Point of View

Teaching about Genocide in a New Millennium

James G. Brown

It was the beginning of the fall semester, and almost all of our 900 college freshmen sat in the auditorium on the second day of academic orientation. One of the students volunteered to go up on stage and demonstrate the "Darfur is Dying" computer-based simulation that had been projected onto a large screen.[1] She selected one of the eight members of a family in Darfur portrayed in the simulation to "forage for water." As the student used the computer keys to help the female animated character, "Sittina," race across the desolate wasteland in search of water, the audience cheered wildly. They shrieked as the Janjaweed truck came creeping closer, roared approval as the character ran to evade the militia, and booed at her inevitable capture. At this point, the simulation queried if we would like a chance to try again. The audience clamored, "Yes!" and so another family member was selected, this time a child named "Abok." This cartoon figure was much faster, and glided across the screen, to the delight of the crowd, but ultimately met the same fate as Sittina. As the simulation ended, students applauded enthusiastically.

I sat in my chair, disturbed, questions racing through my head: Is this the way to teach issues such as genocide in a new millennium characterized by new technologies? Is this how we reach students who have grown up playing video and computer games? Do these technologies provide a new opportunity for activism and understanding? It may be that the answer to all of these questions is "yes," but ethical questions do arise. Is it acceptable to trivialize a tragedy (of a massive scale) through a game so that awareness is increased? Should we make the study of history more game-like? What are the limits of simulations?

The "Darfur is Dying" website was the winning entry of a contest called Darfur Digital Activist, launched by MTV's 24-hour college network (mtvU).

The competition was initiated in partnership with Reebok Human Rights Foundation and the International Crisis Group. The site describes the winning game as "a narrative-based simulation where the user … negotiates forces that threaten the survival of his or her refugee camp. It offers a faint glimpse of what it's like for the more than 2.5 million who have been internally displaced by the crisis in Sudan."[2] I do not at all doubt the intentions of those who developed the game. I believe their intentions were decent and that their ultimate goal is to raise awareness that leads to action to improve the tragic situation faced by those in Darfur. However, I do wonder about the level and nature of their consciousness.

By contrast to the simulation, in modest and reverential ways, I regularly work to help university students and practicing teachers better understand the Holocaust and other genocides. I use the word "modest," because there is so much information available—there are so many difficult histories and so many legitimate voices—that I can only access a portion during a single course. I use the word "reverential," because after listening to a victim of genocide discuss a personal history, most students are spiritually impacted and recognize the need for a solemn and respectful response. As a result, I seldom use simulations or advocate their use when so many meaningful experiences are readily available.

Thus, it was with great interest that I approached the topics of this fall's academic orientation for our new freshmen, which included the overlapping study of two horrific episodes: the Rwandan genocide of 1994 and the current genocide in Darfur, Sudan. Over the summer, all freshmen were asked to read *An Ordinary Man*, the memoir by Paul Rusesabagina (whose heroic deeds were portrayed in the film *Hotel Rwanda*). They also were asked to consider the computer simulation, "Darfur is Dying." On our orientation website, freshmen were asked, "… how effective is this game in conveying the political and human tragedy of Darfur? Is this a game that can really communicate an experience we might not otherwise understand? Or
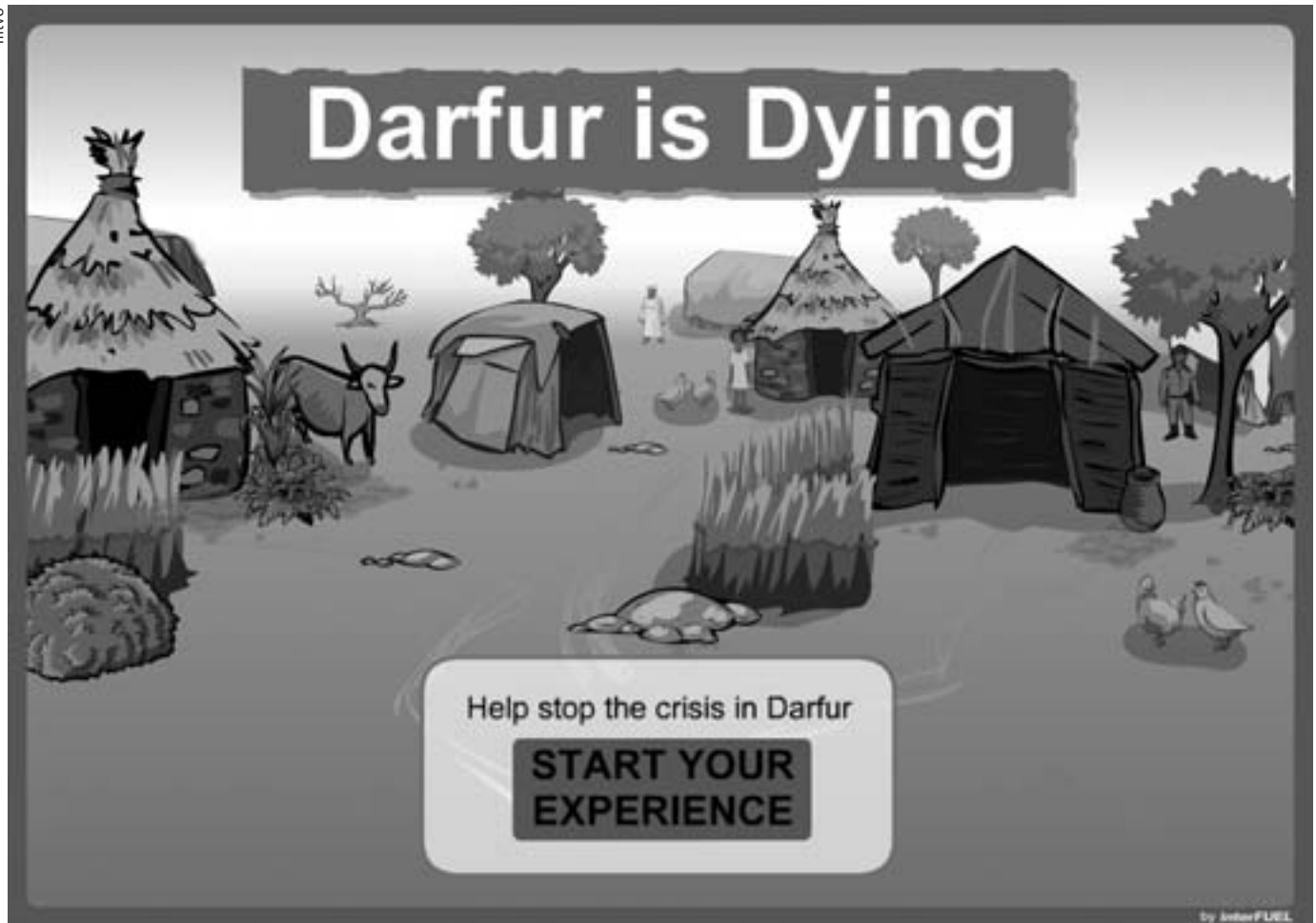
does the translation of this situation into a game ultimately trivialize it and dishonor the people of Darfur?"

The many students who responded to this prompt on the website over the summer were just about evenly split between those who saw benefit in the game and those who questioned its appropriateness. In fact, some responses offered both perspectives. One student wrote, "I wish I could say that creating a game on such a topic is unnecessary. I wish I could say that there are more effective ways to educate American youth on Darfur, such as encouraging them to read newspapers or watch the news. Most teenagers prefer to sit on their computers, play games, or visit their favorite websites rather than worry about these confusing choices. This is exactly why creating an informative video game on an overwhelmingly popular website might just help, even if only a little." The same student then added, "I must say that if I was from

Darfur, I would be disgusted with this game. I would not understand why it was made. It would insult me, because it cannot even begin to convey reality. It can never fully express truth."

I was shocked when I first played the game. It was the antithesis of what most genocide educators would advocate. Samuel Totten notes in *Teaching Holocaust Literature*, "... by using simulations to try to provide students with a sense of what the victims of the Nazis were subjected to, they are minimizing, simplifying, and distorting, and possible even 'denying' the complexity and horror of the Holocaust."[3] Instead, Totten and others advocate using the first-person accounts of survivors, both fiction and non-fiction texts, and documentaries.

When incoming students arrived on-campus in August, the academic portion of their orientation included a live videoconference with members of the United States Holocaust Memorial

Museum. One of the panelists was Eric Nkurunziza, a Tutsi survivor of the Rwandan genocide. He provided a moving account of his experiences during the genocide, including the discovery of his youngest sister, left for dead but still alive (at least physically) among a pile of dead family members. Who would not be moved spiritually by such personally meaningful testimony (exactly the kind of personal testimony most educators advocate in the study of a difficult history)?

Later that day, the "Darfur is Dying" simulation was presented. How, then, can we comprehend the student reaction, particularly the cheering? My initial reaction was disappointment and sadness. I had voiced my concerns regarding the inappropriateness of the simulation to the orientation planners, and now it seemed to me that my fears had been realized. I was ready to criticize those who cheered, those who advocated the

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ning group at fault for presenting the simulation in such a large venue?

I stand by my position: the use of the "Darfur is Dying" simulation was inappropriate. My hope is that the way we use new technologies will help students to access authentic information from primary sources, which we may have only been able to simulate in the past. Placed within the context of multiple authentic experiences, game-like simulations may aid the process of dialogue and subsequent critical consciousness that leads to action. But even the best simulations require great care, lest they become mere entertainment. Ultimately, I wonder what the freshmen students in my courses think about the simulation and the cheering. And I wonder how their perspectives might change after a semester of studying difficult histories, including listening to the first-hand testimonies of genocide victims and heroes and reading their memoirs? 🔳

Notes
1. The simulation can be viewed at www.darfurisdying. com.
2. "Darfur is Dying: About the Game," www.darfurisdying.com/aboutgame.html.
3. Samuel Totten, "Diminishing the Complexity and Horror of the Holocaust: Using Simulations in an Attempt to Convey Historical Experience," in *Teaching Holocaust Literature*, ed. Samuel Totten (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2001), 243-252.
4. Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 36.

game's use, and those who designed the simulation. Were all of them what Cornel West calls sentimental nihilists, "... willing to sidestep or even bludgeon the truth or unpleasant and unpopular facts or stories, in order to provide an emotionally satisfying show?"[4] I could imagine the game players' conversations: "Whoops, little Abok is captured, probably raped, and then sold into slavery while foraging for water. That's okay; let's send out little Poni or Elham. Hey, what was your score?"

However, I must admit that my spirits were buoyed as the faculty-moderated

discussion evolved subsequent to the game. I was proud of those students who spoke out. All of the dozen or so student comments critiqued the cheering and asked us all to consider the gravity of the situation in Darfur, as well as the limitations of the game. Perhaps Nkurunziza's words from earlier in the day faintly echoed in their consciousness. Were the cheers just the voices of a boisterous few? Was it the release of nervous energy during an already emotional period for freshmen, perhaps suffering from separation anxiety from their family and home? Was the plan-

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