

GAMING, HISTORY AND THE CARE AND PROTECTION OF CHILDREN

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INTRODUCTION

In researching visual representations of forcibly displaced children and children affected by war, I have been interested in exploring what sources by, for and about children can tell us about the past and the present. Since I began working with materials such as drawings by children, picture story books about and for children, as well as Instagram posts by adults who were child refugees, I have reflected on the different ways that narratives about children in war and displaced children circulate, who creates these narratives, and what ideas about children and childhood are mobilised through them.¹ In carrying out this research, some ideas I have seen repeatedly are of children being primarily understood as apolitical, innocent and requiring protection and care. This is not to say that these ideas are applied equally to all children, but nonetheless they are ideas that seem to hold considerable power in sources and materials about children, war and forced displacement.

The work of scholars including Miriam Ticktin, Margaret R. Higonnet and Liisa Malkki reveals how the categories of children and childhood are constructed in particular times and places, and the influence of dominant Western ideologies in producing particular children as archetypal figures of innocence.² Research like this shows the boundaries this places on how children can be understood,

¹ Mary Tomsic, 'Children's Art: Histories and Cultural Meanings of Creative Expression by Displaced Children,' in *Children's Voices from the Past: New Historical and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, eds. Kristine Moruzi, Nell Musgrove, and Carla Pascoe Leahy (Springer, 2019), 137-58; Mary Tomsic and Claire Marika Deery, 'Creating "Them" and "Us": The educational framing of picture books to teach about forced displacement and today's "refugee crisis"', *History of Education Review* 48.1 (2019): 46-60 <https://doi.org/10.1108/HER-11-2018-0027>; Mary Tomsic, 'Sharing a Personal Past: #iwasarefugee #iamarefugee on Instagram,' in *Visualising Human Rights* (Perth: UWA Press, 2018), 63-84; Mary Tomsic, 'The Politics of Picture Books: Stories of Displaced Children in Twenty-First-Century Australia,' *History Australia* 15.2 (2018): 339-56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14490854.2018.1452156>.

² Miriam Ticktin, 'A World without Innocence,' *American Ethnologist* 44.4 (2017): 577-90, <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12558>; Liisa Malkki, 'Children, Humanity, and the Infantilization of Peace,' in *In the Name of Humanity: The Government of Threat and Care*, eds. Ilana Feldman and Miriam Ticktin (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 58-85; Margaret R. Higonnet, 'Child Witnesses: The Cases of World War I and Darfur,' *PMLA* 121.5 (2006): 1565-76.

what ideals and expectations are imagined for children and how quickly, in some political contexts, some child-aged people can be excluded from the category of children.³ In contrast to idealised notions of apolitical children, scholars including Kirsi Pauliina Kallio, Jouni Häkli and Janette Habashi have examined the explicitly political agency, engagements and actions of children.⁴ Despite the scholarly work on constructions of children and childhood as well as children's actions, there remains an everyday approach to seeing many children as apolitical, innocent and in need of care and protection.

In researching and writing from Australia and thinking about war and forced displacement across the globe in an Australian context, there are two forces which require consideration as part of any analysis. One is the ongoing colonial project of the Australian nation; and the other is the Australian border-protection regime. These two forces have long histories and are certainly not the same, but they intersect and interact personally, politically and structurally around the nation state.⁵ They create distinctions between people as well as hierarchies of people. Particularly significant are the starkly different ideas, standards, and practices of state sanctioned care for children from particular backgrounds. A demonstrable lack of care is afforded to Indigenous children in, for example, the ongoing removal from families as well as through detention in prisons.⁶ There is also a clear lack of care afforded to children who are seeking asylum or born to parents who are seeking asylum.⁷ As historian

³ Carly McLaughlin, "'They Don't Look like Children': Child Asylum-Seekers, the Dubs Amendment and the Politics of Childhood,' *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44.11 (2018): 1757-73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1417027>.

⁴ Kirsi Pauliina Kallio and Jouni Häkli, 'Are There Politics in Childhood?,' *Space and Polity* 15.1 (2011): 21-34; Kirsi Pauliina Kallio and Jouni Häkli, 'Tracing Children's Politics,' *Political Geography* 30.2 (2011): 99-109; Janette Habashi, 'Language of Political Socialization: Language of Resistance,' *Children's Geographies* 6.3 (2008): 269-80; Janette Habashi, 'Children's Agency and Islam: Unexpected Paths to Solidarity,' *Children's Geographies* 9.2 (2011): 129-44.

⁵ See for example, Anna Haebich, *Spinning the Dream: Assimilation in Australia 1950-1970* (Perth: Fremantle Press, 2008); Amy Nethery, "'A Modern-Day Concentration Camp": Using History to Make Sense of Australian Immigration Detention Centres,' in *Does History Matter?: Making and Debating Citizenship*, eds. Gwenda Tavan and Klaus Neumann, (Canberra: ANU Press, 2009): 65-80.

⁶ For example: Melissa O'Donnell, Stephanie Taplin, Rhonda Marriott, Fernando Lima and Fiona J. Stanley, 'Infant Removals: The Need to Address the over-Representation of Aboriginal Infants and Community Concerns of Another "Stolen Generation"', *Child Abuse & Neglect* 90 (April 2019): 88-98, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.01.017> and 'Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory' report at <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20181010003051/https://childdetentionnt.royalcommission.gov.au/Pages/Report.aspx> [accessed 11 September 2019].

⁷ For example: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), *A Last Resort? National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention*, (Sydney: HREOC, 2004); Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), *The Forgotten Children: National Inquiry into Children in*

Jordana Silverstein has shown in her analysis of the history of Australia's *Immigration (Guardianship of Children) Act (1946)*, the care and control of unaccompanied refugee children has always been tied to the political control of the nation, through which particularly racialised and normative ideas of children, family and parenthood are endorsed.⁸ Structural and cultural racism and xenophobia, delivered by the state through politics and policies, as well as by individuals, institutions and communities, continue to make up a complex set of imaginaries and understandings of children from various social and cultural backgrounds.

In this piece I want to consider one cultural representation, a digital game called *This War of Mine*, wherein a group of civilian adults and children are living through war and conflict. I want to examine how people playing the game are positioned, and have positioned themselves, in relation to the game and the children within the game. This provides insight into how children are understood and the types of relationships of care that are constructed. I am also interested in these representations as historically and culturally specific artifacts, showing how the past is mobilised and on what terms history is considered.

THIS WAR OF MINE

This War of Mine was first released in 2014 by 11 bit studios. The studio was founded in Poland in 2009 by a self-described 'bunch of veterans of polish gaming industry'.⁹ This was the second game 11 bit studios made and on their website they describe it as 'A game that could matter' and 'a game that had a potential to touch people'.¹⁰ The focus on civilians in *This War of Mine* marks this game as different. Having civilians as playable characters is not common in digital war games. Most digital war games usually focus on combat and do this from the perspective of an individual who is controlling a weapon. In contrast, the creators of *This War of Mine* described their motivation as being

Immigration Detention (Sydney: AHRC, 2014).

⁸ Jordana Silverstein, "'I Am Responsible': Histories of the Intersection of the Guardianship of Unaccompanied Child Refugees and the Australian Border,' *Cultural Studies Review* 22.2 (2016): 65, <https://doi.org/10.5130/csr.v22i2.4772>; Jordana Silverstein, "'The Beneficent and Legal Godfather': A History of the Guardianship of Unaccompanied Immigrant and Refugee Children in Australia, 1946–1975,' *The History of the Family* 22.4 (2017): 446–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1081602X.2016.1265572>.

⁹ 'Our Story,' 11 bit, <http://www.11bitstudios.com/about-us/> [accessed 1 July 2017].

¹⁰ Ibid.

to show ‘the real picture of war’, which they see as being war from a civilian’s perspective.¹¹

The game itself is a survival/resources/time management one that focuses on civilians surviving while a city is under siege in the fictional European city of Pogoren in Graznavia. The geography is constructed through the urban location and the type of characters in the game. For example, initial characters are Bruno (a cook), Pavle (an ex-football star), Marko (the football star’s best friend), and Katia (a journalist). To play, gamers point and click to control characters to survive during the war. The characters have physical and psychological needs that the gamer needs to attend to, but not everything is within the player’s control, characters might die or become ill, and items in their possession might be stolen. Movement within the game is determined by day and night – characters hide during the day and can only go out under the cover of darkness. All decisions that the person playing the game makes are serious, involving ‘life-and-death decision[s] driven by your conscience’. The aim is to ‘Try to protect everybody for your shelter or sacrifice some of them for longer-term survival’. In this context ‘During war, there are no good or bad decisions; there is only survival’.¹² *Guardian* reviewer Mary Hamilton described playing *This War of Mine* as teaching ‘you how far you’d go to survive, where you’d draw the line’ when, for example, making a decision to either rob an elderly couple or go without food.¹³ Within the context of the game, sociologist Elisabeta Toma has noted that morally ‘good’ choices, like providing medicine to someone, does not necessarily produce the ‘correct winning strategy’ for the game.¹⁴

In terms of historical research, one of the writers of the game, Pawel Miechowski, said ‘We started by looking at the siege of Sarajevo ... We also looked at the conflicts in Kosovo and then historically wider: the Warsaw uprising of 1944 and the siege of Leningrad. We wanted stories that described what life was like during those conflicts – stories about specific situations or choices people

¹¹ Karol Zajackowski in ‘This War of Mine: The Little Ones - Dev Diary: The Kids,’ IGN, October 26, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lwKWg2v8iYQ> [accessed 23 June 2017].

¹² ‘This War of Mine’, Steam, https://store.steampowered.com/app/282070/This_War_of_Mine/ [accessed 10 September 2019].

¹³ Mary Hamilton, ‘This War of Mine - gaming’s sombre antidote to Call of Duty,’ *Guardian*, October 10, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/oct/10/this-war-of-mine-gamings-sombre-antidote-to-call-of-duty> [accessed 8 September 2019].

¹⁴ Elisabeta Toma, ‘Self-Reflection and Morality in Critical Games. Who Is to Be Blamed for War?’, *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology*; Bucharest 6.1 (2015): 214.

had to make in order to survive'.¹⁵ Overall, the creators did not want the game to be set in a particular city in a particular time, rather they wanted to create a generic Eastern European city.¹⁶

So, while a number of historical events have been identified that influenced the developers, in other online discussions the game is often presented more singularly as being inspired by the siege of Sarajevo which took place between 1992 and 1996 during the Bosnian War. The visual is important in constructing this perception. For example, an image in the game that is continually used is of a tall city building on fire. This image is used in the transitions between days in the game and refers to a well documented image of the city of Sarajevo during the siege.¹⁷ One person responded to a YouTube gameplay video, recognising the building and taking the time to comment, saying 'This game is made by the story that happened in my town Sarajevo, there is parliament [sic] building in picture when days are changeing [sic] "Day 3" etc. i would rly like to play this game'. In a reply to this comment the gamer continued 'That was war between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, where in game "sniper" was Serbians soldiers here are the pictures' and links were included to three photographs online.¹⁸ While these comments on YouTube are not representative of all the online conversations, they do show how people recognise their histories and homes in games such as these.

Alongside the video game, on YouTube there are a series of launch trailers for the game. One of these reveals the ways the multiple personal and childhood connections to war that the videogame elicits. One titled *The Survivor* is a film about Emir Cerimovic and his experiences being 9 years old and living in Sarajevo on the day before the siege began in 1992.¹⁹ Cerimovic, an artist, graphic designer and game developer, was a consultant for *This War of Mine*

¹⁵ Ed Smith, 'War games: POV switches from shooting to emotional impact,' *Observer*, July 30, 2015, Factivia Document OB00000020150730eb7u0005l.

¹⁶ Jordan Erica Webber, 'Inside a virtual war: can video games recreate life in a conflict-ridden city?,' *Guardian*, November 29, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/nov/29/this-war-of-mine-video-game-about-life-cities-war> [accessed 8 September 2019].

¹⁷ Nic Robertson, 'Sarajevo: Then and Now,' CNN, <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/06/05/europe/sarajevo-then-and-now/index.html> [accessed 2 July 2017].

¹⁸ Amer Ćorović comment on 'This War of Mine Gameplay - Part 2 - CHILDREN IN NEED!,' AndrewOscarDelta, November 22, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EmsxVmuwCjw> [accessed 23 June 2017].

¹⁹ Cerimovic and his family sought relative safety with his maternal Grandmother in Zenica (north west of Sarajevo) and eventually escaped to France, Daniel Starkey, 'Harrowing Game Exposes War's Impact on Children,' *Wired*, January 30, 2016, <https://www.wired.com/2016/01/this-war-of-mine-the-little-ones/> [accessed 10 September 2019].

as well as contributing artwork to the game and appearing in this trailer.²⁰ It is one of the responses to this trailer, by Mirza Lych, that I want to focus on here. Lych explains that he is from Bosnia and was 5 years old when the war started. While he did not live in Sarajevo, the town where he lived ‘was razed to ground level by the Serb forces’. He said:

My family had to flee and leave everything behind ... Some of our neighbors who decided to stay before the shelling started didn’t survive even for a month. Some of them were slaughtered in their houses because they believed the soldiers would spare the civilians ... I just wish that this never happens to anyone, and this trailer almost made me cry, even if I’m a full grown man.²¹

The personal and emotional impact of the war, as well as the nature of the conflict, is articulated alongside the game and the connections between events and the game are clearly expressed.

In some ways there is an ambiguous relationship to the history presented and supported through *This War of Mine*. As a historian I would argue that time, place, chronology, historical evidence as well as detailed attention paid to cultural, political and social beliefs are crucial for our discipline – but this is not the discipline of the creators of the game. The creators were looking to real events to make a meaningful game about what they see to be the most significant aspect of war. One of the game’s creators, Przemyslaw Marszal, the art director, said:

We were struck by the fact that physical challenge is not the worst thing people face in war – the emotional toll is much greater ... We knew that that was a good idea for a game, but it would only work if we took it seriously and created an experience that was properly respectful. It didn’t need to be ‘fun’. This was a serious topic and we wanted to approach it in a proper way.²²

Wojciech Setlak, a writer of the game, also stated that the research the 11 bit studio team carried out ‘[confirmed] the knowledge ingrained in us by the war stories every Polish family has: that war bears down most heavily on those

²⁰ ‘This War of Mine Launch Trailer - The Survivor,’ YouTube, 11 bit studios, November 14, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gotK5DLdVvI> [accessed 10 September 2019]; Matthew Gault, ‘True Stories Inspired the Best War Survival Game,’ *Medium* November 26, 2014, <https://medium.com/war-is-boring/true-stories-inspired-the-best-war-survival-game-40c840271995> [accessed 10 September 2019]; Emir Cerimoric website, <http://emircerimovic.com/#video> [accessed 10 September 2019].

²¹ Comment by Mirza Lych, on ‘This War of Mine Launch Trailer - The Survivor’.

²² Smith, ‘War games’.

least capable of influencing its outcome'.²³ It is because of the focus on civilians and the seriousness with which war should be addressed as articulated by the creators of *This War of Mine* – as well as seen in gamers engaging with it online – that I suggest that this game should be thought of as an anti-war cultural creation. Here a political, rather than historical, argument is primarily being made through the game. A sociological reading has articulated the game's potential to be a 'counter pedagogy of war' and a game that diminishes playfulness and moves more towards art.²⁴ Yet despite these qualifiers, the game is also a historical recreation of sorts, which provides an opportunity for historians to consider the ways in which the past is invoked in this type of digital leisure space.

TAKING CARE OF INNOCENT CHILDREN WITH *THE LITTLE ONES*

Following the initial release, an expanded version of the game was released for PC, gaming consoles and mobile devices in 2016. This version included children as playable characters in the game. This version of the game (or in-app purchase of this part of the game) is called *This War of Mine: The Little Ones*. The game's creator, Karol Zajackowski, said with this that *This War of Mine* presented war without any 'fancy stuff ... just the hell like it is'. But according to Zajackowski, this picture was incomplete prior to the expansion: with *The Little Ones* the 'we're adding the one final missing puzzle [piece] to the board'.²⁵

In terms of the children within the game, children can arrive on their own and the gamer can decide whether they will let them stay. Alternatively the gamer can select a child character to be included in their group of civilians trying to survive. There are six child characters and all are based on the children of the games' creators at 11 bit studios. Pawel Miechowski has explained that 'eventually I agreed to have my kid in the game because I'm crazy, I'm passionate about this game and I want to make it as real as possible'.²⁶ The creators of the game described developing a child artificial intelligence system for the child characters' responses, and it includes 3,500 elements that can influence conditions and behaviours of the children.²⁷ This development of including children is presented as significant both in and out of the game: Karol

²³ Webber, 'Inside a virtual war'.

²⁴ Toma, 'Self-Reflection and Morality in Critical Games,' 222.

²⁵ Karol Zajackowski in 'This War of Mine: The Little Ones - Dev Diary: The Kids'.

²⁶ Realness here refers to the physical movement of the child characters in the game, in Ibid.

²⁷ 'Being a Kid – Dev Diary #3,' December 18, 2015, <http://www.thiswarofmine.com/being-a-kid-dev-diary-3/> [accessed 3 July 2017].

Zajackowski explained that 'For you as a parent, keeping the kid alive and ... keeping it safe and keeping it happy will be the most important challenge you'll have to face in war and in our game'.²⁸

I want to turn now specifically to how child characters are positioned in the narrative and structure of *This War of Mine: The Little Ones*. This is useful to help us see how children are understood and what positions they are afforded within this particular cultural engagement with war.

In terms of iconography, the cover of the game and advertising material includes looking at the back of a small child in a bright red coat. This links this game to the young girl in the red coat in Steven Spielberg's Holocaust film, *Schindler's List* (1993). In *Schindler's List*, the girl in the red coat stands out visually in the black and white film. She is also significant in terms of the narrative, her presence during the liquidation of the ghetto is noticed by Oskar Schindler, and after seeing this he decides he must actively work against the Nazi regime. In a similar way, the child in the red coat in *This War of Mine: The Little Ones* is presented to seek action from the gamers. The caption asks the question explicitly: 'How far will you go, to protect the little ones?'²⁹ Here the idea that children require individual adult protection is clearly presented.

The launch video for *This War of Mine: The Little Ones* begins with a little boy, drawing with chalk, talking about super dad, and superhero actions. The child says that his super dad cannot be hurt by bullets and keeps everyone safe from evil. The boy's father comes in when the boy is asleep and the father says that he envies his son's black and white view of the world. Distinctions are drawn here between a child's and adult's view. The father explains that his world is not black and white but

mine is made up of all kinds of different shades, there are no signs to show you the right way, so you have to trust your guts and hope that you've done the right thing [pause] whatever that means now.³⁰

In this narrative there are clear distinctions made between children and adults – children are created as fundamentally different in their thoughts to adults. This division fits within modern Western conceptions of childhood: children are supposed to be segregated from an adult world and 'inhabit a safe, protected

²⁸ 'This War of Mine: The Little Ones - Dev Diary: The Kids'.

²⁹ 'This War of Mine: The Little Ones,' <http://www.tlo.thiswarofmine.com> [accessed 30 June 2017].

³⁰ 'This War of Mine: The Little Ones - Launch Trailer,' 29 January 2016 <http://www.thiswarofmine.com/premiere-of-this-war-of-mine-the-little-ones/> [accessed 1 July 2017].

world of play, fantasy and innocence'. Despite living in a siege, the children within the game remain positioned as intellectually distinct from adults and primarily in a realm of play, fantasy and innocence. Scholar Susan Moeller has argued that since the feminist movement of the 1970s, children, rather than women, are 'the public emblems of goodness and purity': children 'are the moral referent'.³¹ The distinctly moral, and innocent, position of children can also be seen in this game.

This construction of children is a historically specific one in which hierarchies of innocence are invoked, all civilians are innocent, but children are more innocent, and children are understood to be in need of adult care.³² One of the developers articulates a particular understanding of the relationships between parents and children, saying that they can be complex, there is sadness and happiness, but 'everything is all around child's innocence. And in the *Little Ones* you try to protect your child when everything around is falling apart'.³³

The primacy of caring for children is even seen in an evil playthrough of *The Little Ones* by a gamer called TheSparrowsJourney, whose game can be seen in a recording on YouTube. TheSparrowsJourney selected a child Kalina to be one of his playable characters. He also created himself as a character. He said for this playthrough, he would be evil, and he thought Kalina looked evil too, that she would give him nightmares. There were, however, clear limits to his evilness. He said 'I won't hurt this child but I will be evil in other ways'.³⁴ While TheSparrowsJourney is not playing the game in the manner the creators publicly articulated it to be done, he nonetheless still complied with the role of adults taking care of children.

This division between adults and children is seen too in the structure of the game. There are particular boundaries for the child characters that are

³¹ S. D. Moeller, 'A Hierarchy of Innocence: The Media's Use of Children in the Telling of International News,' *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 7.1 (2002): 38, doi:10.1177/1081180X0200700104.

³² See for example, Moeller, 'A Hierarchy of Innocence'; Ticktin, 'A World without Innocence'; Karen Wells, 'Child Saving or Child Rights: Depictions of Children in International NGO Campaigns on Conflict,' *Journal of Children and Media* 2.3 (2008): 235-50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482790802327475>; Karen Wells, 'Narratives of Liberation and Narratives of Innocent Suffering: The Rhetorical Uses of Images of Iraqi Children in the British Press,' *Visual Communication* 6.1 (2007): 55-71, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470357207071465>.

³³ In trailer clip on 'This War of Mine: The Little Ones,' Metacritic, <http://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-4/this-war-of-mine-the-little-ones> [accessed 28 November 2019].

³⁴ 'Let's Play This War of Mine: The Little Ones DLC (PC) - Evil Playthrough [Part 1]' YouTube, TheSparrowsJourney, June 9, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Z-CQ5houXw> [accessed 23 June 2017].

not imposed on the adults. The children cannot scavenge outdoors ‘they are simply too small’, one of the developers said.³⁵ Children can, however, scavenge indoors. When adults in the shelter spend time with a child character, either through playing or talking with the child, then a bond between the two characters is created. Child characters cannot fight or guard, but can be taught to make particular items like toys and craft as well as use a rainwater collector or gather food.³⁶

Another significant factor is that the child characters cannot die in the game. A reviewer on *gamespot*, Justin Clark, explains this concern in detail:

Should you fail in your duty to protect and provide for the child in your care, that child will be whisked off somewhere safe, and that’s the end of that. None of the adults ever skate this easily. Suicide, criminal activity, starvation, and freezing to death are just a few of the myriad, emotionally devastating ways a playthrough can come to an end, and it’s what drives you to keep them consistently healthy and happy. I’m not lamenting that we don’t see skeletal children weeping their eyes out until a bandit comes to finish the job starvation couldn’t, but the lack of consequence should you fail undercuts the strength of the game as a statement on the nature of war as a monstrous force. If there are no tangible stakes to failing to care for the child and there’s always the emotional cushion of ‘they’ll be fine,’ there’s less real impetus for caring for them more than for the endangered adults living under the same roof.³⁷

Here we can see the structure of the game and the narratives created through it reflecting contemporary standards of desired children’s engagement with the world. Historian Peter Stearns argues that international standards now clearly deem that it is not proper ‘for children to be involved in military service’, but there is a long history of children’s involvement in war and a range of ways this involvement with violence has been understood.³⁸ While *This War of Mine* is not about children’s military activity, it is a created war-zone that constructs children as requiring adult care, as innocent and only having a limited understanding of the conflict and violence that they are living through.

³⁵ Trailer clip on ‘This War of Mine,’ Metacritic.

³⁶ See summary of what characters can do, ‘Playable Characters,’ This War of Mine Wiki, <http://this-war-of-mine.wikia.com/wiki/Kalina> [accessed 2 July 2017].

³⁷ Justin Clark, ‘This War of Mine: The Little Ones Review,’ *GameSpot*, January 29, 2016, <https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/this-war-of-mine-the-little-ones/1900-6416341/> [accessed 2 July 2019].

³⁸ Peter N Stearns, *Childhood in World History* (New York & London: Routledge, 2006), 115.

CONCLUSION

There are powerful ideas that circulate, in both an abstract and a general sense, about the need to protect and care for children, which are linked to constructions of children as innocent and apolitical. Some of these can be seen in the structure of the game *This War of Mine: The Little Ones*, in terms of what child characters can and cannot do. It is also seen in the examples of the ways that people play the game, which have been examined here. Linked to this game, there are also examples of how children who lived through war, and saw their experiences connected to this game, were deeply affected by it, and the ways they remember and articulate these experiences. For example, Emir Cerimoric, from the *This War of Mine* trailer who contributed to the game, has said of his memories of the day before the siege began, 'I've been thinking about what I saw ever since'. Cerimoric has also spoken about remembering the 'ambient stress from adults' but it is 'mostly I remember being a kid'.³⁹

Historian Mona Gleeson cautions scholars when employing the analytic categories of children's voice and children's agency, which are commonly used in childhood studies. She notes the importance of avoiding clear binary delineations between child/adult, good/bad, powerful/powerless and instead suggests reading for the more complicated 'messier "in between" of more nuanced and negotiated exchanges between' all ages and groups of people in historical sources.⁴⁰ In examining *This War of Mine* and the responses to it, we can see that in the public discussions, it is largely simplistic and hopeful distinctions and approaches to children and childhood that are animated. This is clearly shown in writer Daniel Starkey's description of the way he felt about the child, Sergei 'who couldn't have been more than 10 years old' and was part of his gameplay. Sergei asked to stay with Starkey's groups of survivors to which Starkey 'couldn't say no'. Starkey continued 'It was Sergei, in his innocence, that kept me going...Sergei didn't understand war.' Starkey explained 'My motivation for playing *This War of Mine* shifted towards wanting to get him through the war. Maybe he could walk out with his optimism intact. On the 44th day, Sergei had left, to go find his family'.⁴¹

Through this example we see present day understandings of idealised children and childhood being placed onto the child character in the game. My aim here

³⁹ Starkey, 'Harrowing Game'.

⁴⁰ Mona Gleason, 'Avoiding the Agency Trap: Caveats for Historians of Children, Youth, and Education,' *History of Education* 45.4 (2016): 448-49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0046760X.2016.1177121>

⁴¹ Starkey, 'Harrowing Game'.

is in no way to admonish the creators and players of *This War of Mine*, but rather to consider how dominant ideals circulate in cultural artifacts and people's uses of them, for historians in particular to be able to reveal the ways these powerful narratives circulate. I mentioned at the start of this piece the significance of working from Australia, and from an Australian perspective. When cultural representations such as *This War of Mine* position their work outside of specific times and places and in more general realms, there is a considerable loss that should be noted. The specific political, cultural and social ideals that influence possibilities, acts and actions in the past and present are hidden. From the perspective of an historian, it is through our historical research and critical readings of a wide variety of sources that we work to uncover generalisations, consider offering expanded and fuller interpretations, and seek to more fully interrogate ongoing relationships between the past and the present.