Documentary Games: Putting the Player in the Path of History

By Tracy Fullerton

The referential power of games – both visually and in terms of underlying simulation – has grown dramatically in recent years. Where once games played primarily in the realm of abstract or exaggerated scenarios, we are now beginning to see game scenarios that attempt to represent and/or re-create historical events and situations. The modeling of real-world systems and interactions in games is nothing new, of course – simulation is at the heart of most game systems – but the specificity of these particular models is what makes them interesting. No longer are we looking at a generic battlefield filled with anonymous soldier units, or even a block of properties "representing" the streets of Atlantic City in only the loosest manner. These new games – if we can still call them games – simulate historical events as tragic and momentous as the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center, and as infamous and topical as the tragedy at the Waco complex of the Branch Davidians, the 1999 Columbine High School shootings in Littleton, Colorado, and John Kerry's Silver Star mission in Vietnam.

Figure 1: Documentary Games?

While there is a great interest these days in games that address "serious" subject matter, and also in games that take on topics of social significance, there is no currently acknowledged genre of games addressing specific historical subjects, no genre of game play that approximates the concept of documentary in film and video. But several of the designers of the games I examine have made reference to such an emerging genre, by calling their products "docu-games" or accentuating their "historical accuracy" in the product literature. These claims attempt to align the play experiences of these games with non-fiction media, a form that carries with it a set of heavily coded cultural expectations and values. It is because of this aspirational pre-naming of such a genre that it becomes an interesting question to try and understand how the documentary form in film and video might intersect with these game experiences, now and in the future.

"Documentary" itself is not a simple concept to define. Since the very moment a camera was first turned on a scene from life – feeding a baby, workers leaving a factory,

a train arriving at a station – questions of objectivity, selection, omission, intent, narrative and the nature of reality have stalked this "non-fiction" genre of filmmaking like a paparazzi. Many of these issues have roots going back to the impulse towards realism in other arts. The persuasiveness of film as a medium, however, and its (seeming) ontological connection to its subject, has tended to frame these questions as a discourse surrounding problems of audio/visual representation: the relationship of the filmed image to the subject, the "real," to science, to history, etc.

As a basis for comparison with the games I examine, four fundamental tendencies of the documentary form as proposed by Michael Renov in Theorizing Documentary, what he calls "rhetorical/aesthetic functions attributable to documentary practice" prove useful. These are: 1) to record, reveal or preserve; 2) to persuade or promote; 3) to analyze or interrogate; and 4) to express (Renov 21-25). The first tendency is the one generally most associated with the documentary genre – i.e., the "replication of the historical real." It is, on the one hand, the most problematic of these four aesthetic functions when applied to the notion of games, and, on the other hand, the stated goal toward which the games I am interested in actively strive.

Figure 2: A range of documentary content and styles.

Games obviously cannot lay claim to the type of ontological relationship with their subjects in the manner of photography or film. But, as many writers have pointed out, Renov included, this relationship is not as sacrosanct as it might first seem. The issues of selection, mediation, and intervention I have already alluded to assure that no matter how sincere our efforts, "the indexical character of the photograph can guarantee nothing" (Renov, 27) In his discussion of this persuasive, yet untenable relationship between the "real" and the photograph, Renov quotes art historian John Tagg: "That a photograph can come to stand as evidence, for example, rests not on a natural existential fact, but on a social, semiotic process" (28). This idea that the documentary nature of a photograph or filmed image is not inherent to these media themselves, but is actually a socially negotiated sense of the image's "believability," a phenomenological artifact of

our understanding of how images are made, relates directly to the ability of simulations to stand as similar evidence.

An example of how this social negotiation of what constitutes "evidence" might impact the emergence of a documentary genre of games can be seen in the evolving status of computer simulations and animations in courtroom settings over the past 15 years. These detailed models, created by forensic experts, have gone from being highly suspect and potentially prejudicial, to being considered probative illustration of actual events. Jason Fries, COO of Precision Simulations, a Bay Area company that makes over 100 forensic animations every year and has a 100% courtroom admissibility record for those simulations, says that in the early 90s, around the time that the first simulations were being submitted as evidence, there were stringent rules that objects depicted had to be very generic – a car could not have any specific details as to make or model, a person must be depicted as just a biped – no distinguishing characteristics. This was to make sure that it was clear to the jury that their focus should be on the underlying physics and behavioral models rather than on the visual representations. According to Fries, one of the earliest trials to involve the use of computer simulations was the 1992 trial of pornographer Jim Mitchell, convicted of killing his brother.

Today, however, as both judges and juries become more familiar with these simulations, the rules have changed. If foundational evidence exists for more specific details, these are allowable within the simulation. So, a collision between a yellow Corvette and a pick-up truck, for example, may now be depicted using models of these particular cars, rather than generic, car-shaped blocks. Also, people may be depicted with distinguishing characteristics including gender, age, race and even specific colors or styles of clothes if these facts can be substantiated by other evidence. According to Fries,

the representational quality of these evidentiary simulations now approaches "Toy Story" level animation.

Are these near photorealistic simulations probative or prejudicial at this point? Both, Fries posits, and that is why they are so powerful. Because they can communicate so clearly to the jury what the forensic expert *believes to have happened* based on their analysis of the foundational evidence. This brings us back to the idea of this socially negotiated sense of an image's – or in this case simulation's – "believability." The fact is, that whether it is warranted or not, as both judges and juries have become more accustomed to the concept of computer simulations, rules of evidence and admissibility regarding simulations have changed. A perceptual shift is taking place, the ripple effect of which is being seen in this example of courtroom evidence rules. This shift is illustrative of how we may someday embrace the possibility of simulations which not only visually model, but structurally (in the courtroom cases, behaviorally) model aspects of history so that they may constitute "evidence" by that same "social, semiotic process" that gives us the concept of the documentary image.

An example of this potentially emergent genre is *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun* (2003) for the Playstation 2. It seems useful to begin with an example from within the mainstream game industry, since most of the other games I will consider here exist, to greater or lesser extent, outside of that industry, and the question of whether some of them should even be considered games at all must be raised. In this game, the player is a witness to history. The following scenario places the player in the midst of the attack on Pearl Harbor; it is dramatic, exciting and it undeniably bears a closer resemblance to Jerry Bruckheimer's *Pearl Harbor* than anything we would call a documentary.

Figure 3: Medal of Honor: Rising Sun

As the game beings, you (the player) lay half-asleep in your bunk; romantic big band music plays drearily over a scratchy radio speaker. Suddenly, something hits the ship, nearly knocking you from your bunk. Klaxons sound an alert and an officer shouts for everyone to get moving – this is not a drill. As you stumble to your feet, you see other sailors around you, tumbling out of bed, grabbing pants or boots, dressing as fast as possible. You know exactly where you are, and when – mostly from the marketing promises of the game – but soon that information is replaced by the details of this immersive experience. You are on the USS California, part of the doomed U.S. fleet stationed at Pearl Harbor on the morning of December 7, 1941. It's now 8:03 AM and the Japanese attack has begun in force. The minutiae of Navy life circa 1940 surrounds

you. Though not photorealistic, it is beautifully rich and specific: snapshots of the player and his buddies tacked to a wall, letters and papers spilling onto the floor next to a dead sailor, killed in the first explosion. Everywhere you turn, there are signs of life interrupted and the sounds of battle coming from above deck.

Cued by onscreen hints, you move as quickly as possible through the ship, stopping to help put out fires or help other sailors as you go, until you reach the deck of the California and join the fight. This moment, where you emerge on deck into the battle proper, is elongated and dramatized in an unusual (for games) use of slow-motion. Control is stripped away from you for this moment – simulating a paralyzing fear as you leave the relative safety of the ships interior. Another sailor is shot out of a machine gun turret and you can either use the rifle you were handed when you came on deck, or climb inside the turret and take over. Either way, wave after wave of Japanese aircraft attack. The sky is so full of planes that it is a simple matter to hit one, but there is always another, another and another.

At a certain point an explosion on the California knocks the player overboard and the player winds up rejoining the fight from the turret of small a PT boat. As the battle intensifies, the USS Arizona is hit and lost. "Oh, my God!" The non-player characters react to this event – an historical fact that locates us in time and space once again with this specific reference to an actual event. "This can't be happening," a non-player character moans. The Arizona is obscured by waves of billowing black smoke and there is a moment of quiet as the boat moves through the smoke – there are no targets, and the magnitude of what has just happened is allowed to sink in. "God help them," another characters comments.

The gun boat soon moves out of the smoke and back into battle, as the officer onboard the gunboat commands us to "get back in the game." After a successful defense of the USS Nevada, the level ends and the characters excitedly rejoice at this small victory amidst larger defeat. The officer reprimands them sternly, saying, "no one will ever know what it [this day] was like – except the ones that made it. Just make sure you don't forget the ones that didn't." The clear message being communicated is that we too are now "virtual veterans," having "made it" through the simulated day.

In this first level of *Medal of Honor*, there is a conflux of history, nostalgia, drama and interactivity. The tone is dramatic, the music and imagery evoke a heroic nostalgia regarding the events, and a sense of honor, even pride in this particular U.S. defeat. By putting the player in the position of an ordinary sailor, without power to make significant change to the outcome of the event, the game allows us to experience this moment from the past "first hand"—to take action but not to expect any critical difference in effect. Although we are dropped into this level without context, subsequent levels of the game use wartime footage as dramatic set up, which give the player an historical, if romanticized, perspective of the importance of their in-game actions. The levels themselves have been designed with the help of veterans and military historians with the goal of putting the player into wartime moments that are as "authentic" as possible. According to executive producer Rick Giolito, all of the objects such as weapons, vehicles, environments, battlefields, etc. have been researched extensively by the designers—though he stresses that the primary aim of the game is to provide entertainment, not to create a realistic simulation (Giolito).

Part of the entertainment that *Medal of Honor* players expect, however, relates to historical accuracy. In the PC version of the game, *Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault*

(2004), the game incorporates "pop up facts" that allow players to hover over objects in the environment to find out interesting historical facts. Also, the game makes a point of informing players when it is moving away from the historical timeline. The inspiration for the game, says Giolito, is the oral histories of people who were there. A great deal of the game's content is based on their recollections. "It's an homage to that generation," he says. And for those who were there, the persuasiveness of the simulation can be quite powerful. Stephen Dinehart, an Interactive Media student at USC, posted a personal note on the division web log about the experience of playing this level of *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun* with this 83 year-old grandfather, a veteran of WWII in the Pacific. "He thought a couple of times that the in-game graphics were actual footage. He would call off the facts and numbers as we played," Dinehart writes. "It gave me this incredible sense of retouching history in a way I have never felt before" (Dinehart).

The scenario described above, with its epic, Hollywood approach to simulating the attack on Pearl Harbor from one sailor's perspective is clearly more aligned with the tradition of historical narrative than that of documentary. The game uses its significant simulative powers to give players the persuasive, immersive, personal experience of being thrown into the events of December 7, 1941, and while it does make claims to historical "accuracy" in terms of the effect of simulated weaponry and battlefields in its literature (Electronic Arts *Medal of Honor* website), it does not itself make any claim to the possibility of documentary games. *Medal of Honor* is useful, however, as a touchstone; not only for the state of the art in simulative re-creation of specific historical events in games, but also as proof of an underlying desire on the part of mainstream players to become immersed in re-created historical scenarios (though, as we will see,

there are limits to that desire that create ethical and aesthetic issues for the designers of more realistic games).

Also, while *Medal of Honor* may be one of the most successful "historically accurate" game series, it is by no means atypical. On the contrary, the technological cycles that have driven the game industry to date all seem to point toward a point of convergence at which photorealistic visuals and painstakingly accurate simulations will meet. If one were to draw a matrix mapping the progress of games along a spectrum of abstract to photo realistic visual imagery on one axis, and generic simulation to specific scenario model on the other, one might see a progression that looked something like Figure 4, below. *Medal of Honor*, while it models a very specific moment in time, does so from the perspective of a generic sailor – a character whose actions will make no significant difference to the larger historical events. The generality of the character's experience allows the player to easily and safely imagine him or herself in this role, to take actions without questioning their historical value or accuracy. We are "in the moment," but we do not define the moment.

Specific ←— Scenario Modeled —→ Generic

Realistic

Representational Style

JFK: Reloaded
Kuma Games

Medal of Honor

Waco Resurrection

Super Columbine Massacre RPG

Civilization
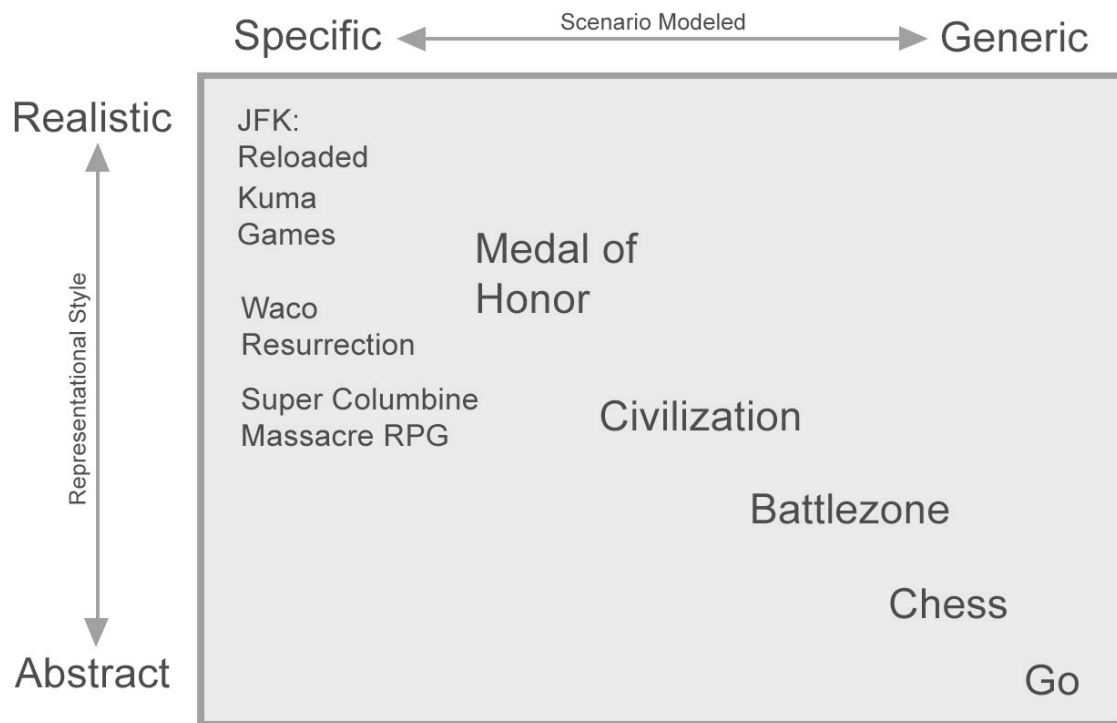
Battlezone

Chess

Go

Abstract

Figure 4: Game matrix

An example in a similar vein is the work of Kuma Reality Games. This company -- whose games are distributed mainly through a website, rather than the larger retail channels at which one would find *Medal of Honor*—offers "accurate re-creations of real war events weeks after they occur" (Kuma Games website). Using reference material such as wire sources, video footage and satellite images, Kuma has arrived at the game equivalent of the nightly news. In fact, when a player opens their game viewer (from which they can choose a specific scenario), they are confronted with a graphic style mimicking that of a news channel. A "text crawl" along the bottom of the screen announces new missions, which are all based on recent headlines.

Kuma CEO Keith Halper compares his company's games to an interactive version of the 1970's documentary series *The World at War*. "We step you through current events, military events that are appropriate our tools," he says. "We try to mirror the real

news, so if there is a story that is big in the news, we will try to come out that same week

with a mission on that topic" (Halper). For example, Missions 1 and 2, *Uday and*

Qusay's Last Stand (2004)*,* feature a re-creation of the assault in which Saddam

Hussein's sons were killed. According to Sarah Anderson, VP of Marketing at Kuma,

this episode in the war was one "where the tactics and end result [i.e. killing the Hussein

brother vs. taking them alive] were questioned and we feel our re-creations help people

understand why it likely went down the way it did" (Anderson).

In most of the Kuma scenarios, as with *Medal of Honor*, you play a generic

soldier, placed into the middle of a specific moment. Your actions, while they may affect

that scenario, are not judged against any particular individual's historic actions within the

moment that is being modeled. One particular Kuma mission stands out in contrast to

this, *John Kerry's Silver Star Mission* (2004), set in Vietnam on February 28, 1969.

During the 2004 presidential campaign, when much was being made of this mission in

the traditional news services, Kuma released a game re-creation of the event. In the re-

creation, the player maneuvers a Swift Boat up the Dong Kung River, in the role of then

Lieutenant (j.g.) John Kerry. At a certain point, the player is engaged by the enemy and

must respond. How to respond to the attack is entirely up to the player, but attached to

every Kuma mission is a linear video discussing the real-world events on which it is

based. In the Kerry mission video, the mission objectives are given context, and the

specific strategy that was used by Kerry in this scenario is explained. If players watch

this video, or have a general understanding of the event, they may try to understand

history here by re-enacting it. Or, they may deviate from history and find their own

solution.

Figure 5: Kuma Reality Games - John Kerry Silver Star Mission

By comparing his company's games to well-known documentary series like *The World at War*, Halper is claiming a sense of cultural recognition for his games that is greater than that accorded to mainstream games. By aligning his re-created scenarios with the concept of documentary, he validates his work as something greater than game play, on the one hand, but more powerful than documentary on the other: "We are able to create a sense of situational awareness," he says, "that is very difficult to get in other types of media." Halper feels that with the tools available to game developers today, "we can tell sophisticated stories about real and very important events. War was a natural choice; and we felt we could really add something to the discussion" (Halper).

The next example is quite controversial, to say the least, and it is worth noting that it, like the Kuma games described above, is not available through traditional retail channels. Available as a download from the developer's website until August 2005, the game is currently unavailable. At the original download site is now a note:

"Documentary history was made here 22nd November 2004. Long live the JFK legacy."

(Traffic website) *JFK: Reloaded* (2004) allows the player to re-enact the assassination of

John F. Kennedy. The opening screen of the game succinctly locates us with a few lines

of text: "Dallas, Texas. 12:30 pm, November 22, 1963. The Texas School Book

Depository, sixth floor. The weather is fine. You have a rifle." The card fades away,

replaced by a view from the sixth floor window just as the presidential motorcade pulls

into sight. Because we are so familiar with this particular moment in history, we know

exactly what we are supposed to do without further encouragement.

Figure 6: JFK Reloaded - view from the sixth floor window.

The assassination of JFK is not an easy task, however, and the fact is that in all

probability even an expert game player will not successfully kill the president the first

time through the simulation. Certainly, they will not make the exact series of shots,

hitting the correct combination of targets. Successful or not, after the motorcade has

passed, the simulation takes you to a review screen to see how you match up against the

actual forensic evidence. Your score is based on how closely your actions approximated

that evidence. For example, you can score 0 – 200 points depending on whether or not

you are able to hit the President, where you hit him, and whether he is alive or dead at the

end of the scene. Your score is also dependent on the number and timing of shots (if you

shoot too many times, too early or too late, points will be deducted), the state (injured or

uninjured) of the First Lady, Texas Governor John Connally and the Governor's wife. If

after seeing your score, you feel you can do better, you can re-start the scenario and try

again. Or, you can use the multiple camera views to re-play your assassination attempt

over and over, watching from Abraham Zapruder's location, from the grassy knoll, the

presidential limo, or a number of other key locations. Or, if you feel you've done fairly

well, you can submit your score to a contest – the player who comes closest to re-creating

the actual events, their exact timing and results will win up to $100,000 from the

developer for their efforts[1] (Traffic website).

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[1] This competition ran through February 22, 2005. The highest scoring entry was 782 points out a possible
1000. The site was taken down in August of 2005 and the game is no longer available for download.

Figure 7: JFK Reloaded - scoring is based on ballistics info.

Figure 8: JFK Reloaded - instant replay.
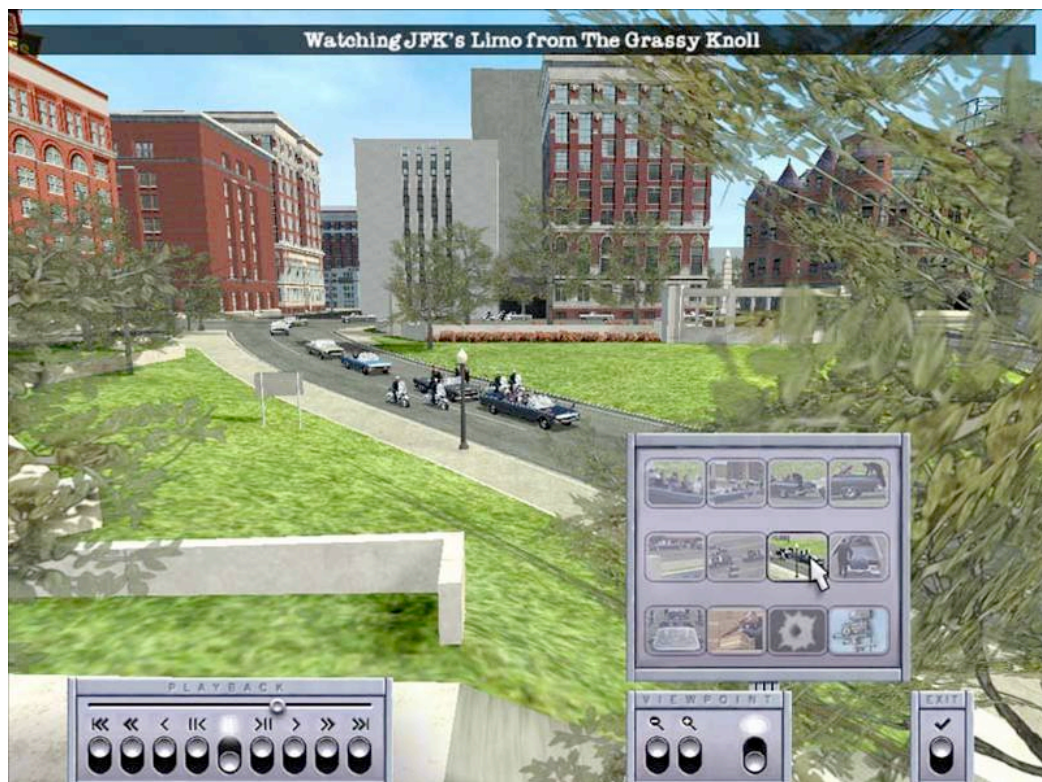
Figure 9: JFK Reloaded - view from the grassy knoll.

Figure 10: JFK Reloaded - a disturbing view of a historical moment.

This game has been vocally condemned by a number of prominent people –

including Senators Edward Kennedy and Joseph Lieberman. Quite honestly, everyone to

whom I myself have described this game has reacted negatively to the concept. But what

is it about this particular scenario that provokes such strong feelings when we are talking

about an event that has been covered, from every possible angle, by every other form of

media? Do we condemn Oliver Stone's *JFK*? The History Channel's *The Men Who*

Killed Kennedy? Or any of the innumerable books, websites, reports, documentaries and

other forms of discourse surrounding this event? One has to wonder whether these

reactions are actually in response to the facts of the simulation itself, or whether the

outcry is in response to the fact that this simulation is constructed as a *game* re-creation

of a very specific and traumatic event.

The very notion of a "game" about the assassination of John F. Kennedy might seem at first to show a lack of respect towards the subject matter. But, as those studying serious games, and those who have read Huizinga know, play is at the heart of the most serious pursuits of culture – religion, law, war, debate, dramaturgy (Huizinga 5). And the designers of JFK have a serious intent. According to them, their primary purpose in creating the game was to finally put to rest the conspiracy theories that continue to surround the assassination. Kirk Ewing, Managing Director of the development company Traffic says "we've created the game with the belief that Oswald was the only person that fired the shots on that day, although this recreation proves how immensely difficult his task was" (Traffic Press Release). The game took a ten-person team seven months to research and six months to program their recreation of the events as specified in the Warren Commission report. Traffic calls their game a "unique insight into the assassination" and a way "to take people back in time and put them at the scene in Dealey Plaza to witness it for themselves" (Feldman).

As a player, however, my relationship to the event is much more complicated than just a trip back in time. I realize immediately that I must "get it right" to achieve a high score. Getting it "right" means acting on not an objective scientific knowledge of the event, or even a detailed knowledge of the findings of the Warren Commission. What it really means is negotiating my own personal memory of something I have seen hundreds of times in the past: the home movie footage shot by Abraham Zapruder. I know *when* to shoot, and *what* I should hit with each shot, primarily because I have seen the event happen so many times in clips from this footage. Unlike the *Medal of Honor* scenario, I am not only cast as a primary participant in this historical moment, with the power to make it happen "correctly" or not, but I also have a very specific set of cultural and visual

"cues" which direct my actions. As I negotiate this knowledge within the scenario, I am struck by two things: first, how deeply disturbing it is to play this particular role, and second, how convinced I've become after fifteen or twenty attempts that Lee Harvey Oswald could *not* have made those shots – at least not if this simulation is in any way accurate. In fact, it is so difficult a challenge that in all of the alternate endings of the event conceived by my play of the game, only once was the president seriously injured. Every other time, the motorcade made it out of range before history could be fulfilled.

In his article "Simulation vs. Narrative: An Introduction to Ludology," Gonzalo Frasca puts forth the concept that games, as simulations, use an "alternative semiotical structure," one that offers "distinct rhetorical possibilities" and may "provide authors with essentially different tools for conveying their opinions." He emphasizes the idea that "Simulation does not simply retain the—generally audiovisual—characteristics of the object but it also includes a model of its behaviors." As he points out, the output of simulations may actually produce the same set of representational signs, (in my example, a simulated audiovisual sequence quite similar to the Zapruder film), but he asserts -- and this is clear to anyone who has played a game and then watched another person play the same game—that "simulation cannot be understood just through its output" (Frasca 223-224). Which begs the question: what can we understand about these historical re-creations through their simulation? Can we understand the reasons behind an assassination? The emotions of the assassin? The nuances of the political context? Or only its basic forensic data?

More recently, another game that might be considered a part of the documentary genre has proved even more controversial. That is *Super Columbine Massacre RPG*

(2005), a game recreating the 1999 Columbine High School shootings in Littleton, Colorado. Danny Ledonne, creator of *Super Columbine Massacre RPG*, spent six months designing the game – his first – which allows players to take on the role of killers Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold on the day of Columbine shootings. The game was released at his website for download on April 20, 2005, the sixth anniversary of the shootings. (Ledonne) Ledonne, a documentary filmmaker by training, used videos, newspaper articles and official documents that had been released to recreate the events of shootings in detail within the game. But this attention to documenting the details of the tragedy is rarely mentioned in general press coverage of the game. "I think there are elements of the game that are completely lost to most people," says Ledonne. "This is in part because the subject matter doesn't flag down our most intellectual sensibilities and also because, of course, video games don't usually contain philosophers, poetry, or deeper meditations on society … In the end, SCMRPG is something of chimera that becomes whatever the player wants it to be: a horrible exploitation, a thorough research project, a crappy little 16-bit game, or a point of fixation for someone who wants to kill people." (Crecente)

Super Columbine Massacre RPG was pulled from the line-up of finalists in the 2007 Slamdance Guerilla Gamemaker Contest because of its controversial subject matter, though in the festival's 13 year history, no film finalist, no matter how controversial, has ever been pulled from the screenings. In protest of this decision, which seems to promote the notion that games can or should not address provocative real world subject matter, seven of the 14 remaining finalists and one sponsor (this author's academic institution) also withdrew from the Contest (Fullerton). In a statement about his decision, game designer Jonathan Blow recognizes that the game "lacks compassion ...but despite this,

the game does have redeeming value. It does provoke important thoughts, and it does push the boundaries of what games are about" (Blow). Unlike the examples of *Medal of Honor* and *Kuma Games*, however, Super Columbine explores a highly-specific scenario in the relatively abstract style of a 1990's Nintendo game. Low-res, pixilated avatars and environments clash with the photographic inserts and documentary content to create an artistic expression of the killings. Echoing Frasca, Wired's Clive Thompson writes that *Super Columbine* "uses the language of games as a way to think about the massacre. Ledonne, like all creators of "serious games," uses gameplay as a rhetorical technique." (Thompson) Although the game was pulled from the Slamdance festival, in an interesting move, the film documentary jury tried to award it a "Special Jury Prize" for "Best Documentary," but was halted by the festival director Peter Baxtor. (Fleming) This type of response, by a artistic venue, highlights the potential complexities surrounding the genre of documentary play, as even an "alternative" venue such a Slamdance considers a documentary game inappropriate for public screening.
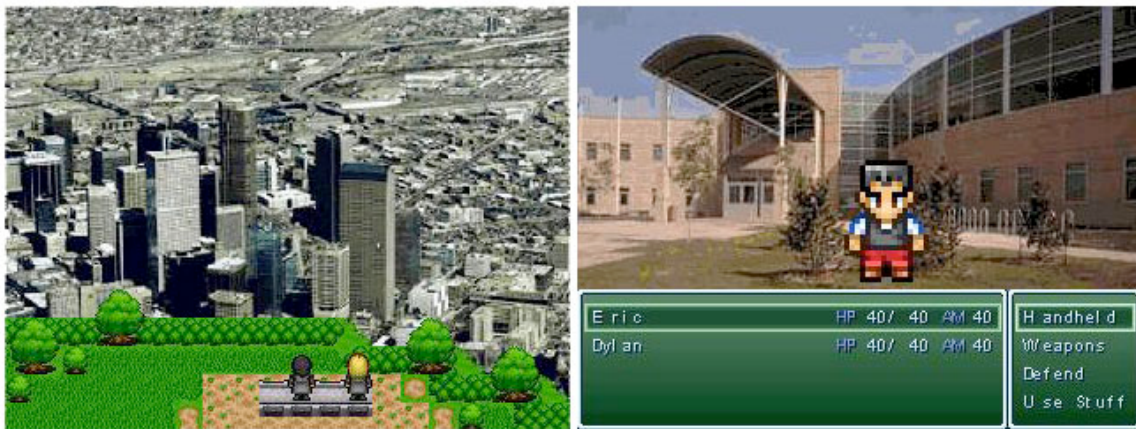
Figure 11: Super Columbine Massacre RPG.

Another example of this emerging genre offers an entirely different approach, one that has more in common with experimental or subjective documentary practice than the

strict re-constructive simulation approach of *JFK: Reloaded* or the dramatic, almost

propagandistic approach of *Medal of Honor*. This is the game *Waco Resurrection*

(2003), and it is not so much a re-creation of a historic moment as an interpretation of

such an event -- an experiential examination of the conflicting forces surrounding it. In

this game, players don a plastic David Koresh mask, and enter a 3D re-creation of the

Waco compound of the Branch Davidians. Once inside the compound, players must

defend themselves against rival Koresh (other players) and government agents, while

maintaining the loyalty of their followers. The soundtrack of the game, which plays

eerily in the earphones of the mask, is a mix of official-sounding chatter on government

radios and a hauntingly surreal song recorded by Koresh himself.

Figure 12: Waco Resurrection.

This game, it is interesting to note, is even farther removed from traditional

distribution channels than even Kuma games or *JFK: Reloaded*. It is designed as an art

installation, and requires a custom hardware environment that includes multiplayer

support and the hard-plastic David Koresh masks with embedded voice recognition

technology so that players can speak the words that cause the simulation to begin: "I am

David Koresh." There is no historical timeline to follow in this game, as there was in the

Kerry mission or *JFK: Reloaded*. Rather, the game takes place in an imagined moment

that includes within in it the various ideologies at play in the historical moment it

references. As the developer, C-level, states on their site, "*Waco Resurrection* re-

examines the clash of worldviews inherent in the 1993 conflict by asking players to

assume the role of a resurrected "cult" leader in order to do divine battle against a

crusading government" (C-level website).

Peter Brinson, one of the game's developers contends, "*Waco Resurrection* does

not attempt to accurately depict the events. It is meant to force the player to confront

their personal take on the incident." Brinson goes on to explain his take on the difference

between film documentary and the potential genre of game documentary:

> In a film documentary – the filmmaker's portrayal and delivery of the events is at
>
> the foreground of the experience … Often a viewer will agree with the film's
>
> subjective points as well as take the portrayal of events as historical fact. Perhaps
>
> the viewer will completely disagree or form a stance somewhere in between. This
>
> negotiation of the content is a result, an after effect of the film documentary's
>
> narrative. In a documentary game, the player's reaction to the content -- both
>
> within the game and in mind -- IS the narrative. It is part of the real-time, present
>
> tense experience of the game's portrayal, rather than a personal addendum to the
>
> grand narrative. The player's perspectives aren't formed in relation or objection
>
> to the game creator's construct. The player's agency is the story. How do I feel

about taking the role of David Koresh in a game? And importantly, how will I

play him? Will I strive for historical accuracy or deviate from what happened?

Do I know exactly what happened? Does anyone? The game's simulation of

events acts as a set of supportive story threads to the player's grand narrative.

(Brinson)

Brinson's statement brings up several important issues, including one which has

proven to be a critical disconnect between games and traditional forms of narrative: that

of uncertainty. Later in the discussion of the rhetoric of simulations quoted above, Frasca

dismisses the importance of narrative to game scenarios, and by association, this includes

historical narratives: "Games always carry a certain degree of indeterminacy that

prevents players from knowing the final outcome beforehand" (Frasca 227).

This issue of indeterminacy, or uncertainty, would then seem to be a key formal

element of games that fights against the ability to create of historically specific game

scenarios. That conclusion assumes, however, that the purpose of a documentary genre

of game would be to dramatize a single historic narrative, an accepted truth, rather than to

allow players to explore and engage with a specific moment in time. The limits of the

documentary genre – in both film and games – are not this clear. As we saw in the *Medal*

of Honor, for example, the player's role was made generic so that their actions, while

having local effects, did not globally affect the outcome of history. In the *JFK: Reloaded*

scenario, the opposite approach was taken. The player's goal is to re-enact history

exactly, and only by doing so can they "win" the game. *Waco*, by exploring the ideology

surrounding an event rather than a specific timeline of events, deals with this issue by

avoiding it altogether.[1]

A final example is *911 Survivor* (2003), a mod for *Unreal 2003* which puts the player into the towers of the World Trade Center during the September 11 terrorist attack. This game mod, which is not commercially distributed, has garnered word of mouth through conference presentations by the developers and a design document and series of screenshots on their website (Kinematic.org). Extremely limited release notwithstanding, the game has nevertheless been as highly criticized in online forums as *JFK: Reloaded*. One of the game's developers, Jeff Cole, states that "the game itself is not really a game at all [… it] keeps not score or actual track of time. It is merely a moment caught in time" (Cole). Cole describes his team as "artists" using the medium they are most familiar with to "reconstruct the event." He knows that his game is controversial, and in his response touches on an important reason for this. Games, he says, echoing the earlier words of Kuma's Keith Halper, "can often provide you with a perspective that you might not otherwise have been able to experience or imagine," but, adds insightfully, they also may fail to "capture any real sense of the emotional distress brought on by the event" (Cole). This is an important point; one which is related to this pervasive notion, seen also in the cases of *JFK: Reloaded* and *Super Columbine Massacre RPG*, that games as a medium are incapable of communicating serious emotions or ideas.

Figure 12: 911 Survivor.

In all of these games, it is clear that there is a basic urge, similar to the first

fundamental tendency of documentaries proposed by Michael Renov, to re-create an

"historical real." In some cases, such as *JFK: Reloaded, Super Columbine* or Kuma

Games, there is also a sense that these games are either analyzing or interrogating that

history -- and perhaps even attempting to persuade or promote based on that analysis.

Waco, with its experimental, subjective approach, also explores the potential for

expressive documentary within a game format. And, while the fact that these games

simply call themselves documentaries and deal in some way with the same fundamental

tendencies of documentary does not prove anything in itself, the fact is that the form of

documentary is potentially quite flexible. In discussion of the poetics of the documentary

from, Renov makes a call for expanding the boundaries of what we recognize as

documentary, pointing out, "that a work undertaking some manner of historical

documentation renders that representation in a challenging or innovative manner should

in no way disqualify it as nonfiction, because the question of expressivity is, in all events,

a matter of degree" (Renov 35.) He is referring, of course, to a more experimental

approach toward documentaries within the film format, but the statement holds true for

this exploration of documentary games as well.

There are clearly some gating issues here. These include several problems I have

only touched on, such as that of uncertainly: i.e. how can games based in fact deal with

the inherent tension between the knowledge of an event's outcome and the necessity of

allowing player agency to affect that outcome? There is also the problem of cultural

acceptance of games as a serious medium. At odds in many ways with the perception of

games as "non-serious" is the fact that all of the events I've looked at so far are moments

of extreme violence which can be quite disturbing for many players. Were these issues to

be solved, there remains the creative question of what we can learn from documentaries

in which we participate, and how these experiences add to our understanding of historical

events and the issues surrounding them, rather than simply allowing us to be "in the

moment." There may yet be an expressive mixing of the game and documentary forms

that will someday carry a cultural value equal to that associated with film documentaries.

We are not there today, but these games show a desire to get there, or at least to explore

that potential.

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[1] To be fair, it is unclear whether a game like *Waco* stands alone as an historical document – or whether it demands extensive prior knowledge of the event in question in order to fulfill its function as an historical critique.