

REVIEW: *THIS WAR OF MINE*

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This War of Mine, available on Steam, PS4, and Xbox One among others, first came to my attention via a *YouTube* Extra Credit commentary on disturbing games. This particular genre or field has always interested me, especially regarding the moral quandaries one encounters in video games where all options are bad. *World of Warcraft*, a game I have played since its vanilla release, has everything from grave robbing to genocide. *This War of Mine*, by contrast, is far more personal and far more disturbing in its single player survival story. I would like to thank Nathan Wise for purchasing a copy of this fascinating game for me.

The action is set in fictional Pogoren, Graznavia, but the parallels between the setting and Sarajevo during the Yugoslav Civil War are too obvious to ignore as you try to keep your characters alive for 50 days of fighting. Indeed, a friend who served there with the USMC has declined even to look at the game because reviews made this comparison too plain for his comfort and PTSD to handle. The game is genuinely that intense, and the greyscale art with limited outlining alongside the minimalist yet oppressive soundtrack only serve to enhance this feeling.

Play starts with anywhere from one to four characters, each with their own traits that give them individual advantages and disadvantages. For example, Bruno is an excellent cook, and therefore requires fewer materials to prepare meals. But, he is

constantly hungry and becomes sullen if he does not eat. He will also often gripe about the lack of cigarettes and smoke like a freight train when they are available. Katia is an excellent negotiator when it comes to bargaining for supplies but is emotionally fragile and, when she mentally breaks, has the unfortunate habit of stealing the group's goods before she runs off into the night.

There are several different houses where play can begin, each with its own complement of obstacles to remove and starting supplies that can be used to craft food, tools, weapons, and workshops. This last group is particularly important as they allow the construction of still more intricate and useful items. Clearance of the starter house may take two game days for new players but can easily be done in one for those with experience. Some of these houses are quite small but others are massive, with attics, back gardens, and sub-basements. However, whichever starter house you get, it will have only a limited supply of anything and you will quickly run out of food and everything else. This is when you must venture out into the city to scavenge at night. Take a shovel if nothing else.

Only one person per night can search the city. Depending on how many people you have in your group, you may have several who can stay home. Of these, at least one must always be placed on guard as the other sleep. To assist in their guard duties, it is wise to patch wall holes as quickly as possible and provide them with some sort of

weapon. Both of these require the second stages of their respective workshops and large amounts of supplies. It is for these supplies that the chosen scavenger character ventures into the darkness.

Starter locations are generally easy, such as the Ghost House. This one has plenty of basic materials, food, and medical supplies, and is a good place to practice prying open doors or using lock picks and saws. You will constantly be crafting these items as they break after a single use. Crowbars cost more in materials and are much louder, but will also last longer in the field. Regardless of where you go, though, you will not be able to carry away all the found goods in a single night. Each person has a different, but limited, carrying capacity in their backpack. Boris, with the largest backpack, is also the slowest mover. Cveta, good with kids, has the smallest.

While the Ghost House is deserted and no weapons are necessary, some areas have a mix of safe and hazardous zones, while other locations are dangerous throughout. The Warehouse has several armed bandits who celebrate stealing from aid convoys while the Semi-Detached House has women guarding their own goods in one part, leaving the other open to scavenging. And this is where the moral quandary enters the picture. Obviously the bandits are evil and deserve what they get. But you, the player, are in turn stealing goods meant for aid workers and other civilians when you confront these bandits. You need food to survive, but so do the women in the Semi-Detached House and they are unafraid to kill you to make sure they keep it. And kill you they will, with no resets or backtracking

allowed. When a character dies, they die and stay that way.

Through the course of the 50 days of game time, various environmental events happen that affect how you play. Winter comes and makes it deathly cold, so you need to build a furnace and keep it supplied with flammable materials. Crime waves happen and looters become more emboldened and desperate, which means patching walls, reinforcing the door, and arming your characters is all required. And, of course, there are the vicissitudes of war.

Any or all of these factors could make a location available one night and inaccessible the next. A place you thought was abandoned and safe may be crawling with militiamen the next time you visit. A building may be half-demolished when you return because of shelling. People become injured or ill and have to be treated. Depression and early stage PTSD can and will affect your characters, especially if they have to kill to survive, and killing is inevitable in this game. Shortages of food, tobacco, and other items plague the city periodically. In short, almost anything that could happen in a real war can happen in this game.

One of those things is that people will visit you. The most frequent visitor is a man named Franko who has items to barter. Others include neighbors asking for or offering help. In almost every instance in my games, helping someone resulted in some kind of reward a day or two later and no one who I sent out came back the worse for wear other than being tired and hungry. Sometimes a visitor will be a new character, most often encountered in the first three

days after a previous resident of the house has died or fled. You will get at most one visitor per day but many have none.

The combat system is my one real complaint. Using a firearm (crafted from scavenged parts with the Level 3 Metal Workshop or found on the bodies of people you kill) of any type is easy and deadly enough, but equipping a knife actually makes it difficult to target even if you are right next to the person you are trying to stab if playing via Steam for PC or Xbox One (I have not played it on the other systems). Strangely, hitting people over the head with a shovel is more effective than a good blade thrust. Also, and perhaps counterintuitively, the aged mathematics professor, Anton, is the best marksman of all the characters.

Also unexpected, you can only have one saved game at a time. This limit may at first seem a bit onerous, but, like so much else, merely reflects the stark realities of war. The game offers several optional DLC packages, a practice that annoys me, but the \$0.99 item goes to children's charity War Child, so here I did not mind. A portion of the proceeds from the other downloads also goes to War Child. Only one of the DLCs adds any new locations, but they all offer a chance to play a few new characters, including the possibility of encountering the stark realities of Pogoren through the eyes of a child. There are reportedly two more DLC packs slated for release in 2018. Also, ignore the achievements for your first few runs. Many of them will be earned just by surviving.

You can also design your own scenarios, at least in terms of the start of the game. Choosing your own characters, whether

from the premade sets or designing your own, can be an interesting exercise in min/maxing or it can prove a true challenge. Further, you can decide which of the various locations will be available in your game. Some I have only encountered in this fashion, never having seen them in any of the preprogrammed sets. You can also adjust how harsh the winter is or how damaging the crime wave becomes. These are unavoidable, but they can be ameliorated or worsened through the options you choose. Crafted scenarios can be uploaded for sharing.

This game is *not* for the faint of heart. Despite years of playing games in the survival genre, my first play through was upsetting in a visceral sense I normally reserve for emotionally challenging books. It hurt. And to get as far as I did that time, only 18 days, I had to kill two people to keep my characters alive. If you finish the game, it is almost certain your kill count will be far higher and you may not have any of your starting people left. Most of your victims will be just like your characters, just like you would be in such a situation, merely trying to stay alive and minimizing the emotional damage to an already wrecked soul. This game is not for children and may trigger PTSD in someone with similar real life experiences.

In Pogoren, war is hell, hell is other people, and *you* are one of them.

Reference

Drozdowski, Michał, dir. *This War of Mine*. Warsaw, Poland: 11 bit studios S. A., 2014/2016, Video Game.