

Critical Gameplay Gone Critically Wrong: Third World Shooter

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Abstract

This paper serves as a postmortem for the game Third World Shooter. The game was completed as part of the Critical Gameplay project. The project endeavors to analyze common game mechanics and create games that demonstrate alternate ways to play. Third World Shooter was as a docugame employing critical gameplay. This paper illustrates how the design of Third World Shooter dovetails into the more successful designs of other critical gameplay games.

Background and Introduction

The Critical Gameplay project is an ongoing investigation into alternate ways to play. The games of the Critical Gameplay project are designed to critique the standards of digital gameplay. These games have been shown at a variety of venues in Europe, Asia and the Americas [Grace 2010]. The games are typically designed and implemented by one person, in under one week. They are designed to create alternate play experiences by offering players new play models. Where typical games may require players to shoot or collect, critical gameplay games require players not to collect [Levity] or to unshoot [Healer]. Critical gameplay games do not always invert gameplay models, as games such as Wait simply require players to balancing seeing and doing (2009).

Docugames are games created to document an historical moment. They are digital gameplay's equivalent of documentary film. There are relatively few docugames in existence. Examples include Kuma War (2011) and Paris Riots (2006). Prior to the Third World Shooter project, no Critical Gameplay project game had endeavored to apply the critical gameplay design pattern to the production of a docugame. Third World Shooter was a first, somewhat unsuccessful attempt at creating such a docugame.

Third World Shooter was designed and developed between December, 2008 and April, 2009. Third World Shooter aimed to provide an entertaining opportunity to explore the experience of being one of several contributors to the War of Independence. The War of Independence is the common name for the struggle to liberate colonial Guinea Bissau and Cabo Verde from Portugal. The war lasted 11 years, from 1963-1974. The history of these African nations is not well documented in popular media (Lobban, 1995). As originally designed, players of Third World Shooter would be afforded the opportunity to play the roles of a variety of citizen action groups, political figures and military fighters seeking independence.

This document outlines the success and failures of such a design. In the process it illuminates design oversights, demonstrates characteristics of effective rapid design, and describes how this game informed other, more successful Critical Gameplay games. It is hoped that this retrospective analysis will benefit makers of docugames, games of rhetoric, and educational game makers.

The Third World Shooter Game

Third World Shooter (see figure 1) began with several fairly lofty design goals. The history of the War of Independence is full of complex politics that could find analogy to the stalemates of the contemporary war on terror. The people seeking independence from the Portuguese colonial system were considered enemies of the state. To gain independence, the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC) used propaganda, sabotage and military action. As a Marxist group, funding and support for the liberating PAIGC often came from communist China and the then USSR. Despite the country's cold-war era allies, Cape Verde in particular has a very strong relationship with the United States.



Figure 1. Screenshot of the Third World Shooter game.

Players of the game were asked to take the role of various PAIGC members, soliciting political support from non-player characters, sabotaging military equipment and firing upon Portuguese soldiers. Players moved through a space that was a reasonably accurate representation of urban life in Guinea Bissau and rural life in the forests.

While these aspects were typical for a docugame, the game also endeavored to be critical. Unlike many first person games which tie the success of an overarching goal to the success of a single player, the game attempted a system where objectives were met through player death. Players worked toward an overarching goal, understanding that they may die, but that their mission goal may be perpetuated by their death. The central question of the critique was why a game must end when the player dies? While not entirely successful, the goal was to investigate the production of a game that employed a self-sacrificing style of altruism.

The game was also aware of its potential as propaganda. It emphatically championed the efforts of the PIAGC, the political party that lead the War of Independence, through player dialogue and game situation. As an educational practice, it was hoped that the game could be used to discuss the complex history through another perspective. Many of the documents of this event were generated by the Portuguese colonial power.

Although several hours of gameplay were designed, the game was released as a beta version including approximately one hour of gameplay over 2 levels. The first level required the player to move through the city of Pijiguiti to gather political support through canvassing the general public. The level was designed around the infamous dock worker strike of 1959 at the

Pijiguiti pier. At the end of level 1, the player is killed in crossfire in what is commonly called the Pijiguiti Massacre. This historical event involved at least 40 non-military victims who were fired upon by Portuguese police during a simple strike for improved wages (Lobban, & Saucier, 2007).

The player begins the second level as a fresh military recruit in rural Guinea Bissau. The player must prove their mettle by first stealing a military communications device from a Portuguese outpost. The player is then asked to collect weapons and use them on military targets. If the player succeeds, they return to their burning military outpost which has been struck by Portuguese soldiers in retaliation. The player is shot shortly after witnessing the carnage.

In retrospect, the errors in design are quite clear. The game suffered from three primary design mishaps. These are the challenge of balancing archive with document, the complexity of employing critical gameplay in a large game, and a failure to employ iterative design evaluations. Several other factors lead to the relative failure of the game, but these are the most prominent.

Documentary or Archive

When designing docugames, it is important to balance design efforts between appropriate documentation and entertainment. While this would seem the most obvious challenge in designing such games, it is actually only a surface level concern. Deeper analysis reveals that like film, there is considerable editing that must occur to successfully create a useful document. In games the rules and structure of that editing are complicated by the non-linear experience. Where a film editor can dictate moments and experience to adhere to three-act structure or Campbell's Heroes' Journey, game narratives are not as easily structured.

The game endeavored to be an accurate representation of the experience of PAIGC soldiers. As such, the game included a tree system that generated over 30 environmentally appropriate shrubs and trees for the forest environment. As a PAIGC soldiers spent much of their time in the deep jungle and as such, to accurately recreate the experience, players are asked to move through the expansive virtual jungle in the game. So much so, that in beta testing the game, players spent as much as 30 minutes of the game's 1 hour play simply moving through the jungle. This is a clear short falling of the game so enormous, that it is comical. Nearly half the game becomes a walk through the forest, potentially changing the focus of the game from the War of Independence to the trees and plants of Guinea-Bissau.

This problem of balancing historical accuracy in experience and environment points to general challenge with the production of docugames. Besides forming an educationally supportive narrative structure, designers must find a middle ground between archival and document. Third World Shooter is full of overly specific efforts to match buildings, clothing, vehicles, and other elements to their historical references. As digital game production can be a very large effort in itself, it seemed fundamentally distracting to put too much effort into create an accurate environment. In total there are more than 70 3D model assets (see figure 2) created for the game. Of those, roughly 12 are essential to the experience of the game. Future developers of docugames would be wise to avoid making historically accurate environments, unless those environments relate directly to the goals they seek. As with any software project, it is essential to balance efforts. Third World Shooter's four month development schedule was dominated by development of elements of accuracy, not entertainment or engagement.

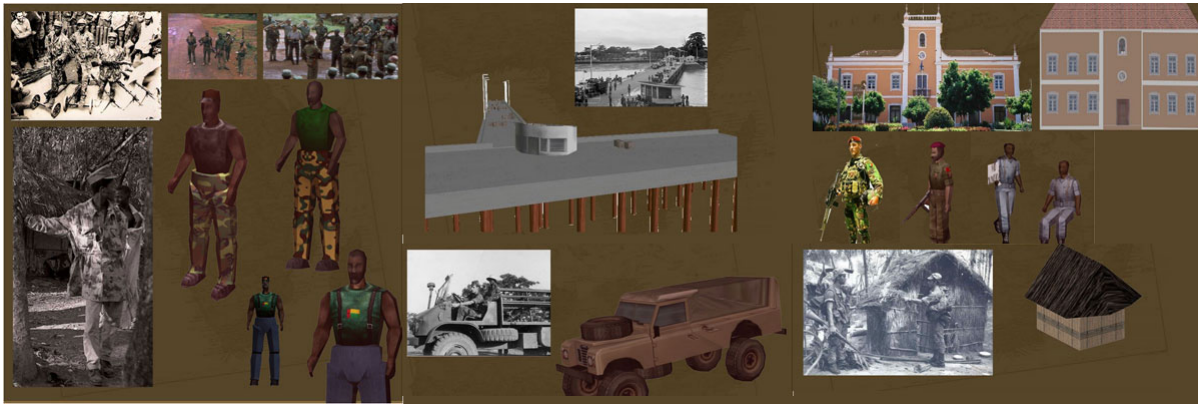


Figure 2. Sample collage of 3D assets created for the game with reference images.

Third World Shooter never found its space between accurately archiving and providing useful documentary. This is a balance between the high fidelity of an archive and the conciseness of an effective document. Many experiences were accurately depicted, but because they accurately represented, they failed. Players were asked to gain support for the PAIGC in the first level, yet PAIGC support didn't grow until after the Pijiguiti Massacre. To be accurate, players were subject to a series of non-player character rejections. Two out of three times a player asked for support from a non-player character, they were rejected. This is not an inspiring way to start a game experience.

Likewise, players were asked to shoot and steal as common game verbs. True to the ratio of experience of the early PAIGC, players shot very little. Players did not earn a gun until they had completed three-quarters of the game. Players steal, but stealing was a very tense experience, as the player was aware that they had no recourse and no defense if caught.

Critical Gameplay and Game Verbs

Third World Shooter also employed a couple of critical gameplay design goals. The most important of which was the notion that players should die in order to meet the goals of the PAIGC group. This critical gameplay goal came from the relative absence of such philosophies in games. Where war may produce suicide bombers and kamikaze pilots, few games, save for zealous squad based players, encourage players to die in the game to meet a larger goal.

In practice, Third World Shooter was not the game to investigate the possibilities of this type of play. First, as a first-person perspective game, there is little opportunity for players to even realize that they have changed characters. Every new level did not feel like the role of a new character, it merely felt like a new level. Secondly, it raised questions about why a player would want to play a game which rewards success and failure the same way – in death. The fundamental design goal was to create an experience that inspires the player to see the value in mutual benefit, not just self-sacrifice. It was not enough to have the player practice self sacrifice, it was hoped the game would tie the players sacrifice to the success of a larger game goal.

This never worked well in Third World Shooter, but it was re-employed in two later Critical Gameplay games called Healer (2009) and Simultaneity (2010). Healer is a third person unshooter, in which players must pull bullets from victims instead of putting bullets into them. The player character in Healer has no weapons. To prevent their recently revived victims from

dying again, the player must put themselves in the way of bullets. Healer's first levels are based on the Rape of Nanjing, an historical conflict between China and Japan that is often recognized as the largest historically massacre in human history (Chang, 1997).

Simultaneity requires players to manipulate several characters through one control. The goal is to move as many characters as possible through misaligned exits. The player must employ a strategy which evaluates the situation of all the pieces on the game board to find a solution of optimal benefit. These two games employ the critical gameplay design goal of mutual benefit more concisely and engagingly than Third World Shooter.

Other elements of the game were designed to recreate the experience of being a member of the PAIGC. These include the explicit effort to create the emotions of fear and isolation. The second level for beta testing was explicitly designed to emphasize the loneliness of moving through the forest searching for soldiers. In gathering feedback, more players felt helpless and lost than lonely and fearful. In retrospect it should also be asked if it makes sense to create an educational game that endeavors to create loneliness and fear in a player. Layering too many designs goals in a fairly small project clearly muddled the resulting game.

Game Complexity and Iteration

Once all of these elements were combined, the game lost its ability to deliver any one element well. The game failed to be an effective docugame because it introduced sometimes off-putting critical gameplay experiences. True to critical gameplay experiences, the player experienced a critical distance which detached any emotional engagement by injecting intellectual curiosity.

The game was also lofty in its pursuit of technical goals. In order to offer avoid the monotony of a very simply game played over several hours, the game sought to employ varies technical systems to make the experience more complex and nuanced. These proved to be more noise than benefit.

Third World Shooter was developed in Blitz3D, a 3D game-making environment in existence as early as 2003. Development time was spent on a day/night system, artificial intelligence that was sensitive to in-game lighting, and accurate rendering of water. In total 12 technical objectives were pursued during the short four month development period. Most of these did not improve the game's ability to impart history. They merely made the game behave more like a commercial release.

Many designers will affirm that complexity does not make a game better. This is true of technical complexity as well as design complexity. Yet, in the pursuit of a better Third World Shooter, complexity was layered into design and technical implementation. This complexity also made the game much harder to test without adding much benefit to the experience. Since many of these new elements were integrated, evaluating them individually did not inform the complete experience. Subsequent critical gameplay games return to the model of one game in one week. Since critical gameplay requires players to change the way they play, simply games with one or two changes seems to be much more fruitful.

Conclusion

It is hoped that this retrospective analysis of the development and design of Third World Shooter will help future developers of docugames and games of rhetoric. It is not accurate to reflect on the experience as a failure. A failed experience would imply that little was learned and

even less mined. The game themes found new space in later games. The programming code has been reused in other projects. The experiment itself worked like an experiment should. It revealed what can work and what can't. Yet, unlike a good experiment, Third World Shooter failed to investigate a single hypothesis well. Instead it was an amalgam of theories, which complicated observation. It is not clear if Third World Shooter was a bad idea, a poorly executed idea, or merely subject to its own lofty goals. At the very least it is hoped that it stands as a useful example of potential challenges in designing docugames that are not merely reporting experiences, but rhetorical and experimental in their approach.

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