



Through the Darkest of Times: life as the resistance during the Third Reich

Interview with Jörg Friedrich

Through the Darkest of Times is a historical strategy video game taking place in Berlin during the Third Reich, from Hitler's seizure of power in 1933 to Germany's surrender in 1945. The player leads a civilian resistance group fighting off the new regime how they can. The resistance is made up of common people, from all walks of life, so it's the leader's job to win hearts and minds and hold the group together. The player will be responsible for planning the group's activity and survive by avoiding the Gestapo. All of this while actual history unfolds outside: the game follows the actu-

al historical time-line, which influence the player's options. The game is under development by Berlin-based studio Paintbucket Games¹, made up by the duo Jörg Friedrich and Sebastian Schulz. It will be published by HandyGames in the near future and is already listed on Steam.

The Journal of Geek Studies interviewed Jörg Friedrich to understand how such a unique game like *Through the Darkest of Times* came to be. You can read the full interview below.



¹ Be sure to check out their website (<http://paintbucket.de/>).

Q: On your website, you mention that a game focusing on the civil resistance during Third Reich Germany just had to be made. We agree, of course, but would you care to elaborate a little more on this?

A: The story of civilian resistance fighters in Germany is a story that people must learn about – these normal people with families, with normal jobs, saw what was going on the world and decided they had to do something against it. They went underground and risked their lives to stop an inhumane regime.

We think this is a story that must be told.

As political people, certain developments in the world, the fact that we see fascists rise again, here in Germany but also in many more countries in Europe and in the US, worries us a lot. In 2017 we wondered what we could do about this and the only thing we are good at is making games, so we thought “hey let’s make a game that takes an anti-fascist stance and maybe it will make the world a better place!”

As game developers and artists, we like to push the boundaries of the medium. Sebastian and I met when we were working for YAGER, where we made a game called

Spec Ops: The Line – an AAA shooter that asked players to shoot people and blamed them when they did. It was supposed to make players feel bad.

Back in 2012 this was special. It felt like a game that needed to be made. We felt like pioneers, we felt like we tried something new by taking a new stance on war and on war in games.

Making *Through the Darkest of Times* feels similar – we try to find a new way on how games treat Nazism.

Q: Do you believe game developers have a responsibility when representing History? Should this come before artistic freedom?

A: We learn history not only at school, but also from the stories told to us by movies, books and well – video games.

But if someone would learn everything he knows about Nazism from games, he might conclude that Nazis are villains like the Empire in *Star Wars*: somewhat evil, but they have cool uniforms and tanks and are in the end just a faction like any other.

I find it problematic, that most games





with Nazis don't even mention the murderous anti-Semitism, the slow rise of Fascism or the Shoa.

I know that these games usually have no bad intention by omitting these facts, they often do it to avoid controversy. But honestly: if you think mentioning the historical crimes of the Nazis is inappropriate for your game, maybe picking Nazis as a faction or theme for your game is what is inappropriate here.

Q: Nazism seems to have become just another Hollywood trope nowadays. Are you concerned about how Nazi Germany is depicted in current games?

A: Here is the problem: if your game is about Nazis, but in your game, they do not commit any war crimes, there is no Auschwitz, no Shoa, then you create a historical narrative in which the Nazis didn't commit these crimes.

And that's the narrative that is told by Neo-Nazis who try to white-wash historical Nazism, so people are less hesitant to open for far-right ideologies.

Video games is the most important nar-

rative medium of our time – as developers we must take responsibility and tell things the way they happened just as movies did a couple of decades ago.

Q: Current gaming culture is often referred to as toxic, where sexist, racist, homophobic behavior unfortunately abound. Do you believe that might be related to the ideals that games historically presented? Can game developers help change this culture?

A: Yes, I think so. The way games were marketed since the 1990's until recently, towards young men, featuring the ideal of tough white guys who like hot girls and solve problems with their guns, appealed to a specific type. And this type feels now entitled to games. They think it is their medium and that developers need to create games for them and only for them.

This was never true, because of course there were always all kinds of people playing video games, but we now have this extremely entitled, extremely loud and toxic bunch of guys who yell the loudest and think they can dominate the Internet and our medium.



We must not let them. We must not listen to their demands; leave them stew in their own juice and just ignore them. Let's make games that are open and inclusive, for an open and diverse audience instead of making games for the Christchurch killer².

Q: So, let's turn to the game now. What exactly is the players' goal in *Through the Darkest of Times*?

A: You play a leader of a civilian resistance group in Berlin in 1933 when Hitler becomes chancellor. You try to fight the regime with acts of sabotage and later attacks, educate people and let them know the truth about the Nazis' plans and their doings, and help the persecuted, by hiding them or getting them out of the country.

Your goal is to persist as a group until the end of the war and do as much of the three things mentioned as possible without being caught by the Gestapo.

In order to achieve this you need to send your members on missions and organize re-

sources necessary for your fight.

The group members are civilians, who are suddenly thrown into a situation where they must do something illegal and risk their life to resist the regime. Members have different biographies and political views, which can lead to conflicts within the group and keeping up morale and members from simply giving up can be tough.

So you try to do as much good as you can and lead you and your group through the darkest of times.

Q: There are some games out there with a healthy dose of historical backgrounds, such as Ubisoft's *Valiant Hearts* and *Assassin's Creed*. How does *Through the Darkest of Times* approach History?

A: Every turn in the game is one historical week. At the beginning of each turn you get the news with what happened in that week – based on the historical events of that week. But history influences the game mechanics too: at the beginning you don't

²The Christchurch mosque shootings were two terrorist attacks conducted by an Australian alt-right white supremacist in Christchurch, New Zealand, on 15 March 2019. Over 50 people were killed and another 50 were injured. New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern described the event as "one of New Zealand's darkest days." (Source: Wikipedia)

need to be too worried, there are even public protests against the regime happening in the streets where you and your group can join. But over time, the repression increases; after the Reichstag fire, the city is full of SA and things are dangerous; and once the Gestapo is founded and the first concentration camp is built, things are dangerous.

There are also big historical events that you witness through narrative sequences to give you more a feeling of being there, than just in the strategy mode.

History also influenced the looks of the game. Sebastian was inspired by German expressionists of the 1920's who were later banned by the Nazis as un-German art. He tried to create a look that the Nazis would have banned.

So I would say, history plays a very important role in *Through the Darkest of Times*.

Q: What kind of source material did you use while building the game? Books, historical documents, interviews?

A: All of this. We read a lot, we went to places and museums – luckily, as we are in Berlin and the game takes place in Berlin,

there are a lot of memorial sites and local annalists we got in touch with. We read interviews of course and we talked to descendants of civilian resistance fighters.

Q: How faithfully does the game follow real-life events of the Third Reich? Can the players expect to “change the course of history”?

A: In the main game, the historical events and what you read in the news all follow the actual historical timeline. Your character, the members of the group and your supporters are fictional though, and so are their actions against the regime.

But characters and actions are inspired by real civilian resistance groups that were active in Berlin at that time, such as the Schulze-Boyssen/Harnack group or the Jochen-Baum group.

Most of the missions wouldn't have an impact on grand politics – if this is what you mean by “changing history”. However, the way we see it, history is not only changed by generals and leaders but by all of us.

Who saves people drowning in the Mediterranean Sea today is changing history –



more than most politicians and in a better way if you ask me.

But since we have all these rogue-like elements in the game and since we like the idea, we are thinking about a second mode – a “New Game+” if you want – in which events happen less predictably and you might be able to stop the regime before the end of the war.

Q: Do you hope players will learn something about German and World History by playing *Through the Darkest of Times*?

A: When I talk to people about the Nazi time they often have the idea that it started with war and holocaust right away. But it didn't. Hitler got elected. He became chancellor in a legal way, because we had conservatives who thought that they could handle a fascist in power and that this would still be better than the left – 12 years later half of Europe was destroyed and millions of people had died.

I hope people might be able to recognize the patterns when playing *Through the Darkest of Times* when they look at what is going on in the real world.

Q: Is there any takeaway message you'd like the players to get from your game?

A: It would be great if our players took away the same message that we took away when we started to learn about civilian resistance fighters: some developments are so wrong, they are so evil, that we have to overcome our day to day disputes, unite and fight for the fundamental human rights even if it means taking a risk.

ABOUT THE TEAM



Paintbucket Games is a Berlin-based indie game studio founded by two ex-AAA developers. **Jörg Friedrich** does design and code and **Sebastian Schulz** does art and design. They have been making games for more than 13 years each and worked on 10 of those together. Among the several titles they worked on are: *Spec Ops: The Line*, *Dead Island 2*, *Albion Online*, and *Desperados 2*.