

Games of War

As a recruit, the first thing I learnt was that when you're in battle, you obey. No matter what.

"Move out!"

The foggy humidity is thick, enveloping us from every side, and my breath comes short and heavy. We advance. Fifty pairs of synthetic leather boots hit the ground in perfect rhythm, *thud-thud-thud* as the world seems to shake. On the horizon, the enemy appears.

"Grenades, go!"

Numbers flash before my eyes. The smart contact lenses I am wearing ensure both accuracy and precision, counting down so I don't miss my cue. *One, two, three:* I fix my eyes on my target, marked by a laser-projected cross. *Four, five, six:* I blink. The miniscule bomb is launched over 700 metres away by an Underbarrel Grenade Launcher attached to the rifle I carry. *Seven, eight:* Twelve fragmentation grenades erupt simultaneously, each launched by a member of my platoon, shooting shrapnel in every direction.

"Fire at will!"

My favourite command. I heft my rifle up, using the magnifying feature of my contact lenses to peer at the sea of camouflage-clad bodies and mask-covered faces, nearly invisible through the smoke and fire. But not to me. *Reload. Aim. Fire. Repeat.*

When I shoot, I shoot to kill.

I look up again, and the enemy is gone. So are six of our soldiers.

The game ends.

Only six soldiers! That's a record for our platoon. My eyes water as the scenery of the battlefield fades, replaced by the four drab walls constituting my bedroom. Bright red words appear on the walls as an overlay, courtesy of the latest Augmented Reality technology. I groan, sinking back into a chair while I read the debrief generated by Artificial Intelligence, based on our performance during this simulation. Designed to train our reactions and behaviour in battle, the gamified 'war simulation' is one of the most popular training methods during National Service.

***Collective Feedback:** The platoon reacted swiftly and accurately to commands. An obvious improvement from previous rounds of training, leading to a minimised number of "deaths". **New High Score:** Number of deaths, [6].*

***Personal Feedback:** Excellent marksmanship, REC60983. Your effective use of ammunition has earned you [50] points, putting you in [4th] place on the platoon leaderboard! You are currently behind: PTE24601, PFC50781, REC63234. Pass them for a promotion to the next rank, Private (PTE)!*

This concludes the Basic Military Training (BMT) session for today. Recruits are to report promptly on their respective Digital Reality devices tomorrow at 0600.

Pleased with my achievement, I remove the contact lenses from my eyes, lift headphones from my ears.

The words disappear and I stand, leaving the room exhausted after 12 hours of training.

In the living room, the world takes on a different light.

The setting sun pours through tinted window panes, casting long shadows over hardwood as I step toward the dining table. My parents are seated opposite each other, conversing in low tones. I catch the words ‘enemy’, ‘post-war crisis’, and ‘rising tensions’ before James spots me.

“Jie¹, come eat! How was training?” He asks.

A steaming bowl of rice is placed before my seat as I take my place between my parents, smiling fondly at my younger brother. James is ten, just a few years shy of National Service himself. But in moments like this, sitting at the dinner table, mischief in his eyes, he seems years younger.

“Good. My platoon set a new high score, and I’m third in the ranks. I might get promoted soon.”

James gasps in excitement, demanding details, and I describe each of the simulation exercises we went through.

“You know, back in my day, girls your age didn’t participate in National Service.” Dad² interjects, a frown on his face. James and I exchange a glance - it’s his refrain, one he reverts to every time he hears me speak of violence.

“It was just for boys aged 17 to 18. We know, you’ve mentioned it.”

¹ Older sister

“Exactly! Fourteen years old and shooting guns? You’re just children. Far too young to be dealing with things like war.”

Mum³ cuts him off before I can retaliate. “You know the government doesn’t have a choice. After the last war, we can’t afford to be caught off guard again.” She looks down, not meeting our eyes. “Our country does what it must to survive.”

Dad does not appear appeased. He understands, though. After the short, but impactful war, our country recognised the need for better-trained, more able-bodied soldiers. National Service became compulsory for all teenagers from 13 to 19. Boys and girls. To cope with the logistical demands, Digitisation and Gamification were employed - training is almost fully carried out online, fighting against computer-generated enemies rather than real people. By turning NS into a game, effectively every child in Singapore is engaged. I don’t see the issue with it.

"At least we get to see Jie every day, at least she's at home in her room. Not like the old NS." James says softly.

Dad rises from the table, walking away.

"Not like real war, either." He calls over his shoulder.

² Father

³ Mother

Four months later

“This is an official announcement from the Ministry of Defence. On this day, the tenth of August 2053, at 7.53 p.m., our country is facing a threat. It is with a heavy heart that we inform you that Singapore is now at war. Our homeland has come under attack, and our brave men and women, young and old alike, are standing ready to defend our freedoms and values.”

I freeze. We turn in unison to stare at the projector television, wired to show a National Emergency Broadcast even when turned off.

“All members of the Armed Forces or the Civil Defence Force are to report immediately to your various assigned stations for further instructions. This includes recruits currently undergoing National Service, who will begin serving full-time in our forces tomorrow. We express our deepest gratitude to these soldiers...”

The room is silent. Four bowls of rice lay between us, abandoned.

It's Dad who speaks first.

“Soldier.”

I look from James' terrified face to Mum's sad, resigned expression. I cannot feel anything but numb shock.

"Yes, Dad?"

“You’d better come home. No matter what.”

“Fall in!”

The movements are familiar, drilled into my head after months of non-stop rehearsal. If I keep my eyes ahead, I can imagine that this is just another simulation. That in a couple of hours I can log out of the game, and see my name shining on a scoreboard - first place, where it’s been for the past week.

“Move out!”

Half an hour passes before I get my first glimpse of the enemy soldiers. They stand in formation, behind them a swarm of automated tanks and robotic weapons. Their army seems infinite, vastly outnumbering ours.

Then it begins.

War is chaos. It’s a sport of gunpowder and blood, a dance of uncertainty and strategy in which each of us are paramount. It’s a game, and not a foreign one.

Acrid smoke fills my lungs as explosives are launched, the crack of rifles drowning out the pounding of my heart. I tune out the noise, put aside the patchwork of detritus lining the ground and the weight of my equipment. All I can do is rely on my training. I lift my rifle.

“Fire at will!”

I squint, and my contact lenses zoom in. Bright laser dots shows me where my targets are, as well as where my rifle is pointing. Without hesitation, I line up my first shot.

The two red dots align, hovering perfectly in place on dark camouflage uniform.

Then the target - no, the *soldier* - moves, and what's in my scope is his face.

“James?”

The boy is staring straight at me - or at the barrel of my rifle. There is sheer terror in his wide brown eyes.

No, no, it can't be - I take a deep breath.

It's not James. It's an enemy soldier. I wait for the relief to come, but it doesn't. He can't be more than *ten*.

What is he doing on a battlefield? What of the parents, the siblings that need him to come home?

REC60983, You are instructed to fire.

He's just a child.

I'm just a child, too.

How many times have I shot at faceless avatars, how many times have I yearned to see my name atop that bright red scoreboard? Longed to be rewarded for slaughter?

Digitised National Service taught me to play games. I didn't realise they were Games of War.

REC60983, You are instructed to fire. For the survival of the country, remember your training. There will be consequences if you do not comply.

“Our country does what it must to survive.”

Before I was a soldier, I was a child.

But not anymore.

When I shoot, I shoot to kill.