Fifty Shades of Red. Depictions of the Eastern Bloc in American and European Cold War-themed real time strategies

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Keywords

real time strategy, wargaming, postcolonialism, cultural memory, historical game studies, Cold War

INTRODUCTION

Cold War-themed strategy games are important subject of study, and very extensive one – as the genre has its root in the last decade of the actual Cold War, when subconscious threat of nuclear annihilation made wargaming a natural way to enable gamers to feel safer by (fictionally) taking matters into their own hands (Nikolaidou 2020). However, the depiction of hypothetical World War III scenarios were often simplified, following popular Cold War tropes from literature and cinema of the West, and – in case of games – often prone to stereotypes when it comes to the portrayal of communist countries; the aspect that can be studied effectively through the lenses of postcolonial theory, not unlike the depictions of the Middle East, or Latin America (Mukherjee 2017; Magnet 2006; Šisler 2008). Notably, the paper focuses on differences (and their possible sources) in portrayal of the Eastern Bloc (i.e. the Soviet Union and its Central European satellites) as observed in certain Cold War-themed RTS games that were developed in the US from the 1990s, notably the *Red Alert* series, and later European video games: Swedish-made *World in Conflict* (Massive Entertainment 2007) and French *Wargame* series, notably its first installment, *European Escalation* (Eugene Systems 2012) as set in Central Europe. While *Red Alert* games (especially the first two installments) became instant classics that paved the way for the latter (as well as for the entire related subgenre), certain puzzling differences in regard to poetics and content can be observed between the Westwood/EA-made game series and both European games in question

In the most general terms, the first *Red Alert* game (Westwood studios 1996) was obviously designed with broader audience in mind, focusing on fast-paced action and visual attractiveness, initially: simply expanding science fiction-flavored poetics of the original *C&C* subseries (a.k.a. Tiberium universe), but applying it to historical, rather than near-future setting (as was the case with *Tiberium Dawn*, with *Red Alert* initially conceived as its expansion pack); and its sequels followed its 'ludic' formula,

making it even lighter in tone (including camp esthetics). On the other hand, games like *World in Conflict* and *Wargame* follow a path of World War 2-themed games of different subgenre, that was developed later on, i.e. in the 2000s – in the case of the latter, its direct predecessor: *R.U.S.E.* (Eugen Systems 2010) - utilizing more nuanced approach to world-building and narrative, putting emphasis on historical realism.

For the purpose of detailed analysis, the paper would utilize a modification of three-layered game model originally developed by Elliott and Kapell (2013) for the purpose of analysis of historical games, resulting in analyzing separately broader narrative of each game, goals set for the player, and content of specific military arsenals available for each side. On the narrative level, *Red Alert* games focus on large-scale global conflicts, with black-and-white characters playing leading roles. By contrast, *World in Conflict* and *European Escalation* portray limited Soviet incursions (in the US and Western Europe, respectively) and either offer more nuanced characters (e.g. Soviet officers in *World in Conflict: Soviet Assault*), or make them – by design – insignificant in the big picture (as in *Wargame*, where providing generic names for squad leaders turns those into labels for otherwise undistinguishable units). Said contrast can be also observed in regard to mission goals: while *Red Alert* series usually provides action-packed, dramatically themed missions, often set in visually attractive urban locations, both European games usually portray mundane battles in generic suburban or rural surroundings, with eradicating the enemy being a sole goal (even though the road to it is often complex), better reflecting realities of war.

In regard to units, again, sharp contrast can be seen: *Red Alert* series uses alternate history setting to introduce science fiction-themed weaponry (e.g. famous Tesla coils) into the arsenals of both sides, while both European games deliberately aim at (hyper-)realism. An interesting aspect of arsenal construction is also the question of inclusion of Soviet satellite states, as many video games choose to ignore the very existence of those, to emphasize Moscow hegemony for the sake of simplicity. This was the case with the original *Red Alert*, with subfactions for Allied and Soviet forces being available in multiplayer, but for the latter: only "Russia" and "Ukraine" (Soviet republics) were present, rather than proper (non-Soviet) satellites states (in sharp contrast to the Allies, where the choice was between the US and real-life European NATO members). In *Red Alert 2* (Westwood Studios 2000), Soviet subfactions have been replaced by Third World members of a fictional Soviet-led alliance, to resonate better with contemporary geopolitical realities, thus preventing European satellites of the USSR from appearing; while in *Red Alert 3* (EA Los Angeles 2008), subfactions disappeared completely. In *World in Conflict*, Soviet hegemony is likewise reflected by ignoring the satellite states, when it comes to faction choice: the player leads non-American NATO forces occasionally (forming the third playable side, comprising of French or British counterparts of American vehicles or warplanes), but communist forces comprise of Soviet units alone. By sharp contrast, *Wargame* can be seen as overly realistic, due to introducing major Warsaw Pact members as separate factions (in symmetrical fashion with NATO members). The game encourages players to build "national" decks (for the purpose of multiplayer) by unlocking "national" vehicles of Polish, Czechoslovak or GDR armies (despite those mainly comprising – as realism dictates – simply of "national" variants of Soviet-made equipment; in sharp contrast to far more diverse "national" NATO arsenals, partially covered by *World in Conflict*).

The attempt of the presentation would be to answer the question about the source of above differences: was it simply about the poetics chosen in each case, or rather a reflection of different cultural memory in Europe and America, that shaped the

imaginary of the Cold War in a different fashion, resulting in different subgenres being preferred by developers on both sides of the Atlantic?

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