"In a world without gold, we might have been heroes!" Cultural Imaginations of Piracy in Video Games

EUGEN PFISTER (HOCHSCHULE DER KÜNSTE BERN)

Abstract

From its beginning, colonialism had to be legitimized in Western Europe through cultural and political narratives and imagery, for example in early modern travel reports and engravings. Images and tales of the exotic Caribbean, of beautiful but dangerous „natives", of unbelievable fortunes and adventures inspired numerous generations of young men to leave for the „new worlds" and those left behind to support the project. An interesting figure in this set of imaginations in North-Western Europe was the "pirate": poems, plays, novels and illustrations of dashing young rogues, helping their nation to claim their rightful share of the „Seven Seas" achieved major successes in France, Britain the Netherlands and beyond. These images – regardless of how far they might have been from their historical inspiration – were immensely successful and are still an integral and popular part of our narrative repertoire: from novels to movies to video games. It is important to note that the "story" was – from the 18th century onwards –almost always the same: a young (often aristocratic) man, unfairly convicted for a crime he didn't commit became an hors-la-loi against his will but still adhered to his own strict code of conduct and honour. By rescuing a city/ colony/princess he redeemed himself and could be reintegrated into society. Here lies the morale of the story: these imaginations functioned also as acts of political communication, teaching "social discipline". But does this narrative still function in open world video games like Assassin's Creed IV and Pirates!? This article examines "modern" iterations of these ahistorical imaginations in video games to see if and how the cultural image of "piracy" has changed through the media of video games.

Keywords: Game Studies, Cultural History, History of Ideas, Cultural Studies, History of Piracy

The Scourge of the Caribbean

Pirates! They are the scourge of the seven seas, the nightmare of every law-abiding merchant, dashing adventurers, brutal murderers, fearless explorers, romantic womanisers; they are criminals but also romantic idols. They ooze a sort of anarchic machismo and glamour. We read about them in adventure novels, we see them in the cinema and on TV, we dress up as pirates and now – with the advent of video games – we are able to virtually immerse ourselves into the myth, playing games like *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* (Ubisoft Montreal 2013) or *Sid Meier's Pirates!* (Microprose 1987). The idea of the swashbuckling pirate, especially in conjunction with imaginations of tropical Caribbean islands is still successfully tapping into some of our

more subconscious desires (Mackie 24). It is a promise of exoticism and adventure, of freedom and sex (Ganser 32). The phenomenon is not particularly new, and by no means an invention of video games:

> "In representations so ambivalent and repetitious as to signal a cultural fixation, volume after volume of criminal biography have fixed the pirates of the early modern Caribbean as objects of popular fascination, glamorization, and, I think, nostalgia since the late seventeenth century." (Ganser 32)

It should come as no surprise, that the romantic pirates of our video games are not authentic representations of the buccaneers of

the seventeenth century or of the pirates of the eighteenth century. Our jaunty reinterpretations have, in fact, very little in common with the harsh (and mostly short) lives of Caribbean pirates[1] : "the pirates in these texts may be seen as all and none of the above at the same time; they are textual constructions articulating a historical phenomenon" (Ganser 32) In our popular imagination, the life of the pirate is an exhilarating sequence of thrilling sea fights, dizzying swordfights and romance – all rather untypical for the daily business of the historical pirates[2]: The pirates of our video games, for example, don't have to wait week upon week for a likely victim[3], they don't have to careen their ships every month and they don't have to search for drinking water in hostile environments. They aren't forced to flee the navy and usually they don't readily repent on the stairs to the gallows. The pirate in popular culture is, in fact, a cultural construct, a construct that has been particularly successful. The figure of the pirate has become a discursive rhetoric argument:

> "… le pirate/corsaire était une forme vide que chaque époque resémentiserait en fonction de sa sensibilité, des ses croyances, de ses hantises, des ses apsirations, de sa conception des configurations géo-politiques et du système de valeurs qui définit son horizon culturel." (Le Huenen 403)

The figure of the pirate in video games looks back on a long tradition of cultural imaginations: From the seventeenth century onwards, *pirate narratives* established a successful genre for centuries to come. It began with the first travelogues of former privateers and buccaneers such as Raveneau de Lussan, Alexandre de Exquemelin and William Dampier. This was followed by plays, poems, novels and, finally, the cinema. They were never meant to recreate authentic imaginations of historical pirates, but to tell specific stories. And the most frequent story to be told was a myth of honourable men, cast out of society through no fault of their own. With the end of World War II, however, the golden age of piracy in popular culture found an abrupt end and it was only at the turn of the millennium

that pirates reconquered popular culture, first in video games and later in the cinema.

Nowadays, pirates are still a big part of western popular culture; in fact, they are everywhere: they appear not only in video games but also in movies and TV-series; they are to be found on nursery bedding, party drinking cups and stationary. Two big budget pirate video games were scheduled to come out in 2018: *Sea of Thieves*, developed by Rare and released in March 2018 as an exclusive title for the Xbox One and Ubisofts (to be released later in 2018) *Skulls & Bones*, a multiplayer "naval combat game" based on *Assassins Creed IV: Black Flag*. Both settings are easily identifiable as the Caribbean Sea. And while the first game stands in the new tradition of the supernatural treasure hunt narrative in the wake of Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise, the second pits a handful of players against each other in a race for loot. Neither of the titles attempts to recreate an accurate account of historical pirates – or for that matter the political situation of the Caribbean in the seventeenth to eighteenth century – but are contemporary re-imaginations of the pop-culture pirate.

Over the past thirty years, digital games have joined the mass media, reaching an audience of hundreds of millions worldwide. Whether triple-A- or Indie-, video games are all developed from inside our societies, culture and politics and are consequently shaped by these political, social and cultural ideas and discourses – intentionally as well as unintentionally. They are therefore perfect sources for dissemination of dominant historical discourses. Is there a cultural and/or political message hidden in the figure of the pirate in video games? Have video games translated the cultural topos successfully from other media or have they created something new? In what follows, I analyse "modern" iterations of these ahistorical imaginations in video games and examine if and how the cultural image of "piracy" has changed through the media of video games. The traditional narrative framework of the gallant privateer appears to be broken, which leads to the question if video games could be made responsible for this change? After an overview of the development of the cultural imaginations of pirates in history, I will search for one or more

consistent pirate 'myths' – in Roland Barthes' understanding – in video games. But first we to identify the "pirates" in video games.

Pirates!™

The cultural topos of the Caribbean pirate in popular culture is not an attempt to simulate a historical period accurately. It has become a brand, so to speak, with a high recognition value: the Jolly Roger, an eye patch, a peg leg, a parrot and – of course – some buried treasure.

> These pirates of fiction dress and behave in a way that has been handed down to the modern age as pirate orthodoxy. They are heavily sunburned and they tend to be bearded and have luxuriant moustaches. Their heads are covered in brightly coloured handkerchiefs or bandanas and their ears droop under the weight of huge gold earrings. (Earle 7)

Some of these paraphernalia have roots in historical attributes; some do not, as shown by David Cordingly and Jean Pierre Moreau in their histories of piracy.[4] These are only some of the exterior attributes we have all learned to recognise. Pirate narratives are also defined, however, by the distinct if sometimes contradictory emotional values they evoke: violence, cruelty, sexuality, freedom and rebellion. Like the figure of the pirate in popular culture the pirate in video games is characterised by an intrinsic ambivalence: he can be a hero and a monster, terrifying and attractive at the same time (Le Huenen 411)

As mentioned above, pirate narratives in popular culture never aimed for historical authenticity: French travelogues such as Jean-Baptiste Labats "Nouveau voyage aux îles de l'Amérique",[5] for example, helped to advertise the adventure of the "New World" and legitimised these early colonial efforts. Thus they served unconsciously the expansion of the later European empires. Images and tales of exotic foreign lands – and here especially of the Caribbean – of unbelievable fortunes and adventures inspired numerous generations of young men to leave for the "New World" and

those left behind to support the project. The most prominent figure in this set of imaginations in North-Western Europe was the "pirate" and/ or the "privateer"[6]: poems, plays, novels and illustrations of dashing young rogues, helping their nation to claim their rightful share of the "Seven Seas". These images –regardless of how far they might have been from their historical inspiration– are still an integral and popular part of our narrative repertoire today: from novels to films to video games. It should be noted, that the pirate of popular culture is almost exclusively a Caribbean (North-American) phenomenon. There is no single explanation for the preponderance of the Caribbean setting in contrast to the Western African coast and the Indian Ocean for instance. One possible explanation might be, that the European colonial empires were interested in the establishment of longterm settlements in the Caribbean due to the plantation economy, as opposed to simple trading outposts along the African coast, thus focusing public interest on the Caribbean Sea.

The pirate-"story" was –from the seventeenth century onwards– frequently the same: a young (often aristocratic) man, unfairly convicted for a crime he didn't commit becomes an outlaw against his will but still adheres to his own strict code of conduct and honour. These imaginations functioned also as acts of political communication, teaching "social discipline", which soon transcended their function as advertising figures of the colonisation.[7]

A Brief History of the Pirate in Popular Culture

The pirate of the Caribbean might justly be understood as the inspiration for a modern pirate genre, but the figure of the pirate in literature and more generally in fiction was not an invention of the seventeenth century. It was an ambivalent figure from the beginning. The Cilician pirates for example became a formidable foe in the writings of Plutarch and were used to emphasise the qualities and merits of one Caius Julius Caesar. According to Plutarch, Caesar was captured by pirates in Pharmacusa and impressed them with his fearlesness (Plutarch). In this narrative Caesar then assembles a fleet, captures the pirates and crucifies them (Canfora 25-27), a

story later adapted by Suetonius. While based on a historical event the aim of Plutarch and later Suetonius was not to give an accurate account of what had happened but to portray the figure of the politician Caesar. This is one of the two possible narratives of the pirate in our cultural history: the formidable foe, the opponent, the anti-thesis of the civilized man: "Pirata est hostis humani generis" –A pirate is the enemy of humankind, a Roman phrase attributed to Cicero.

This narrative tradition found its continuation in the publication of pirate chronicles in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Alexandre Olivier Exquemelins, himself a former buccaneer, published an account of his experiences in 1678: *De Americaensche Zee-Rovers*, later translated into German, Spanish, English and French. One reason for our enduring fascination with pirates is certainly the vivid descriptions of the brutal atrocities of the French buccaneer L'Ollonois (Pfister, *Von Bukanieren, Flibustiers und Piraten* 195). Captain Johnson's –a pseudonym associated by many scholars with Daniel Defoe– *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pirates*, first published in 1724, achieved a similar level of success. The book was based on contemporary court reports and published confessions. While also a rather unreliable "historical source", it is – together with Exquemelins *The Buccaneers of America* – still the main inspiration for movies (Moreau 341) and video games alike.

The cultural perception on piracy depended naturally on the perspective of the writer, as can be seen in the in "The Peloponnesian War" by Thucydides. If some of your most famous coevals, for instance, were publicly celebrated pirates you could endorse a more positive perspective of piracy. Travel journals such as Raveneau de Lussan's *Journal du voyage fait à la mer du Sud, avec les flibustiers de l'Amérique en 1684 et années suivantes* and William Dampier's *New Voyage Round the World* (1697) and even parts of Exquemelin's *Buccaneers of America* can also be read in this tradition. They were frequently reprinted and sold well across North-Western Europe. One of the first fictionalisation of the figure of the gallant pirate happened as early as 1640 with Jean Mairet's

L'illustre Corsaire and in 1662 with Paul Scarron's comedy *Le prince Corsaire*. The eponymous corsair was – in both cases – in reality of noble birth (Requemora 308). The figure of the pirate became a global cultural phenomenon (Krief 344) with the adventure novels of the nineteenth century, especially James Fenimore Cooper's *Red Rover* (1827) and Emilio Salgari's *Corsaro Nero* (1898). Salgaris *Corsaro Nero* codified the narrative of the "pirate against his will", the fallen prince. The hero of the story, the young noble Emilio di Roccabruna is forced to flee Europe because of the treachery of a certain Duke Van Gould and begins a successful career as a pirate in the Caribbean, his mission to find the traitor and to avenge his brothers. It wasn't therefore a voluntary decision on his part to become a pirate but a consequence of an act of treason. The narrative was then further refined by the Italian writer, Rafael Sabatini, in his best-selling novels *The Sea-Hawk* (1915) and *Captain Blood* (1922) in the early twentieth century. With the advent of the moving picture, both stories were turned into films, first as silent movies and subsequently as talkies, thus helping to propel the Australian actor, Errol Flynn, to international stardom. The narrative stayed largely unchanged. In *Captain Blood* (U.S. 1935), for example, a certain Irish physician, Dr. Peter Blood, helps some wounded rebels under the Duke of Monmouth. For helping the rebels, he is sentenced to be sold into slavery in Barbados. He flees and becomes a rather successful and dashing pirate. In contrast to his French ally, the ruthless Captain Levasseur, Captain Blood adheres to a strict code of honour, especially when female captives are involved. The inevitable happens: he kills Levasseur in a duel; he romances the beautiful niece of the local military commander and saves the British colony from a French surprise attack, thus redeeming himself. The story of *The Sea Hawk* (US 1940) is practically the same with the minor difference that now the Spanish are the bad guys.

The narrative of the honourable privateer bears the promise of freedom, exoticism and excitement. Its hero is free of our daily social constrictions. He takes what he wants when he wants it. But on second glance, very strict limits become apparent. First: the privateers of fiction never become outlaws through free will,

but are obliged by exterior circumstances to live this life. Second: contrary to their adversaries – the ruthless pirates – the privateers followed a self-imposed code of conduct. Third: they all had but one aim – sometimes it was more of an unconscious wish – to become a part of society again. They tried to redeem themselves by saving their colony. Therefore, the carefree pirate life can only be an ephemeral episode – a necessary rite de passage. The message of the narrative as such becomes apparent: it aims for social discipline. This goal is finally achieved by opposing the honourable privateer with the figure of the ruthless and cruel pirate. This message became, to some extent, a myth in the sense of Roland Barthes' mythologies. It appears to us to be a natural component of the pirate narrative. We expect pirate stories to follow those unwritten rules, which are therefore never questioned.[8]

With the end of World War II, the narrative, which had been successfully reproduced for more than three centuries, abruptly lost its appeal to Western audiences. The few British and Italian Pirate films that came after this time were only modest successes. It was only in the 1980s that the pirates of the Caribbean became a moderately successful setting for video games, while attempts to resuscitate the genre with films such as *Cutthroat Island* (1995) flopped at the box office, until Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* (2003). While the first film of the series had a classic honourable privateer in the figure of Will Turner, played by Orlando Bloom, it was its counterpart, the ruthless but loveable Jack Sparrow, played by Johnny Depp, that stole the show and became the central protagonist of the four sequels. The honourable privateer then appears to have vanished from our screens. What remains is the idea of freedom associated with the outlaws but without the didactic moment at the end. In the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise – the gritty and dark aesthetics notwithstanding – the pirate motif loses its core ingredient altogether: piracy. There are no attacks on merchants on the high seas.

Imaginations of Pirates in Video Games

Video Games as a media of popular culture are not only a means of recreation and entertainment but they also help to communicate the values and worldviews of our culture. Niklas Luhmann opened his reflections on the reality of mass media as follows: "Whatever we know about society, or indeed about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media." As he continues, "Even if all knowledge were to carry a warning that it was open to doubt, it would still have to be used as a foundation, as a starting point" (Luhmann 1) All information we acquire in mass media frames our future cultural, economic, social and political knowledge. This is also true for works of fiction. This means that we are, in fact, partly socialised through video games. Our collective identities are a result not only of our upbringing and education, but also of our interaction with mass media, especially when related to the more abstract concepts of politics and society. "It is also in the cultural imagery that significant political battles are fought, "because it is here that coherent narratives are produced, which in turn serves as the basis for any sense of community and political action" (Bronfen 23)

The pirate narrative of the honourable privateer was astonishingly adaptable. Largely originating in the French tragic comedy of the seventeenth century, it migrated to the adventure novel and children's literature of the nineteenth century and finally became the mantle and dagger film in the early twentieth century. But is it possible to transpose this very teleological and linear narrative to an interactive media like video games? What happens, for example, when this chronological narrative encounters open world mechanics? To better analyse the impact of gameplay on the narrative I distinguish hereafter two different approaches of gameplay: The first is the linear narrative model of the adventure, the action-adventure and – to a lesser degree – the role-playing game (RPG). These games have a beginning and one possible end, and the path of the player is more or less prescribed by the narrative. The second is the open world model of the simulation and strategy game. I begin my observations with the linear narrative model, because it is here that transmedial transfers

become most apparent.

Of Plundered Hearts and Monkey Islands: Linear Games

The first pirate video games were rather straightforward: in the 1970s, the pirate motif had no longer the appeal of the interwar period, but it was still part of the popular culture repertoire. As early video games were mostly programmed by individuals on a low budget, pirate narratives were a welcome substitute to expensive trademarks and franchises. This is why Scot Adams, for instance, chose to name one of his text-adventures *Pirate Adventure*. The game, which came out in 1978, is in fact a very simplistic treasure hunt, where the player interacts with the program via a text parser; typing simple commands like "go north" and "take cup". Apart from the title and a hand-drawn cover illustration depicting an exotic island scene, there is also a non-player character, described by the programme as a pirate. But apart from this, the game has very little to do with pirates. It simply uses the theme to "jazz up" a classical treasure hunt, in a sense foreshadowing the pirateless *Pirates of the Caribbean*.

In 1987, Infocom published *Plundered Hearts* a much more detailed pirate text adventure, in which the player takes the role of a young woman who is captured by pirates*: "In the 17th century the seas are as wild as the untamed heart of a young woman"* reads the back of the game box. In the ensuing romantic intrigues, the player has to decide between the dashing young pirate Nicholas Jamison and his nemesis the ruthless governor Jean Lafond. This is the first game that incorporates the classical narrative with an honourable privateer and his cruel antagonist. By making the villain French it even mirrors the national stereotypes of the American cinema such as *The Black Corsair* and *Captain Blood*. The pirates in the game, however, are not protagonists but allies and/or antagonists of the heroine. Japanese role-playing games also heavily rely on the pirate-NPC, most often in the guise of comic relief. We meet pirates in *Final Fantasy II, V, XII* [9] and in *Lost Odyssey*. Tetra's pirate crew in *Zelda: The Wind Wake* is a good example for this narrative mechanism.

These jolly pirates symbolize wildness and freedom but they never attack commercial ships for booty but search for hidden treasure. While the Caribbean pirates in Western popular culture are a cultural appropriation of a historical phenomenon, the Japanese imaginations are an appropriation of the pirates of Western popular culture, an imagination of the second degree so to speak. They epitomize a certain admiration for a presumed western freedom and ferocity, but communicate also a cultural distance.

Parodies of Caribbean pirates are a similar case, as exemplified by another pirate hero of early video game adventures: Guybrush Threepwood, an insecure young adult wanting to become a pirate. The manual of the adventure-parody *The Secret of Monkey Island* written by Ron Gilbert, Tim Schafer and Dave Grossman for Lucasfilm Games and published in 1990, introduces the story as follows:

> In the Secret of Monkey Island, you play the role of Guybrush Threepwood, a young man who has just hit the shores of Mêlée Island™ (somewhere in the Caribbean). Our naive hero's travels have lead him to Mêlée Island™ in a quest to fulfil his life's ambition...to become a fierce, swashbuckling, bloodthirsty pirate. Unbeknown to Guybrush, however, there have been some strange happenings in the area surrounding Melee Island and on the more mysterious Monkey Island. As he walks into this maelstrom of mystery, Guybrush will soon be very aware that things are not what they appear to be, that even bloodthirsty pirates can be scared, and that there's more to being a pirate than swinging a sword and drinking grog! Here's where you come in.... (Gilbert et al.)

The protagonist has first to pass "three trials" at Mêlée Island™ to be accepted as an equal by the "important-looking" pirates. When stealing a statue from the governor Elaine Marley – one of the three aforementioned trials – he falls in love with her only to witness the abduction of his beloved by the "Ghost pirate Le Chuck". The story appears to be a potpourri of all common stereotypes of the genre, and rightly so: there is the good pirate/privateer and the bad pirate,

the captured love interest, the treasure hunt, the motley crew, exotic islands and wild cannibals. These set pieces are exaggerated to an extreme and thus deconstructed in the tradition of satire. The piratical hero is no longer the self-confident gentleman-adventurer oozing wildness and sex-appeal but a young wannabe, insecure and always afraid of not being taken seriously. His timid menace, "Don't eat me! I'm a mighty pirate!" is therefore rightly ignored by the vegetarian cannibals of Monkey Island. (These "cannibals" are naturally not a parody of the historical Caribs of the Lesser Antilles but a parody of the cultural trope of the "wild indigenes".)

The spectacular swordfights – central staple of the genre – are also broken down to an "insult sword fight" in The Secret of Monkey Island, where verbal attacks have to be riposted correctly to prevail. By making fun of the genre, the game is at the same time a loving tribute and therefore a perfect source for the cultural imagery of piracy, as explained by Ron Gilbert himself: "The pirates on Monkey Island aren't like real pirates, who were slimy and vicious, the terrorists of the 17th century. These are swashbuckling fun-loving pirates, like the ones in the adventure stories everyone grows up with."[10] By his own account, Ron Gilbert found the inspiration for the game in non-fiction books as well as in novels, in particular, Tim Powers' "historical fantasy novel" On Stranger Tides. The game release was followed by an increasingly surreal direct sequel – LeChuck's Revenge – and subsequent parts (but without the participation of the original developer team). The theme of pirate treasure has also become a main plot line in the recent action adventure Uncharted 4: A Thief's End, set in the ruins of fictional pirate republic Libertalia, invented by Captain Johnson (Moreau 368f.). The fate of the pirates is told to players via the intermediate of in-game history, while the classical narrative of the honourable pirate plays no significant role in the game.

A good example of a successful translation of the narrative can, nevertheless, be found in the RPG-series Risen, especially in the second and third part. In Risen 2, set in a fantastic world where Titans and humans are locked in an eternal fight, the player takes over the role of a castaway. The setting is clearly inspired by the fauna and flora of the Caribbean, as are the toponyms. One city, for example, is called Antigua. The NPC "Steelbeard" is an explicit allusion to Blackbeard, and his daughter "Patty" is inspired by the fictional character of Anne Providence from Jacques Tourneur's film Anne of the Indies. Like Anne, Patty is the daughter of a famous pirate. Interestingly enough this appears to be the only acceptable way for a woman to become a successful pirate in most of the pertinent movies and games. It is also true for the figures of Morgan, played by Geena Davis in Cutthroat Island and Angelica, played by Penelope Cruz in Pirates of the Caribbean 4: On Stranger Tides. And while these figures are shown as equal to the male protagonist in skills and intelligence, their exceptional status only proves the rule, that the classical pirate apparently still has to be a man. While the player has the possibility to travel freely through the archipelago, he has to follow a storyline if he wants to "win the game". We play, in fact, an agent of the inquisition, only pretending to be a pirate to find a mythical weapon, which means that we are constrained by exterior circumstances to be a pirate for a finite amount of time. Thus, Risen 2 is by far the most faithful adaptation of the classical narrative, even when compared to its sequel Risen 3, which focuses even more on supernatural and magical elements.

Traces of supernatural elements can also be found in the game world of Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag. The game is embedded in the overarching narrative of the Assassin's Creed series presenting a century old struggle between the secret order of the Templars against the Assassins in a competition for alien artefacts and over the fate of humanity. The game-series has traditionally an abundance of narrative levels: On the first level, set in the near future, the player works unknowingly for a company of the Templars. Here he is able to immerse himself in the memories of his ancestor Edward Kenway with the help of an apparatus called the Animus. This narrative level serves only the purpose to link the game to the other games of the series and is of no further importance for the main narrative, set in the Caribbean. On a second level, we play Edward Kenway, a British pirate and later member of the Assassins. With the help of

(historical) pirate contemporaries – most notably Blackbeard – Kenway attempts to protect the (fictitious) pirate republic set in Nassau against the attacks of the (historical) pirate hunter Woodes Rodgers. The pirate republic motif might be inspired by the tales of Libertalia. It serves, above all, the purpose to oppose the freedom-loving pirates (and by extension the Assassins) and the encroaching British Empire (and by extension the Templars). This means that the game world – apart from some historical figures and places – is not trying to be authentic but is clearly fiction. It is interesting to note, however, that Ubisoft was eager to promote the historical research involved in the development process. In fact, historical authenticity is a big selling point of the game series: "a work of fiction that depicts the real events" (Sawula). Darby McDewitt, creative writer of the series, explained that the game world was based on "The Republic of Pirates" (2007) a monography by the American journalist, Colin Woodard [11]. Ubisoft further hired the "weapon historian", Mike Loades.[12] Based on the dialogue and the character design we can furthermore assume that the writers must have read Captain Johnson's *Most Notorious Pyrates.* In addition, on a visual level, we can identify the influence of the American nineteenth century illustrator, Howard Pyle (Pfister, *Der Pirat als Demokrat* 289-90).

The envisaged authenticity, nevertheless, stays superficial. It is the scenery: "Kulissenauthentizität".[13] It is interesting to see, though, how the historical pirates are presented in the game. They are shown as social rebels – which has some congruence with their historical models and the idea of the "pirate libertaire" (Moreau 357). The pirates of the early eighteenth century were, in fact, for the most part mutineers who could no longer bear the inhumane working conditions of the British merchant navy. In this sense, Marcus Rediker (294) understands these pirates to be rebels: "[Seamen] influenced both the form and the content of plebeian protest … They manifested and contributed to the anti-authoritarian and egalitarian traditions within early working class culture."[14] Their fight for an independent pirate democracy in Nassau, however, is far from the political thoughts of its role models. While it is

true that life on pirate ships on the whole was organised rather democratically, there are no sources whatsoever concerning a political fight by the pirates (Moreau 377f.):

> In order to avoid the romantic fallacy of viewing piracy as diametrically opposed to oppression and violence which lurks in many accounts of pirates, one needs to acknowledge the other side of the coin as well: first, experimental pirate counter-societies were often short-lived or unsuccessful; for instance, pirates did partake in the slave-trade and did not always free slaves captured from another vessel. Their resistance was by no means unaffected by the social values and racial stereotypes of their times; pirates might have minimized acts of violence by relying on their dangerous image, but pacifism was never their priority. (Ganser 36)

In sum, the historical pirates were rebels but no revolutionaries.

While the narrative of the honest pirate no longer dominates the scene, there still are some vestiges of the narrative left: Kenway adheres to his code of conduct and acts for the most part of the game ethically and has to rescue his love interest –the female pirate Mary Read (inspired by a historical figure of the same name). He also tries to do the "right thing" by defending Nassau from a British attack. But there are some important deviations: Edward becomes a "gentleman of fortune" of his own volition and –even more importantly– he seeks no redemption. The open game world invites the player to explore and hunt for victims. Successful raids are rewarded with resources to further enhance the performance of the ship. This game mechanic invites the players to spend hours upon hours attacking one merchant ship after the other. There is no time and no incentive to ponder the possibility of becoming an honest man again. The master narrative of social discipline fades into the background, while the players attack one enemy ship after the other, giving no quarters. The only motivation to search for yet more valuable prizes is the possibility to upgrade one's ship, base and gear. Then again, an upgraded ship enables the players to attack even more valuable prizes. It

is telling, that, with *Skulls & Bones*, Ubisoft will be publishing now a game solely based on the naval battle mechanic in 2018. The loss of the gallant privateer narrative is partially due to a story-related renunciation of the myth but in particular to the open world game mechanic of limitless naval battles and raids.

From Port Royal to Tropico: Pirate Simulations

It can therefore be said that a translation of the "honourable pirate" narrative is potentially possible when linear (or, in the case of RPGs, mostly linear) games are involved. Open world game mechanics on the other hand appear to counter the narrative. The first genuine pirate simulation [15] was programmed in 1987 by Sid Meier. Simply called *Pirates!*, the game was published by Microprose, co-founded by Meier, which was most famous for highly detailed flight simulators. The game became a lasting and influential success and it was the first game where the protagonist was himself a pirate: "The world's first swashbuckling simulator" (*Manual for Pirates* 82). It is an interesting mix of different genres: trade simulation, strategy game and RPG with arcade elements (in particular the swordfights). When reading the extensive handbook, it quickly becomes apparent that Sid Meier invested much time in research and even appears to have read most of the historical works on that matter. In contrast to his contemporary American historians concentrating almost entirely on the British, he was also interested in the French, Dutch and Spanish perspectives. These are, incidentally, also the four possible European origins of the protagonist. The manual bears witness to Meier's zeal for historical accuracy over 87 pages, including "historical footnotes" (Sandkühler 183): "*Pirates!* began as a glimmer in an historian's eye. Here at Microprose we knew the buccaneering era in the Caribbean would make a formidable game"(*Manual for Pirates*). But Sid Meier was also clearly inspired by the pirate narrative in popular culture (Sandkühler 193). This is why he incorporated arcade swordfights on the ship's deck and the possibility to romance a governor's daughter. While of no importance for the actual gameplay, the narrative of the honourable pirate is apparent in the aftermath of the game. When a pirate retires, his success is evaluated by the program and then ranked from beggar to king's advisor.[16] The reintegration of society is therefore still understood as the goal of a pirate's life. This, however, turns out to be only an embellishment. The actual gameplay leaves the players with the freedom to choose their own actions: they can decide to roam the seas as privateers with an official permit in the form of letter of marques, to wage war on specific fractions, to simply trade, or to become the enemy of all men by attacking every ship in sight. The moment of social discipline therefore loses its authority over the player, because the gameplay itself does not reward the classical narrative. The game was surprisingly successful, followed by two official remakes: *Pirates! Gold* (1993) and *Pirates!* (2004) and a handful of video game clones: *Sea Legends*, *Buccaneer* and *Corsairs: Conquest at Sea*. Interestingly, these later titles put more and more emphasis on the trade aspect of the original game. At the same time, with the prominence of trade, the figure of the pirate, mostly symbolised by a small ship on a map, moves more and more into the background. This becomes most obvious in the *Port Royale* series (2002-2004), heavily influenced by *Pirates!* The game *Port Royale* is a business simulation game set in the Caribbean, where spreadsheets dominate the aesthetics. In *Port Royale 3* for example the protagonist is a young Spanish commoner who falls in love with Elena, the daughter of the governor of Port Royale. If the player decides to take the "adventurer path" he would end up at war with the French in order to save Elena, who has been captured by pirates hired by a young Frenchman who plans to marry her. But the story is, as with *Sid Meier's Pirates!,* not part of the gameplay but an embellishment which can be ignored and therefore is unable to develop into a didactic moment.[17]

This dissonance between the story told by game mechanics as opposed to the story told by the background story, can also be seen in the imaginations of the "natives". As satirized by the vegetarian cannibals of Monkey Island, the imaginations of so-called "native tribes" in video games clearly show, that these games

are not attempts to simulate a specific historical episode. While there are Indigenes included in some pirate games – most notably in *Sid Meier's Pirates!,* – they are normally just a shallow decal of the original Taíno and Island Caribs. We learn nothing about their culture and society, and they have no agency to speak of. They are in fact reduced to a tool for the players. This shows, that the Caribbean setting of most pirate narratives never was about the Caribbean but only used this historical episode as a well-established background.

Vestiges of the "noble privateer" narrative are a testimony of the endurance of a century-old myth. This cannot, however, change the fact that the gameplay, focussing on the moment of agency and wealth-accumulation, has the power to counter this narrative (Linderoth 17-30). While it is theoretically possible that individual players choose to endorse this narrative framework to improve their game experience, it is no longer a requirement. And what is more, because the backstory has no real influence on the gameplay, the story looses more and more importance with the continued act of playing these games.

"It's fun to charter an accountant / And sail the wide accountancy"

As shown in the historical overview, the narrative frame of the good versus the bad pirate had an unparalleled consistency in Western culture for more than four centuries. It originated in the age-old cultural dichotomy of the gentleman-adventurer, on the one side, and the ruthless foe of humanity, on the other side. The success of the "honourable privateer" story can probably be explained with the emergence of the modern state in Western Europe. It developed a social function, offering its audience the idea of freedom, a short vacation from its civic duties. The moral of the story, however, helped legitimate the modern state and the loss of personal liberties. Even the wildest privateer desired nothing more than to get back his place in society, to marry the Governor's daughter and become a respectable subject (Pfister, *What did you say*).

While early video games still translated and/or quoted the classical narrative of the honourable

pirate vs. the ruthless pirate, open world game mechanics more and more impeded a potential didactic moment. Eventually, video games abandoned the narrative altogether and focused instead on the mythical treasure hunt motif – inspired by the youth literature of the nineteenth and twentieth century – such as *Sea of Thieves* and the *Pirates of the Caribbean* Franchise or on the aspect of capital accumulation – in particular simulations like *Pirates!, Port Royale* and *Tropico 2.* As is evident in these titles, the element of social discipline appears to have gradually lost its function. In both possible gameplays – treasure hunt and capital accumulation – an educational impetus was replaced by the strive for personal wealth. *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag,* with its reliance on a strong story, shows, in particular, that the pirate motif nowadays is strongly connoted with individualism as opposed to the idea of social responsibility vis-à-vis society in the traditional pirate narrative (Pfister, *Der Pirat als Demokrat*). The modern state appears to be no longer the safe haven at the end of the story, or is an unreliable ally as shown in the economic simulations or the opponent of freedom as in *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*. What is more, the Caribbean setting lost all remaining connections to the quoted historical and geographical reference point and became more and more a pop-cultural self-reference. These are no longer commentaries and imaginations of the relative freedom of the imperial peripheries, about cultural transfers and colonial appropriations of a specific period and space.

This new emerging pirate narrative was certainly facilitated by traditional game mechanics, which conventionally tend to strengthen the agency of the player, and thus propagate consciously or unconsciously a strong impression of individualism. Traditional ideas of gameplay focusing on conflict, concurrence and the accumulation of resources and wealth defined a new imagination of the pirate, from gentleman-adventurer to adventurer-capitalist. In light of the increasing dissociation of pirate video games with the traditional pirate narrative, these games ironically resonate with the historical pirates, as shown by Alexandra Ganser:

[E]specially from a macrohistorical perspective, one might argue that despite the pirates' anti-hegemonic economic and social practices, they nevertheless did function as vanguard colonialists, first settlers, explorers, and dynamic agents necessary for the advance of capitalism (46).

This shift is partially due to the rhetoric of the medium of video game that focuses on agency and conflict. The media itself becomes the message: a story of individualistic adventurers searching for riches in the American Caribbean. In the dog-eat-dog world of perpetual conflict and concurrence of video games, our virtual pirates just follow the rules of the game. It is important to note that game mechanics are not an unchangeable value in our culture but also a semiotic sign, a discursive statement.

This might be how a new myth emerged. But we also have to take into account that a very similar narrative proliferated at the same time in films and TV-series. This "new" pirate could ironically be seen as a more "authentic" imagination of the historical pirates who lived for the most part a life outside of society only relying on their personal wits and strengths. The historical pirate of the eighteenth century –as opposed to the buccaneers and privateers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – was no gentleman or freedom fighter. He was to some extent a rebel (but not a revolutionary) – as shown by Marcus Rediker– but above all he preferred to live a short and dangerous life in freedom as compared to the inhuman conditions on board British merchant ships.

Even so, pirate games are not a historical source of the depicted historical period but of their culture of origin, i.e., the western society. The western origin of the game developers and publishers explains, amongst other things, why the depicted pirates almost exclusively roam the American seas and not for instance the Indian Ocean or the South China Sea. The pirate figure always was a sort of 'narrative container' waiting to be filled (Le Huenén 402). In view of this inherent openness of the pirate figure, the consistency of a dominant narrative of the gentleman pirate is even more extraordinary. He

is the ambivalent hero of plays, poems, romantic novels, movies and can even be found in video games. It is possible that we are now witnessing the advent of a new dominant narrative statement: the individualist fortune hunter. As Alexandra Ganser demonstrates in her research on piracy, pirates are "figures symptomatic of crisis" (32). When seen in the light of a developing scepticism towards democracy, piracy could be thus understood as a source for an actual societal paradigm shift from submission to the societal order to the triumph of individualism, with all its consequences.

Notes

1. See David Cordingly, *Under the Black Flag,* Jean-Pierre Moreau, *Une histoire des pirates,* and Peter Earle, *The Pirate Wars.*

2. Compare Eugen Pfister, "'Imaginez des Tigres avec un peu de Raison'. Von Bukanieren, Flibustiers und Piraten (1602-1726)." and Eugen Pfister, "'What did your say your occupation was? – I'm a grog-swilling, foul-smelling pirate'. Das Piratenbild in 'alten' und 'neuen' Medien".

3. „*Au XVIe et debut du XVIIe siècle, dans les voyages au pays 'au delà de la faim', le premier ennemi des flibustiers était souvent l'ennui*" (qtd. in Moreau 373).

4. See Cordingly, *Under the black Flag*, and Moreau, *Histoire des Pirates.*

5. See R. P. Jean Baptiste Labat, *Voyage aux Caraibes.*

6. While popular culture usually makes no distinction between the terms pirate, privateer, buccaneer and corsair, they were initially describing different "professions". The privateer was sanctioned by a letter of marque of one government and was therefore allowed to attack merchant vessels of the enemy nation while the pirate was an open criminal attacking ships of all nations. Buccaneers were the first pirates and privateers who stayed in the Caribbean for the winters and corsairs were pirates/privateers in the Mediterranean Sea. For an extensive lexicography see Pfister, *Von Bukanieren, Flibustiers und Piraten*, op. cit. 187f.

7. Cf. Gerhard Schuck, „Theorien moderner Vergesellschaftung in den historischen Wissenschaften um 1900."

8. To my knowledge there are no extensive analyses of this concrete narrative. Cf. Also Eugen Pfister, „Roland Barthes Mythos-Begriff."

9. Final Fantasy II (1988), Final Fantasy V (1992), and Final Fantasy XII (2006).

10. *"I was sorting through some boxes today and I came across my copy of Tim Power's On Stranger Tides, which I read in the late 80's and was the inspiration for Monkey*

Island. Some people believe the inspiration for Monkey Island came from the Pirates of the Caribbean ride - probably because I said it several times during interviews - but that was really just for the ambiance. If you read this book you can really see where Guybrush and LeChuck were -plagiarized- derived from, plus the heavy influence of voodoo in the game. When I am in the early stages of designing, I'll read a lot of books, listen to a lot of music and watch a lot of movies. I'll pick up little ideas here and there. We in the business call it 'stealing'." ("The Secret of Creating Monkey Island")

11. See Colin Woodard, *The Republic of Pirates.* The choice of Woodard's journalistic account means that the writers of Ubisoft effectively decided to ignore current historiography, i.e. the works of Marcus Rediker, David Cordingly, Peter Earle and Jean-Pierre Moreau.

12. "Yes, I'm a weapon historian, but I also am a serious historian generally." (qtd. in Campbell, "Truth and fantasy in Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag.").

13. See Carl Heinze, *Mittelalter Computer Spiele.*

14. See also Ganser. pp. 31.

15. In the early "business simulation" *Pirates of the Barbary Coast* (1986) developed for the Commodore 64, the pirates played the role of the ruthless antagonists and the player had to accumulate wealth through commerce to be able to pay the ransom for his daughter in the game.

16. The ranks in the original Pirates! (1984) from 24 to 1 are: *"beggar, pauper, scoundrel, rogue, farm hand, sailor, bartender, sergeant, sailing master, tavern keeper, major, shop owner, colonel, councilmember, merchant captain, sugar planter, general, wealthy merchant, plantation owner, rich banker, fleet admiral, Lt. Governor, governor and king's advisor."*

17. For an extensive overview over pirate simulations cf. Eugen Pfister, "'Don't eat me -I'm a mighty pirate'. Das Piratenbild in Computerspielen."

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Author's Biography

Eugen Pfister is the project manager of the SNF-Ambizione research project "Horror - Game - Politics" at the Hochschule der Künste Bern (HKB), Switzerland. He has degrees in History and Political Sciences from University of Vienna and Université Paris IV – Sorbonne. From 2008 to 2013, he held a fellowship at the international graduate school „The History of Political Communication from the Antiquities to the 20th century." He has earned his PhD in co-tutelle at the Universita degli studi di Trento and at the Johann-Wolfgang-Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main. He is a founding member of the research group "Geschichtswissenschaft und Digitale Spiele" (gespielt.hypotheses.org).