand campaign. The war is won when either of the two victory conditions is met: 1) the faction captures or holds 15 capital cities; or 2) other factions
battles are balanced matches with equal resources. These matches are isolated clashes, and do not impact the course of war. The war mode is more dynamic and consists of three types of battles: skirmish,
enriches and balances the gameplay. The American-Soviet coalition would make Germany an overwhelming underdog in the campaign.

The claim is plausible to a certain extent, but it can be partly explained, for instance, with the scalability of simulation. In the arcade mode, certain Soviet vehicles appear overpowered contrasted to their
inaccurate allocation of modules. Gaijin has naturally denied implementation of such policies. Most of these claims are anecdotal, based on players subjective gameplay preferences and combat results, which often depend on employed tactics and strategies. However, some arguments are based on more concrete
evidence, such as datamining.

The predictable calls for nerfing also highlight the tension between authenticity and experience. Gaijin has been accused of instilling ideology to its game design. According to the critics within the gamer community, this ideology manifests itself in the so-called Russian bias, which refers to intentional boosting of the attributes of the USSR vehicles. The alleged motives vary from rewriting history to nationalistic favouritism to pleasing the Russian gamer demography. The perceived bias includes, for instance, map design choices, ammunition boosting, underpowered vehicles and selective use of modifiers. Gaijin has naturally denied implementation of such policies. Most of these claims are anecdotal, based on players subjective gameplay preferences and combat results, which often depend on employed tactics and strategies. However, some arguments are based on more concrete evidence, such as datamining.

The aim to provide historically accurate simulation conflicts with certain fundamental elements of multiplayer gaming, such as gameplay balance. War Thunder cannot escape these realities, which tend to favour experience/playability over authenticity/realism. Adjusting shell penetration and reload time for the sake of balance, or combining hostile factions under the same team to decrease matchmaking time, are examples of this tendency. Furthermore, the battle rating system used in the matchmaking is not always historically accurate, as it is based on the vehicle statistics, not on their production period.

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HEROES & GENERALS: AUTHENTICITY THROUGH EXPERIENCE

Heroes & Generals (H&G) is a combined arms game – integrating tanks, planes and infantry – which draws inspiration from the traditions of first-person shooter and strategy game genres. The game has
currently three factions: the United States, Germany and the USSR. The central tenet of the game is the creation of alternate histories. H&G is not a straightforward historical game, although it is being marketed as “the ultimate WWII game”. The setting is recognisable from the history, but H&G does not have a historical starting point, nor does it recreate specific events or faithfully follow the course of history. This inherent unpredictability of the simulated conflict creates a notion of realism as equifinality. The end state of the game is not predestined. The absence of historical alliances is another
example of divergence. All belligerents battle against each other for the domination of Europe. This creative choice, which enables simultaneous combat between all the factions on a single map,
enriches and balances the gameplay. The American-Soviet coalition would make Germany an overwhelming underdog in the campaign.

The gameplay consists of action and strategy components, depicted from the first-person viewpoint and top down perspective, respectively. There are two game modes: staged battles and war. The staged battles are balanced matches with equal resources. These matches are isolated clashes, and do not impact the course of war. The war mode is more dynamic and consists of these types of battles: skirmish, assault and defend. Every battle has an impact on the grand campaign. The war is won when either of the two victory conditions is met: 1) the faction captures or holds 15 capital cities; or 2) other factions lose all their major cities. The order of battle and the composition of troops depend on available resources the generals are willing to commit on specific battles. This prioritisation can result in highly
unbalanced matches, pitting smaller infantry units with minimal resources against larger motorised forces. Consequently, this aspect makes the experience of war seem more authentic. However, the strategic component is central to the outcome of the war, it can be considered as a browser minigame for experienced players, which revolves around simplistic mechanics of deploying, reinforcing and

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H&G has primary and secondary objectives, which revolve around grinding. The principal aim is to develop a character or additional characters, from privates to generals. Experience to do this is earned by dispatching enemy troops, destroying vehicles and capturing/defending control points. Players receive in-game currency \[^74\] by participating into the battles. The amount depends on the character rank and battle performance. The credits are used to purchase or upgrade weapons, vehicles, camouflage or new characters. There are six available careers, infantry, paratrooper, recon, tanker, fighter pilot and general. New players usually start with regular infantry, as academy trained or higher tier soldiers require considerable sums of credits or investment of real money. The strategy mode can be accessed when the characters reach the rank 12 (lieutenant) and receive command points. Characters become generals at rank 18. The second goal is to participate to the war campaign. The war mode is reserved for rank 3 or higher characters.

H&G adopts an arcade approach to modelling and simulation. Albeit the battle locations in the strategic map are actual cities and regions, the mission maps themselves are generic representations of military, industrial, urban and rural areas. The game tackle maps of larger cities, which means that the battles for metropolises and capitals are fought in smaller towns or rural areas. This is for the most part a technical impasse. The sheer size of the strategic map makes it challenging to recognisably model all 23 major cities or other battlegrounds on the theatre of war. The weapons and vehicles are more accurately modelled, according to their real world referents. The weapon physics are perhaps the most important aspect of simulation for a first-person shooter, as they are the main tools for player-to-player interaction. H&G incorporates elements of basic ballistics, such as bullet drop, muzzle velocity and bullet penetration, but these effects are not rigorously simulated.

The main motivators for grinding in H&G are soldier rank, weapon upgrades and ribbons. Players gain access to additional weapons, vehicles and items by completing ribbon levels. Traditions of first-person shooters become apparent through different contours of game design. The battles are conquest-type contests that are won by capturing and defending objectives. The linear maps follow the conventional lane structure, which concentrates combat on specific points in the map. This is reinforced with static objective locations, which must be captured in particular order. The weapon modifications and ribbon system also adheres to the contemporary gaming trends, popularised by modern military shooters. The modifications are upgrades that include internal and external parts, which can be used to alter the performance of weapons. Ribbons unlock combat badges, weapons and other items. Combat badges are passive modifiers that offer various perks, which can be used to specialise characters to different combat roles. They also offer versatility between close quarters combat and longer range engagements. As expected, conforming to audience expectations inevitably interferes with historical accuracy and authenticity. For instance, in high ranking matches, majority of the infantry has scoped firearms instead of general issue weapons. This has significant impact on the nature of combat.

CONCLUSIONS: TWO APPROACHES

Historical games incorporate several interdependent and overlapping constituents that influence their sense of historicity. The base element is the genre, which largely determines the formal elements of realism, such as visual verisimilitude or fidelity of simulation, and also introduces a set of cultural conventions, which in turn are directly linked to audience expectations. Sub-genres include their own distinctive traditions and gameplay styles, varying from game to game. War Thunder depicts World War II as modern, technology-oriented warfare. It is an armed contest of engineering. However, history is just a backdrop in the multiplayer mode, utilised to create a setting for incessant vehicular combat. World War II is never-ending. Random battles are inconsequential in the grand scheme of things. In War Thunder, the main goal is to make money, purchase upgrades, and unlock new vehicles and weapons. The game provides a realistic simulation of combat, with realistic vehicle and weapon physics. The game also incorporates elements of history, such as German, Italian and Japanese vehicles and weapons. War Thunder aims to provide an entertaining arcade shooter, infused with strategic elements, but lacks the historical accuracy of a historical simulation game.

H&G, in turn, depicts World War II through the perspectives of frontline infantry. Other military branches (air force and naval aviation) have more supportive roles. The game has a postmodern approach to history, as it does not imitate specific historical scenarios or relay metanarratives, but creates a plausible experience in terms of contemporary gaming conventions of large scale warfare. The simulation of war is dynamic with varying outcomes. Instead of rigid historical accuracy, H&G aims to provide an entertaining arcade shooter, infused with strategic elements. This framework incorporates historical details, such as weapons, vehicles and belligerent nations, but lacks others, such as political conditions or specific events that were decisive for the war. The game does not aim to construct indexical relations to real world data. H&G harnesses the potential of the MMO genre by offering a shared experience that allows simultaneous participation of thousands of players in a persistent game world. This is realised in a meaningful way. In addition to socialising, players can influence the outcome of the war by commanding assault squads, instead of being mere pawns on the
battleground. One of the most interesting aspects of WWII & the shared storytelling experience, which emerges from social interaction. It is quite rare approach in WWII-themed games. Their objective is not to convey a comprehensive account of the war, but to use WWII as a setting for entertainment. In this context, the concept of entertainment does not include elements of fun, but also moments of frustration and tediousness, as exemplified by grinding.

The author is a PhD student at the University of Jyväskylä. He is finishing his dissertation on gaming-related controversies and moral panics.

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3. Bullethead Interactive and Divine Arts have crowdfunded their upcoming WW11 shooter projects, Battalion 1944 and Days of War, respectively. These games will be one of the first WW11 games to feature ground combat. New West Interactive developed Day of Infamy (2016), a game based on Infamy (2014) modification in cooperation with the modding community. [Takaisin]
4. Airgame (Franz Schnei (1940) was the first historical wargame situated to WW11. The cover's blurb reads: "Now you change War World II in this realistic invasion game." [Takaisin]
5. Taktische: Computer Game of Armed Combat on the Eastern Front (Clawfish, 1997), North Atlantic Convoy Reader (Avlon Hill 1980). Computer Antwerp (SBI 1989) and Eastern Front 1941 (Avalon Hill, 1996) are two other historical computer games with WW11 setting. 's work was quite an interesting exhibit, as it was a hybrid of computer and board wargame. The computer handled the calculations and the player moved the counters on the game board. [Takaisin]
6. paradise distanced V-Game (1944), in which the objective was to shoot V1 rockets into German cities and on high ranking Nazi officials (Ancient Triade Gazette, 28.8.2007). [Takaisin]
7. O'Day (Avlon Hill 1961) was the first historical wargame situated to WW11. The cover's blurb reads: "New you change War World II in this realistic invasion game." [Takaisin]
8. Taktische: Computer Game of Armed Combat on the Eastern Front (Clawfish, 1997), North Atlantic Convoy Reader (Avlon Hill 1980). Computer Antwerp (SBI 1989) and Eastern Front 1941 (Avalon Hill, 1996) are two other historical computer games with WW11 setting. 's work was quite an interesting exhibit, as it was a hybrid of computer and board wargame. The computer handled the calculations and the player moved the counters on the game board. [Takaisin]
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11. Grand strategy games are either turn-based or real-time, derived from top-down or isometric perspectives. The games are either turn-based or real-time, derived from top-down or isometric perspectives. The players command smaller military units, base building and accumulation of resources are...
Battle rating is a value that is used to determine the matchmaking and balance the game. The better and more effective the vehicle is, the higher the battle rating.

Wehrmacht can invade the Great Britain or thwart the collapse of the Eastern Front. The USSR can keep advancing towards west after the fall of Berlin. The United States can fail in its landing to Normandy and be forced to defend London from the impending invasion.

The ongoing, real-time war on a persistent server is not a novel innovation for the FPS MMOs. The concept was already introduced in the early-2000s by World War II Online. However, this feature has been seldomly utilised since.

H&G has three currencies: credits, warfunds and gold. Credits are the basic in-game currency. Warfunds are used to purchase, deploy and supply assault teams. Gold is bought through microtransactions. Gold can be used to buy, for instance, veteran membership, camouflages and boost ribbon progression. The players earn free gold by completing the first match of the day.

In this context, the term "pseudorealism" refers to both the synthesis of dramatic/playful and authentic/realistic elements to meet the audience expectations, as well to the exaggerated/imprecise simulation. Exaggerated bullet drop of submachine guns is an example of this tendency. It gives a hint of realism to operating a weapon, but the actual simulation is notably inaccurate.

The term "tactical realism" refers to gaming, which imitates real military organisations from chain of command to tactics.