The New York Times
nytimes.com

November 23, 2007

# Spanish Civil War, This Time Fought in Pixels

**By VICTORIA BURNETT**

MADRID, Nov. 22 — A new video game that invites players to rewrite the course of Spain's devastating civil war has touched a nerve in a country that is often reluctant to revisit its past, let alone play with it.

"Shadows of War" bills itself as the first video game based on the 1936-39 war, which erupted after right-wing forces loyal to Gen. Francisco Franco staged a coup against the elected Republican government. General Franco's subsequent dictatorship lasted 40 years until his death in 1975.

The game went on sale in Spain on Thursday in the midst of a bitter debate about how to deal with the country's past, prompted by a new law that would authorize reparations to civil war victims and ban monuments to Franco.Even before it hit the stores, the game drew criticism from both sides of the political spectrum as a divisive trivialization of a war whose wounds, for many Spaniards, have yet to heal.

Manuel Contreras, a columnist for the conservative newspaper ABC, said in an editorial that the game will "fuel political conflict and reinforce the split between the two Spains."

"It will trivialize the drama of the civil war and dissipate its legacy of horror," he added.

Carlota Leret, whose father, Virgilio Leret Ruiz, was executed at the beginning of the war by troops loyal to Franco, said the game "will not serve to help reconstruct our historical memory, but to render death, tyranny and violence banal."

Ms. Leret's father is mentioned in the game as a victim of execution after Franco's troops captured the North African air base he commanded. In an interview with the liberal newspaper El País, she said, "This is not a historical event that is buried in the past, but something that is very fresh in the memory of Spaniards."

In Shadows of War, players can join the Nationalist or Republican forces and change the outcome of the war's defining moments, like the Battle of the Ebro, an attempt to push back the Nationalist line that historians believe exhausted and broke the Republican army. Managing limited supplies of fuel and gold, players battle among 50 military units, including the Italian, Soviet and German troops that fought alongside Spanish forces in what became a precursor to the World War II.

Francisco Ferrándiz, a social anthropologist at Spanish National Research Council, said the game was a logical although in his view undesirable addition to a "memory industry" of plays, movies, books and articles on the civil war that has emerged in recent years. Interest in the war is particularly strong among younger Spaniards who did not experience the war first hand and want to break the nation's silence about its past.

"We're in the midst of a memory boom," he said. "This game translates the civil war into a technological language that appeals to the younger generation."

Francisco Pérez, head of development at Legend Studios, which produced the game, said it made accessible a chapter of Spanish history that was often passed over in the classroom. The game includes documentary footage of the war from the British Broadcasting Corp. and two Catalan archives and a timeline of the conflict.

"There are a lot of young people in this country who don't know much about the war and this is an opportunity for them to learn," he said.

Mr. Pérez said the game's creators did not know when they started designing it in 2004 that it would be released when Spain's sensibilities were so inflamed. The question of setting the record straight over the civil war and making reparations to Franco's victims has become a leitmotif of the Socialist government of Prime Minister José Luis Rodriguez Zapatero.

However, Pérez said the controversy would probably help sell the game, which cost about 1 million euros to develop, compared with the 10 million euros often spent on blockbuster video games.