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A game (simulation) is a game (interactive technology) is a game (lifestyle) is a game (live archive): *An Introduction*

MAHSHID MAYAR (BIELEFELD UNIVERSITY)

In the post-9/11 world, critics and advocates of the so-called preemptive war have resorted to video games as a metaphor, or at least a motif, to reach opposing ends. The virtual world has already turned into a space where campaign wars are fought and elections are won. In their capacity to engage with sociopolitical realities, video games have been continually mentioned in debates over war: either comparable to a first-person shooter, or far more technically, affectively, and politically complex than any game title. On the one hand, as Roger Stahl reminds us in "Digital War and Public Mind," as journalism and the big screen failed to record the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, "the video game industry squarely embraced the thematic of contemporary warfare" (144). At the same time, however, the video game industry is inherently at a loss when it comes to the realities of war on the ground as it is viewed at worst as a purgatory and at best as a medium of simulation. In fact, video games as realistic documentary renderings of war have been heavily criticized as bland and apolitical; in the words of Ben Fountain:

> Everything is political, if we're living among other human beings. Certainly everything in a society is political… And war perhaps is the ultimate political sphere. Some representations of the Iraq war—Hollywood movies, especially—have tried to be neutral, to simply present the soldiers' experience on the ground without political commentary. Well, what you get then is a video game… Any realistic exploration of the war is going to have to include the political element; otherwise it's just not worth the time. (qtd. in Buchanan 103)

On the other hand, in a 2012 interview with the *Atlantic*'s Jeffery Goldberg about waging war against Iran, President Obama maintained:

> Look, if people want to say about me that I have a profound preference for peace over war, that every time I order young men and women into a combat theater and then see the consequences on some of them, if they're lucky enough to come back, that this weighs on me—I make no apologies for that. Because anybody who is sitting in my chair who isn't mindful of the costs of war shouldn't be here, because it's serious business. These aren't video games that we're playing here.

These are the words of a president who is fondly remembered by the American gamer community as the godfather of the video game industry in the United States—"the most video game-friendly president in U.S. history" (Crecente). President Obama's remarks about the post-9/11 American ways of war as a far more complex matter than a video game, while intentionally downplaying the elaborate power of in-game narratives in giving force to out-game debates and practices, could be read as an attempt by the former U.S. president to counter the debates over the massive investment of the U.S. Army in video games as recruitment entry points.[1]

On a cultural front, 2012 was also the year during which the MoMA acquired fourteen digital games for its Architecture and Design Collection, ranging from *Packman* and *Tetris* to *SimCity* and *Super Mario*. These classic video game titles were selected and put on display in a permanent exhibition thanks, as the museum announced, to their capacity not only as art but as "interaction design." According to the exhibition's curator Paola Antonelli:

> As with all other design objects in MoMA's

> collection, from posters to chairs to cars to fonts, curators seek a combination of historical and cultural relevance, aesthetic expression, functional and structural soundness, innovative approaches to technology and behavior, and a successful synthesis of materials and techniques [in video games] in achieving the goal set by the initial program.

Economically speaking, too, video game revenues have increased remarkably across the globe. With an expanding official market following decades of video game piracy in the region, Latin America for one is now the second fastest growing video game market in the world. According to a 2016 Gamer Consumer Insights survey conducted by Newzoo, Latin America closely follows Southeast Asia in its share of annual growth in video game revenues (Holleman). With approximately 110 million paying gamers in 2016, the total annual game revenues were more than $4 billion, the research suggests. With a regimen of 20% annual growth, Holleman predicts that the 2019 total game revenues in Latin American will reach $6.2 billion, with a major share of the revenues coming from mobile games. In the meantime, while Canada's market is reported to have had a total game revenues of $1.8 billion in 2016, the country's video game market growth (3.8% per annum) is remarkably slower than that of Latin America (ESAC). Even the United States, which is a leader in terms both of revenues (worth $23.6 billion) and the total number of gamers (179 million gamers in 2016), has an estimated average annual growth rate of only 4.1% ("US Games Market 2016").

These are but a handful of points that mark the widespread presence of video games in political rhetoric, arts, and economy, showcasing the relevance of a videogaming mentality/language in the Americas (and of course globally) in the past two to three decades—what Phillip Penix-Tadsen refers to as the "increased interpenetration of 'reality' and 'gamespace'" (4). Following these examples, and looking at the Americas through the lens of critical game studies as my guiding objective in this introduction, I examine the rather recent, mostly undocumented intimacy and reciprocity between (inter-)American studies and game studies in order to make arguments about their commerce in terms of both semantics and thematics.

Indeed, among the many lenses through which the cultures of the Americas have been examined in the new millennium, video games are a particularly productive one. In its routines of inclusivity and exclusivity (as well as instances of lukewarm and superficial pretences to inclusion),[2] videogaming as a socially significant, culturally ubiquitous, and politically charged practice reveals what about the Americas' past, present, and future is deemed ludic, why and in what terms. A critical examination of video games as medium of engagement provides insight into the multitudinous aspects of the post-9/11 world order in which only certain of those aspects are dealt with as ludic (interactively simulable and narratively consumable). In the meantime, topics, character types, and historical events that are excluded from the gamescape (e.g., the intricacies of decades of drug wars in Latin America, the individuals and communities that have led the ethnic struggle in Canada, or the eventful history of unilateral sanctions imposed by the United States on its so-called strategic foes) are either left for other media to cover (such as the traditional news media or social networks) or left entirely off the radar. I understand this feature of video games as *videoludification*; as Muriel and Crawford suggest, our social realities and cultural concerns in the new century—and I would add, our postmodern accounts of history tailored for popular consumption—could be made sense of as we examine "the institutionalization of video game practices, experiences, and meanings, in contemporary society"(5).

Therefore, rather than a close reading of individual game titles or transmedia networks that ludify Americanness, take the Americas as their setting where the post-apocalyptic unfolds, or complicate our relationship with the historical narratives available to us via more formal channels such as history textbooks, consider this introduction a brief report on some of the ways these fields corroborate and contribute to one another—a series of cut-scenes to the contact zones between critical game studies and (inter-)American studies. As a north-

Americanist, I do not treat video games in this introduction as cultural artefacts of archival or artistic value (which they have proved to be), nor do I analyse individual commercial titles or game franchises that compete against older cultural forms (and often succeed). Similarly, I do not address questions of ludonarratology, gaming subcultures, hacktivism, or the semantics and semiotics of indie digital games, nor do I engage with the lines of research that are central to the concerns of both American and inter-American studies, such as longstanding concerns over the commerce between virtual and real violence, video game addiction, or the so-called militainment of the U.S. society through video games. Rather, following a quick tour of the thematic and semantic exchange between (inter-)American Studies and Critical Game Studies, and in an attempt to co-map the two fields, I focus the remainder of my discussions here on the ways the Americas' past, present and future are depicted in video games as they engage with the social, the political, and the cultural.

America's Past, Present, and Future in Video Games

Reflected in the works of game theorists, even game reviewers and designers, the ludic turn—mapped by prominent game theorists such as Brian Sutton-Smith in the late 20th century—has influenced the ways we practice (inter-)American studies as well as the research questions we raise. Consequently, it is inescapable for Americanists (a term which, broadly speaking, includes both those engaged in the rather exclusive study of north America and those engaged in the study of the Americas, the inter-Americanists) to consider the centrality of video games in the minds and hearts of generations of Americans who, like the protagonists in the American coming-of-age movie *Boyhood* (2014) or the Mexican road movie *Duck Season* (2004), have been brought up with a steady regimen of video games in their lives, turning them into adults who are well-versed in the language of video games. At the dawn of the new millennium, few Americanists doubt that video games have a unique capacity in engaging gamers with the cultural, the social, and the political in numerous complex or superficial, uncharted or familiar ways, introducing alternate historical narratives, predicting the apocalypse, or depicting the post-apocalyptic. In fact, if we ask Americanists about the texts and contexts in which video games have entered their research (either as focal research interests or as casual means of procrastination) the list will be a rather long one.

To be found on such a list is the now classic line of inquiry in the over-militarization of the post-Cold War society that finds its various expressions in the fascination of generations of Americans with first- and third-person shooters. As the illuminating analysis in such volumes as *Playing War* (by Matthew Thomas Payne, 2016) and *America's Digital Army: Games at Work and War* (by Robertson Allen, 2017) confirm, even for those Americanists who have remained sceptical of (even entirely indifferent toward) the undeniable commercial success of shooter video games since the early 2000s or dismiss the medium as too popular or too ephemeral to be of scholarly value, the rise of 'military brand' video games (most famously, first-person shooters *America's Army* (2002) and its sequels, *America's Army 2* (2003), *America's Army 3* (2008), and *America's Army: Proving Grounds* (2012), and *Full Spectrum Warrior* (2004)) and the overt proliferation of government-owned spaces where such games can be played for free have been received as a matter of engaged intellectual concern. In fact, the recruitment policies of the U.S. Army among the young as part and parcel of a more complex political imaginary matter to both gamer and non-gamer researchers in American studies exactly because, as Matthew Thomas Payne asserts in the case of post-9/11 war video games, "the matters of gameplay are never restricted to their ephemeral play sessions. The virtual realms of games and the physical world exist in a complex but coevolving dialectic" (4).

The most common of the many ways critical game studies enriches and expands the scope of cultural studies—as an instance of the density of the ways "culture is negotiated through media technologies" (Penix-Tadsen, *Cultural Code* 7)—is the emphasis it places on video games as a reflection of what *is*. In their matchless capacity

for simulation and interaction, and whether deliberately or inadvertently, video games (such as humanitarian crisis video games, the so-called HCGs) draw upon social, political, and cultural realities such as unrest across national borders, struggles for social, political, and gender equality, awareness toward ecological and human disasters, or resistance against new (or hidden old) forms of intersectional exploitation.

In a semantic context, and closely related to this, I argue, are the discussions made within traditional game studies circles about the modern man as *Homo Ludens* (man the player) and its applicability to the present state of humankind in the digital age. Discussing the reciprocities of culture and play in the West, and writing in the inter-war period in Europe, the cultural historian Johann Huizing commented on human civilizations as being founded on a rather exceptional seedbed: play. Huizinga's main point in *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element of Culture* (1949) centered around a historically-informed argument about the current stage of 'human civilizations.'[3] From where Huizinga stood, it is impossible to make sense of human cultures without taking the element of play into account (Huizinga ix-x). Observing human actions beyond the optimistic post-Enlightenment lens of *Homo Sapiens* (man the thinker) and *Homo Faber* (man the maker),[4] he identified a newfangled humankind: *Homo Ludens* (man the player) and further examined the historical roots of play as constitutive of old and young civilizations in contexts as seemingly wide apart as poetry, chivalry, art, politics (including U.S. presidential elections), and war.

Huizinga's insights are relevant to my discussion here (and in the whole special issue) as they inform popular views about modern U.S.-American life. In volumes such as *The Ultimate Game Guide to Your Life: or, The Video Game as Existential Metaphor* by Christopher Monks (2008), for one, modern American life is likened to a video game at the same time that video games are examined in their metaphoric relationship with the American way of life in the new century.[5] Written with a great deal of humour as a kind of 'How to Life' manual for dummies, the title has a general audience in mind among Americans who are more or less invested in video games. Resembling a game franchise with new titles introduced every few years, the book's chapters each stand for a phase in a white, male, straight American's life from birth to death and each include challenges, life points, mini-games, cheat codes and hidden items, physical and emotional health meters, instructions on how to save the game, activities and tips, extensive visual information on the level-appropriate joystick and the difficulty level. The most interesting feature of each phase/game is the mini-games this average American has to play: workaday subjects such as 'Crawling' and 'Don't Lose your Mittens', 'Believing in Santa Claus,' 'Blogging' and 'Student Loan Debt Calculation,' less workaday subjects like 'Hip Hip Hurray! My Son is Gay!', and old-age challenges such as 'Making Friends' at the assisted living facility and undergoing the 'Hip Replacement Surgery.'

Interestingly, while some of these mini-games are common to all human beings, most of them are in fact specific to the American way of life in its most simplified and generalized version based on the fantasies and norms of an average heterosexual white, male American living in the twenty-first century. In this sense, the book works as a manual to a sheltered, 'average' lifestyle as if everyone lives the life of an average, not overly ambitious, semi-religious, white, male, middle-class U.S.-American, localized, my guess is, in suburbia. Monks makes occasional references to the minorities in the U.S. society, women, people of colour, the newly migrated and the homosexual, who might want to apply the manual about *their* life, by sarcastically suggesting that they ought to wait for mods and spin-offs that are supposed to be made available "next year." As in many other areas of life in the United States today, the book reminds us that, while those who closely resemble his protagonist's lifestyle live a life that *is readily available* to them, 'others' have to wait for what *might become available* at some point in future.

An audacious parody with marginal commercial success -- Christopher Monks' book does not make references to a list of ludic moments in the life of his American prototype. Rather, he talks about his prototypical American as a *Homo Ludens*: a faceless, nameless individual whose life—far from including some

ephemeral gaming moments/sessions—is set in a stretch of video games in which he spends his entire time, a form of a ludic *Truman Show* that he does not figure out nor does he want to escape from. He so completely fits the setting and is so busy overcoming the minor, almost 'natural' challenges the games throw at him, Monks tells us, that he never begins to question the authenticity of his life or look for the borders of this game-world. In fact, *The Ultimate Guide to Your Life* stretches the idea of game sessions to a whole life-time of ludic quality—as Huizinga would agree is how modern human beings live—including few matter-of-fact moments in which his hero actually plays with a toy gun or finds an XBox to kill time while waiting for the birth of his child in the local hospital.[6]

In further examining the book, a quick overview of the concept of 'metaphor' as defined by Paul Ricoeur would help us make better sense of the book's subtitle, 'Video Game as Existential Metaphor'. According to Ricoeur, "[m]etaphor is the rhetorical process by which discourse unleashes the power certain fictions have to redescribe reality" (5). Ricoeur explains this point in terms of discourse when he maintains: "Metaphor bears information because it 'redescribes' reality" (24). Therefore, historically viewed as deviant, a dispensable, ornamental, nominal figure of speech in classic literature, Ricoeur reinstates metaphor as a forceful tool at the service of modern political discourse. In doing so, he defines metaphor as a relational linguistic affair that "always involves a kind of mistake, … involves taking one thing for another by a sort of calculated error," concluding that as such it is "essentially a discursive phenomenon" (23). "Metaphor," he further asserts, "holds together within one simple meaning two different missing parts of different contexts of this meaning. Thus, we are not dealing any longer with a simple transfer of words, but with a commerce between thoughts, that is, a transaction between contexts" (Ricoeur 80).

With this in mind, we can think of a number of questions to ask while paging through Christopher Monks' book: Does the book equate, by way of metaphor, modern human life to a video game? Does it view the post 9/11 video game as a material site of a life-long ludic bastion? And if so, what does this metaphorical co-contextualization (to requote Ricoeur), this transaction of meanings and significations say about American life? Who is an average American? How scripted is (in this case) his life? How ludic is his life? How serious is his life game? If both scripted and ludic, then: does one play one's life or live it? Does one live video games or play them? Given the ludicity of such a life, as the book maintains, are we to categorize all U.S.-Americans, by extension, as prime examples of *Homo Ludens*? What does such a view imply about play and playfulness as foundational elements of life in the West? In the Americas? As an Americanist, I would further ask, is play an existential metaphor for a narrative-specific succession of pre-plotted events, semi-accidental challenges, and harmless, though wicked mini-games with a far-from-complex points system on the side? If so, how far reaching do we understand ludic or entertaining to be? From such a perspective, how can we account for tragedies, natural and human disasters, prejudices and exclusions, denial of due process of law to minorities, personal and collective trauma, or modern warfare as ludic or entertaining?

Similarly, in a conditional type-I manner, video games map the *terra incognita* of the cultures and crises ahead. This goes hand-in-hand with the debates in critical game studies over the potential of video games not only as a simulation of what already is but as a conjecture into both what *can be* and what *will be* (or not). Aside from genres that by nature engage with the future (for instance, the post-apocalyptic as a genre best represented through the medium of video games), works such as *Video Games as Culture* (Muriel and Crawford, 2018), register the map-territory relationship between video games and what the future will bring. As Muriel and Crawford contend, it is already more-or-less common sense that video games reflect the social and cultural life of contemporary communities under the aegis of neoliberalism.[7]After discussing the affinities of video games and culture—"video game culture, video game in culture, and video game as culture" (5)—they take a step further, placing emphasis on video games in their capacity to function as a blueprint for future

changes in society. Commenting on the long-standing debates on the precedence of maps over territory in the context of colonialism (that maps drawn by European colonizers preceded the territorial realities of the spaces colonized), they invite attention to videogaming as a mapping activity that precedes social reality. In this sense, video games reflect (upend or endorse) the cultures that give birth to them while they also help gamers imagine first-time social realities (Muriel and Crawford 5), as they serve as "the beta test version of the society to come" (Muriel and Crawford 181).[8]

Furthermore, turning attention to historical video games in their engagement with what *has been* or what *could have been* (and this is the main focus of the three articles included in this special issue), videogaming has joined forces with New Imperial Studies—a field that has changed our everyday relationship to and encounters with empires and our (post)colonial heritage. In general, as the New Imperial Studies holds, the contemporary experiences, myths, and memories of/about empires in the former colonies such as Haiti, Peru, and Canada, have opened spaces for the colonized to record their otherwise unheard or suppressed voices through a plethora of new media. On the other hand, in the so-called metropole, unprecedented geopolitical ruptures, disruptions in the colonial economic (im)balance, and newly conceived narratives of (post)coloniality and of relating to, representing, and imagining (post)colonial identities have altered the perspectives and experiences of empire and the settings in which it is re-enacted. As the main objective taken up by the articles, reviews, and the interview included in *Encounters in the 'Game-Over Era': The Americas in/and Video games*, this changed everyday experience and exposure to the Americas' past and to the state of (post) coloniality in the present post-colonial 'game-over era' in the Americas is worth closer scholarly examination.[9]

Making sense of the ways the past creeps into and the historical is brought to the present (what *has been*) through videogaming, video games can indeed be viewed as a site for re-telling the "history of the present" (Lowe 136)—the ways a work/text with references to the past "refuses the simple recovery of the past and troubles the givenness of the present formation" (Lowe 136). While being entertaining, video games remind players of the ways the past (a) permanently changes the present, as well as the ways (b) it continually changes the present in unprecedented ways. The focal point in addressing and assessing video games as part of a larger 'live archive' in the twenty-first century is indeed to systematically investigate our understanding of the colonial past in as diverse and globally entangled a geopolitical region as the Americas takes unprecedented shapes as gamers and game researchers continue encountering the recently digitized historical/archival as the born ludic/digital.

In This Issue

What follows this introduction focuses on the various medial, rhetorical, literary, and historical aspects of a growing body of video games that engage with past forms of imperialism and colonialism in the double-continent in one way or another. The discussions revolve around the many faces of empire that surface in the intra- and inter-imperial encounters in the Americas as well as between the Americas and other continents, including the lasting colonial imprint of the Spanish Empire in the Americas and the colonization of British North America as depicted or debated in video games. The short anthology that follows views video games as media through which events, places, and peoples from/in the Americas have been turned by game designers into ludic matter (setting, narrative, personae, sound effect, violent NPC) and made sense of all over again for the post-colonial gamer to encounter. The questions that inform the ensuing discussions include: How is 'empire' represented in video games about the Americas and the complex, evolving entanglements it has historically spun? How does relating to the (post)colonial heritage in the Americas through video games affect/reinforce/cleanse/dismiss/renew existing imperial myths and narratives in and about the Americas? How do gamers' affinity to a specific colonial heritage (being a Colombian adolescent, e.g.) and the historical moment at which they play (e.g., in the aftermath

of the election of Donald Trump as the US president) affect their relationship to imperialism/colonialism and to the various narratives which function as the games' backdrop? In what ways does the post-colonial studies of the Americas benefit from research on video games? In what ways do video games differ from/resonate with other media such as film in depicting the (post) colonial entanglements in/of the Americas?

As its central point of interest, this issue joins the rich scholarship in critical game studies to invite digital historians, researchers in media, cultural studies, literature, American studies, game studies, and Latin-, African- and inter-American studies, who are interested in video game cultures to discuss the potential of video games as a significant and prevalent new media, new text, and new means to narrate imperialism and to re-construct colonialism—media which help remind Americanists of the necessity of reflecting upon the tenacity of the (post)colonial heritage in the Americas through a rather new, highly popular, interactive field, i.e., the video game.

It is therefore fitting to begin the special issue with Eugen Pfister's article, "'In a world without gold, we might have been heroes!' Cultural Imaginations of Piracy in Video Games." In this article, Pfister examines the extent to which classic depictions of and fantasies around the figure of pirates in older media forms in Northern Europe have found their way into the game-world. Complicating the relationship between the historical, the literary, the colonial, and the ludic, Pfister introduces eighteenth-century imaginaries revolving around the image of the pirate before turning his attention to the twenty-first century "iterations of these ahistorical imaginations in video games" such as *Pirates!* and *Assassin's Creed IV*. Stefan Schubert's article, "Columbian Nightmare: Narrative, History, and Nationalism in *BioShock Infinite*," moves to the north of the double-continent as he examines the game in its capacity to engage, even if indirectly, with questions of nationalism and imperialism in the case of a rising U.S. Empire. Drawing attention to "the constructedness of worlds, of narrative, and of history", Schubert's close reading of *Bioshock Infinite* as an example of political/historical fantasy video game reveals the ways the game title does "cultural work" as it criticizes "underlying notions of nationalism and imperialism in US history." Following Schubert's contribution, Daniel Giere engages with video games' potential to accommodate unprecedented historical narrations while they engage with "individually staged, seemingly historical situation[s]." Examining how the Boston Tea Party, as the founding event that marks the birth of the United states as a nation, is ludified in *Assassin's Creed III*, Giere adopts Adam Chapman's analytical framework (the four-dimensional toolbox he proposes in the study of historical video games, consisting of epistemology and style of simulation, time, space, and narrative) as he juxtaposes the more formal historical accounts of the event with those narrative elements that are inserted into the game narrative by the game's developer-historians, placing emphasis on pre-game research, interactivity, and players' choice as part of what I view as the 'live,' if flawed, historical archive of videogaming.

Next, and in close conversation with the three articles outlined above, especially with the first article by Eugen Pfister in its depiction of piracy across various media, the interview I have conducted with Stephen Joyce turns attention to some of the discussions he makes in his forthcoming book about transmedia storytelling and the post-apocalyptic as a genre. As Joyce contends in his understanding of the prominent position video games occupy in transmedia studies, "[i]n many ways, the content of games isn't as important as the conversations they enable." In response to a question about the interrelationship between post-apocalyptic and post-colonial in video games, Joyce highlights the two genres' "desire to rebuild after a catastrophic event and to imagine an alternate world in which things turned out differently or in which we have more agency than many feel they currently possess. Post-apocalyptic worlds," he concludes, "offer a chance to wipe the slate clean of colonial legacies." This interview is followed by two book reviews: while Naima Shaheen's choice of review, *Cultural Code*, underlines Penix-Tadsen's seminal work on the reciprocity of game studies and Latin American cultures, Leonid Moyzhes' review of *Video Games as*

History draws attention to the illuminating discussions and methodological breakthroughs in Chapman's work on the ludification of historical narratives through video games. Ultimately, Philipp Penix-Tadsen's afterword wraps up the discussions I have picked up in this introduction and the many lines of argument driven in the articles, the interview, and the two book reviews, highlighting the importance of "understand[ing] the obstacles and affordances that define video games' potential for historical depiction, realism, accuracy and scope." As he makes the case, this special issue joins the expanding body of literature in the study of games and culture under the umbrella of what he refers to as "regional game studies."[10]

Conclusion

The contributions included in the special issue, including the present introduction, examine video games in their playful and poli-angular but not necessarily careless or casual, capacity to treat the historical, the political, and the social as the studies of the Americas' past, present, and future meet critical game studies. While highly timely to delve into the videogaming scene in Central and South America (where the sports hit *Lucha Libre AAA: Héroes del Ring*, the sci-fi title *Reversion*, *Papo Y Yo* (Colombia/Canada), *Kerbal Space Program* (Mexico), *Rock of Ages* (Chile), *Kingdom Rush* (Uruguay), *Preguntados* (Argentina) and the serious game *Pregnancy* are developed and played alongside popular, pirated or officially imported, Japanese, American and European video games), or to discover the reasons behind the lacklustre interest in official investment in this expanding market or to localize the titles that are sold to various gamer communities in the region, the examination of individual game titles (such as the serious game *ICED – I Can End Deportation*) and the Latin American market politics lie outside the scope of this introduction.[11]

In fact, what follows this introduction marks (inter-)American studies' fascination with videogaming as a practice and a metaphor as our disciplines respond to the great number of changes in the ways American Studies and critical game studies have met in the past half-decade. As the number of panels and conferences organized to examine the digital games culture within the brackets of American Studies increase, so does the number of thematic and semantic points of commerce between the two fields and the hashtag campaigns over various issues of intellectual interest around videogaming such as the so-called GamerGate. This coincides, not surprisingly, with the release of a record number of video games that "cross over with real life [in the Americas]" (Penix-Tadsen, *Cultural Code* 6). As the tour in the past few pages made clear, video games ludify politics, history, and culture in the double continent (as well as elsewhere) as the Americas' past meets its present in the form of the post-colonial and as populations continue to be on the move, polities questioned, and presidencies shaken to the ground.

Notes

1. In terms of domestic politics, we all are familiar with Obama's rather small-scale in-game campaign advertisement in a total of eighteen online video games as he ran for U.S. presidency in 2008. The campaign was conducted by the in-game ad firm Massive Inc., owned by Microsoft. Obama's use of video games released by large American tech companies was criticized as biased by (John) McCain's campaign.

Furthermore, once in office, Obama did a lot that in hindsight is viewed by gamer communities as historical landslides in recognizing video games as intellectual property, declaring them as free and protected speech. What is more, gamers and design companies fondly remember the first White House game jam in 2014 and an online stream of a video game competition to make the case for Obamacare in 2016.

2. As Alfie Bown makes clear in an article on the momentous necessity of the video game industry to move from formally political to purposefully progressive, "progressive content is not enough… Video games communicate ideology at the level of form, and laying a progressive storyline over the top does not necessarily prevent a game from serving rightwing ideas."

3. Even though the general historical overview that he offered in the book about the history of human civilizations founded on the play element has to be taken with a grain of salt, his work is still a starting point for practitioners in the field of game studies and cultural studies scholars who view play as part and parcel of culture.

4. Huizinga ix.

5. While not extremely popular nor part of a larger body of works that equate American life to video games, I believe that the title deserves closer scholarly attention especially

among Americanists.

6. Indeed, the book's protagonist seems to be an American Peter Pan, the boy who—busy with playing the game of his life—would never grow up to have to endure real hardship, unexpected mishaps, and life-changing events such as migration/expatriation, bankruptcy, or cancer.

7. The book does a fantastic job in reading culture through video games, weaving arguments about identity politics, participatory cultures, and consumerism with the help of the experiences and exposures of the player community as games evolve and as individuals and communities play.

8. For a list of reasons as to why it is a productive endeavor to study contemporary culture and society through video games, see the introduction to *Videogames as Culture* (Muriel and Crawford 3-5).

9. To get a sense of the central work on video games and postcolonialism, see Souvik Mukherjee (2015, 2017) and Sybille Lammes, ''Postcolonial Playgrounds.''

10. For a thorough understanding of the term, see: Bjarke Liboriussen and Paul Martin "Regional Game Studies."

11. For a thorough understanding of the market dynamics in the Latin American gamescape, see Gackstetter Nichols and Robbins, *Pop Culture in Latin America and the Caribbean*; and Aldama, "Getting Your Mind/Body On: Latinos in Video Games."

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Mahshid Mayar is an assistant professor of North American Literature and Culture at Bielefeld University, Germany. She holds a Ph.D. in history from the Bielefeld Graduate School in History and Sociology (BGHS). While her doctoral project (under review for publication as her first book) examined the cultural geographical formations of the U.S. Empire at the turn of the 20th century, her postdoctoral/Habiliation project focuses on U.S. history through the lens of video games. Her research interests include history of globalization, American studies, 19th century U/S. history, cultural geography, childhood studies, and critical game studies.

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Let's Play the Boston Tea Party - Exemplary Analysis of Historical Events in Digital Games

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Abstract

Digital games constitute a new form of presenting history: With unprecedented intensity, users are taking part in the game-world through active participation. This creates an individually staged, seemingly historical situation in which the plausibility-requirements can exceed the level of classical historical narration.[1] The crucial aspect is choosing which perspective is applied to a specific historical representation; the focus must be on the user's options for action, and their influence within the entire game-world. Other approaches are required when, for example, only a particular episode is to be investigated. This research shows how the analytical framework developed by Adam Chapman facilitates analyzing historical events represented in game-worlds (Chapman, Digital 59-172). The depiction of the Boston Tea Party in Assassin's Creed III provides an exemplary analysis, which compares relevant historiography. It will ultimately be concluded that the Sons of Liberty would not have been able to historicize the Boston Tea Party as a glorifying revolutionary act, if, as the game imagines it, dozens of British soldiers had been killed (Berg 14-15; Hochgeschwender 111; Humphrey 59-82).

Keywords: Digital Games, Historical Events, Historical Narratives, Boston Tea Party, Assassin's Creed III, British North America

1. Introduction

The current discussion about digital games and history is characterized by disparity, as well as by criticism of the accuracy of historical representations in video games. While critics argue that the inaccuracy of historical representations is attributed to 'history as a brand', the point with games is that they often do not intend to achieve accuracy.[2] Thus, the criticism is misleading. Digital games simply use a different understanding of history than historians would, because of their need for media-specific enactments that support their commercial requirements. When analyzing the historical representation in digital games, it is necessary to consider the interdependency between the media-specific ludic form, narrativity and iconicity (Hensel 146). We must ask how the game regulates what the player can do (gameplay) through an immanent system (game-structure), the same system that influences the historical representation and thus creates the game-world (Aarseth 2). Therefore, specific historical representations within the game-world have to be investigated by focusing on the user's options for action, and their influence within the entire game-world. Other approaches are required when, for example, only a particular episode is to be investigated. This research shows how the model for "playing games as actions" by Klimmt combined with the analytical framework developed by Adam Chapman allow analyzing historical events represented in game-worlds (Klimmt 69-73; Chapman, *Digital* 59-172). The depiction of the Boston Tea Party (henceforth referred to as BTP) in *Assassin's Creed III* provides an exemplary analysis, which compares relevant historiography. It will ultimately be concluded that the Sons of Liberty would not have been able to historicize the BTP as a glorifying revolutionary act, if, as the game imagines it, dozens of British soldiers had been killed (Berg 14-15; Hochgeschwender 111; Humphrey 59-82).

2. Analyzing historical events in digital games

A promising model for analyzing gameplay has been developed by Klimmt (Klimmt 69-73). In his model, he describes gameplay as a process that can be divided into several temporal procedural sections. The smallest part of this is the "Input-/Output-Loops" (I-/O-Loops), which describe the action of the player (e. g. clicking) and the resulting output of the digital game (Klimmt 70-71). Chains of I-/O-Loops are called episodes, which are concluded by the player through a specific action, motivated by the story of the game (Klimmt 71-72). An episode can be the same as a mission within the game and these episodes are always framed by the player's actions. Further differentiation of the actions taken while playing an episode or focusing I-/O-Loops narrows the complexity of research down to three possibilities. The first is a micro-perspective, which considers every activity of the player (see I-/O-Loops). The second is a meso-perspective, which focuses on specific coherent parts of the game content. The third is a macro-perspective that regards the communication process in its entirety (activity while gaming, Klimmt 70-75). However, I-/O-Loops tend to subside in immersive gameplay (Klimmt 102-115; Klimmt and Blake 76-78). Using a micro-perspective to investigate the depiction of historical representation does not seem to be expedient. While a macro-perspective enables us to reveal the mode of the historical representation, a meso-perspective permits us to focus on specific episodes, as for example, a historical event. Throughout the present article, the BTP in *Assassin's Creed III* is drawn upon as an example for performing such analysis. If this historical event and its representation within a game are to be investigated, we must consider them within the context of the entire game-world. Accordingly, if a meso-perspective is used analyzing the BTP, the underlying game-structure must still be analyzed through a macro-perspective. Therefore, it is necessary to focus on the game-world and its game-structure by analyzing gameplay (Aarseth 2-7). Chapman's analytical framework is particularly suitable for this purpose.

Chapman insists that content should not be analyzed separately from its form (Chapman, "Form" 44). This implies that the specificity of digital game-worlds should always be considered. A discourse on the accuracy of historical content in games, without an analysis of gameplay and the game-structure, is not sufficient because of the producers' (that is, developer historians') creating history with different goals in mind than gaining historical perspective according to books (Chapman, "Form" 42-43). "History is not a 'thing' that can be understood as separate from the forms in which it is produced, received, and argued" (Chapman, "Form" 44.). In his monograph, *Digital Games as History*, Chapman offers a model for analyzing historical representations in digital game-worlds (59-172). From a methodological point of view, Chapman focuses on the analysis of historical content based on his own gameplay-experience and proposes four analytical dimensions: epistemology and style of simulation, time, space, and narrative (see Table 1). A macro-perspective analysis aligned with these dimensions allows us to find out which "historical narrative" (Chapman, *Digital* 136-172) is present in the so-called (hi) story-play-space which is shaped by shared authorship of the player and the developer historian. This leads to an understanding of the ways in which history is designed through interaction within digital game-worlds (Digital 30-55, 131-132). The game series and games analyzed by Chapman show an extraordinary, but not necessarily complete, range of game-structures (*Digital* 61-69). However, a focus on emergent historical narratives created through gameplay allows us to compare these historical representations with current historiography from a meso-perspective.

3. Chapman's analytical framework

The following analytical categories must be seen as ends of a spectrum, whereas analyzed (hi)story-play-spaces should always be understood as categorical hybrids within the said spectrum (see Table 1). History in digital game-worlds constitutes modes of representation based on two completely different styles of simulation, while audio-visual processing needs

to be considered as the major factor. Since the different styles of simulation involve different epistemologies, the simulation style should be the first part of the analysis (Chapman, *Digital* 59-61). The time dimension entails three categories: X = play time (needed by the player to play), Y = fictive time (narrated by the game-world) and Z = realist time (duration of historical events or actions). The relation between these categories determines time within the game-world. Following Chapman, space in digital games is mainly determined by the player's perspective and actions. He also distinguishes this through a dichotomy, in this case between narrative gardens and canvas story structures, which reveal an intended story within the game-world (Chapman, *Digital* 100-109). The game-based narrative contains two parts: the narrative intended by the developer historian (framed narrative) as well as the narrative framed by gameplay (ludonarrative). The framed narrative is a pre-established story with movable pieces of scenery that structures the events and cannot be changed by the gameplay. The ludonarrative is an ongoing process, located between the beginning and ending of the framed narratives and is only specified through gameplay. The framed narrative has to be seen as the global control over the gameplay by the developer historian who directs and contextualizes the historical narration. Cutscenes are one example of the unalterable forms of narrative. Within these framing controls, possible gameplay is predetermined by developer historians. In this manner, the framing controls determine the continuation of the framed narrative within

Table 1: Analytical dimensions: epistemology and style of simulation, time, space, and narrative (table created based on Chapman, *Digital* 61–129)

	|---------- Hybrid Forms within the Spectrum ----------|	
Style of Simulation + Epistemology	**Realistic Simulation** (Chapman, Digital 61–69) Surroundings, objects, events and characters are portrayed audio-visually as authentically as possible, regarding their physical and historical conditions. Realistic simulations try to approximate reality. **Tends to Reconstructionist Approach** (Chapman, Digital 79–83) The reconstructionist developer historian thinks of the production process as being objective and unaffected by social or ideological constraints. Discursive, multi-perspective or theoretical constructions of history are avoided. They show history as it "really happened".	**Conceptual Simulation** (Chapman, Digital 69–79) Conceptual simulations are audio-visually less complex. Usually abstract symbols hint at information within the game-world. Realistic scaling, standards and relations are sidelined. **Tends to Constructionist Approach** (Chapman, Digital 79–83) Constructionist approaches try to approximate structures. Constructionist approaches are more than just an audio-visual depiction that is being authenticated. History of that kind is often generalized or historicity is even established as a constituent game-structure.
Time	**Realist Time-structure, X=Y=Z** (Chapman, Digital 91–93) In this structure, play, fictive and realist time pass nearly equally and create a feeling of authentic time representation. Realistic time-structures are usually found in realistic simulations.	**Discrete Time-structure, X≠Y≠Z** (Chapman, Digital 93–97) Within discrete time-structures the play, fictive and realist times differ fundamentally. Sometimes multiple decades pass within a second. Discrete time-structures are usually found in conceptual simulations.
Space	**Narrative Gardens Structure** (Chapman, Digital 101–104) Narrative gardens are predefined, usually aesthetically designed, game-worlds depicting a space that is limited by the narrative or game-structures. The player is a listener of a story determined through the mostly unchangeable space.	**Canvas Structure** (Chapman, Digital 104–109) When using space as a canvas, it becomes a game-structure. Space is the fundamental aspect that determines gameplay. The user becomes the author of his own narrative through interaction with the space.
Narrative	**Deterministic Story Structure** (Chapman, Digital 128) Within a deterministic story structure the framing narrative is privileged. The decisions of the users barely have an influence on the narrative within the game-world. The user might decide whether to step into a house and search for something in it or not, however this will not affect the narrative of a deterministic story structure.	**Open-ontological Story Structure** (Chapman, Digital 129) The open-ontological story structure uses weak framing goals and focuses on the gameplay. Hence the framing narrative is rarely present. The user has various possibilities to reach goals within the game-world, which can lead to enormous changes in the narrative. Ludonarratives are preferred.

the ludonarrative. Thereby, according to the probability of a given gameplay, coherence is ensured through prearranged storylines (Chapman, *Digital* 119-127).[3]

Following the analysis of game-structures influencing the historical narrative as stated above, it is clearly relevant to explain the relation between the frame narrative, ludonarrative, and classical historiography (Chapman, *Digital* 136). A comparison between the historiography and historical narratives created by the game-world should only be established through an adjustment in textual form. Nevertheless, the textual description of the game-world always contains some processing of ludonarratives, even if framed narratives are more dominant. This is needed, or else the game would not be a game anymore. Historical narratives in digital games always contain framed narratives and ludonarratives intertwined with various intensity (Chapman, *Digital* 155-162), and can be explained with the help of the previous analysis based on the four dimensions. Because Chapman's analytical framework does not contain clear-cut dimensions, the historical narrative can be seen as a final stage of the complete analysis. Within the macro-perspective, Chapman's analytical framework can serve to uncover game-structures which influence the historical narrative of the game-world. The macro-perspective on the tendentious influence of game-structures though gameplay forms the basis of a meso-perspective analysis of the historical narrative, based on a chosen episode in the game-world —in this case the historical event of the BTP in *Assassin's Creed III*.

4. *Assassin's Creed III* in the macro-perspective analysis

The audio-visual realization of *Assassin's Creed III* is assigned to the realistic style of simulation, which can already be seen at the start of the game. The first scene portrays how the main character of the game relives the historical memories of Haytham Kenway in 1754, through the so-called Animus technology by reconstructing "historic" surroundings.[4] In this episode, the Royal Theatre in London is reconstructed with precision, allowing the player to see the performance of a play.[5] Thereby, the game tries to approximate "historical reality": Buildings and their surroundings, people, objects, and cities are depicted as realistically as possible.[6] Even the representation of Mohawk settlements corresponds to historical evidence. Not only do the inhabitants speak indigenous languages, which are translated using subtitles, but settlements are depicted as closely to historically validated models as possible. This visual approximation is also used for the indigenous people of the north-east woodlands, accurately depicting the typical methods of acquiring food, their clothing, their art and craftsmanship, as well as their social structures (Arens and Braun 24-45).[7] The so-called longhouses, as can be seen in figures 1 and 2, are shown as precise examples.[8] All in all, the game-world tends towards a reconstructionist approach to history.

In *Assassin's Creed III* the relation between gaming, fictive, and passed time can be called equal, with very few exceptions. Initially, some leaps in time are needed within the narration of the main story, e.g. during the change of the protagonist from Haytham Kenway to his son Connor. These can take days, months, or even years.[9] However, this development can be traced back to the Animus technology used in the game-world, which enables the protagonist to go back in time and relive certain sequences of memories from his ancestors. Therefore, the leaps of time do not seem misplaced. Fast travelling on the game's internal map can be explained in the same way. The distortion of the time-structure in fighting scenes is only a peripheral phenomenon.[10] Time slows down if the protagonist demonstrates spectacular fighting moves. Thereby, fictive time and passed time are caught in a momentary lapse, a sort of sequential disparity.[11] The day-night cycle is shortened as well in the game-world. This, however, is barely noticed, because there are at least two hours of difference between them. The leaps of time occurring through the Animus are another factor making it difficult to know what time is currently being represented in the game. Although realistic time cannot be depicted, the game-world tends toward a realist time-structure.

Within *Assassin's Creed III* some compromises

Figure 1: Picture of the inside of a reconstructed longhouse used by Mohawks.[12]

Figure 2: Selection of a Screenshot showing the inside of a longhouse used by Mohawks in *Assassin's Creed III.*

must be made regarding the representation of space. One example of this is the shortening of distance to historical buildings within the narrative gardens of *Assassin's Creed III*. Likewise, the exposable game-worlds of Boston, New York, and the western frontier are confined through visible borders, keeping the user from going any further.[13] In fact, since there is no new content in these border areas, they create very little incentive for the player to try to reach them.[14] Within these borders, however, the user can move freely. At the frontier, as in the cities, some houses are inaccessible (with the only exception being the possibility to walk through open houses as shortcuts).[15] However, since the realistic reconstruction of the house exteriors has been done so well, it is safe to assume that the players will imagine the interiors as having been equally well reconstructed. The perceived, but not reachable, space is augmented by specific kinds of representation. This can be seen if the user climbs upon an observation tower, where he can see the surrounding areas.[16] Even though the small island of Boston and Charlestown are out of the player's reach, they can still be seen. Through this, the game scene feels as if it were a part of a bigger game-world on the American East Coast. In order to force linearity within missions, the user does not always get to move around freely, as can be seen in the first scene in the Royal Theatre in London. Here, the user is forced to go directly to his seat, without being given a chance to explore the building.[17] Once more, the tendency toward narrative gardens within the main mission is shown clearly. Maps provide information regarding the borders of the narrative gardens. This can be seen in missions or sequences that are not placed inside the open game-worlds of Boston, New York, or the western frontier. A small map is always visible in the bottom left corner of the head-up display (HUD), which shows the linear scope of action.[18] The spatial structure can barely be changed and does not present the user with options to take action. This leads to it being oriented as a space used for the embedding of information. A narrative gardens structure constrains the possible actions of the player —especially within the main episodes like replaying the BTP.

It becomes obvious that the influence of the player on the narrative of *Assassin's Creed III* is limited. The framed narrative dominates over the ludonarrative. It is not possible for the user to change the narration of the main episodes in any way. The only option is to reach a higher synchronization with the Animus technology through side quests, which grants some advantages for progressing through the game (for example, better weaponry or equipment). However, it does not change the underlying narrative. The user can only choose the main mission (including the framing goals) without the possibility of changing the order of approach. There is only a free choice when it comes to the side quests or optional mission goals. For example, during the BTP, the way in which dozens of British soldiers are killed is optional, but not the killing itself. The user cannot prevent the BTP from happening in the specified order that the game designates.[19] For example, even

if the user decides to eliminate some British units, this would not change anything regarding the presented narrative by cutscenes, which is divided into twelve main episodes including the epilogue. The central objective of the game is to complete the main missions, with multiple, dominantly placed hints inside the game-world motivating the player to advance.[20] All missions have one feature in common once they have been started: The level of progression and the next goal are shown in the top left corner of the HUD, with a division between primary and optional goals within the mission.[21] If all of the optional goals are accomplished, "full synchronization" is reached within the Animus and the user will be awarded with extra money or new equipment.[22] This sums up to a lot of possible game goals. However, completing the main mission(s) is the game's primary objective.[23] Especially important for a subsequent meso-perspective analysis of historical representation, regarding the game-structure, is the distinction between main and side missions, as well as the choice of areas within the game-world. Interaction with objects is limited to missions or opposing troops. All interactions of the player inside the ludonarrative are limited to the following framing controls: climbing (onto objects, buildings, trees, or cliffs), sneaking, hiding, riding horses, navigating ships and commanding the gunners, distracting and killing opponents, as well as specific interactions with several objects, which do not have any influence on the narrative —supported by the recurrent narrative gardens structure of the space. In the end, it is only possible to complete a mission or lose synchronization, for example, by the death of a character which leads to a mission restart. The player does not have a chance to change their decision or narration regarding the protagonists.

In this respect, while performing a meso-perspective analysis, special attention needs to be directed at identifying the framing controls. These might explore the historical narrative counterfactually by adding gameplay options that differ from the relevant historiography. Overall, a deterministic story structure arises underlying the narrative of the main missions. This is in opposition to the more open story structure in the areas of Boston, New York, and the frontier. An open-ontological story structure does not exist at any point in time. Especially when looking at the explicit procession of historical events in the main missions, it should be considered that the framing controls, preset by the developer historians, can distort the historical narration. For example, it is safe to assume that peaceful historical events are being transformed into acts of violence, since most of the player's actions are designed to violently eliminate enemies. In the end, the historical narrative in *Assassin's Creed III* is heavily influenced by the fictitious story of the assassin Connor and his mostly violent framing controls. In the case of the meso-perspective analysis of the BTP, we have to assume a realistic style of simulation, realist time structure, as well as a narrative gardens structure, coupled with a deterministic story structure, which first has to be described before a comparison with the actual historiography can take place.

5. Meso-perspective description of the Boston Tea Party in *Assassin's Creed III*

One of the most colorfully historicized events of the American Independence Movement is the BTP (Jennings 142). In the game-world of *Assassin's Creed III*, the motives leading to the BTP are only mentioned within the database of the Animus.[24] As is shown below, because of the influence of game-structures, the representation of this event is processed at the very least questionably, if not counterfactually. The role of the player is represented by the fictitious character Connor, who is portrayed as a thoughtful and decisive person during this event. This description is only meant to showcase what *could* happen if a historical narrative is worked out only on the basis of game-world representation without considering historiographic sources. Of course, this kind of approach must be evaluated critically and by no means meets empirical standards (Kühberger 75). Nevertheless, the following meso-perspective description enables a comparison between the "game-worldly" induced historical narrative and the current historiography that follows.

On the evening of 16th December, 1773, Samuel Adams takes part in a public debate

in the Old South Meeting. He argues that this meeting cannot do anything more to save the country and urges fighting the repressive British crown through the Tea Act or other "foreign" rules. Straight after uttering this sentence, he leaves the building to meet William Molineux, Stephane Chapheau, and Connor in front of the Old South Meeting House. The first two already know what the next steps will be. Connor on the other hand —being of British and Mohawk descent— questions the methods and motives of the Sons of Liberty, demanding to know every detail of the plan. Samuel Adams willingly explains the plan to destroy the tea cargo from the ships at Griffin's Wharf in order to gain support from colonists. However, Adams does not tell him any details; the exact route and the number of supporters are also unknown. Adams counters Connor's criticism by offering to lead the group. At the wharf, 15 British soldiers await the Sons of Liberty. The British soldiers, separated into formations of six and nine soldiers, cover both paths leading to the ships. The only possibility to send a message of rejection toward British dominance, in the minds of the Sons of Liberty, is to appropriate the crates of tea and kill the soldiers. Therefore, the two veteran fighters, Stephane Chapeau and Connor, are assigned to kill the British enemies in close combat. After having dealt with these, Connor tells Samuel Adams, William Molineux and Paul Revere to follow him. Meanwhile, a group of nearly 100 bystanders gathers in the wharf, watching the revolutionaries throwing the wooden tea barrels into the sea. The revolutionaries wear regular workers' clothes. Suddenly, British reinforcements appear, running towards the ships. Paul Revere warns of the advancing enemy, which leads to the revolutionaries leaving the ships to avoid the attack, except for William Molineux, Paul Revere, Stephane Chapheau, and Connor. The people defending the entrances of the ships are reinforced. However, the reinforcements are killed by the British troops rather quickly, before the assassins Connor and Stephane Chapheau eliminate the oncoming troops. More barrels of tea are thrown into the water in the meantime. After the last barrel has been disposed of, the British troops abruptly stop their attack and vanish for no reason. Then, Samuel Adams appears and walks off the ship with the other revolutionaries while being celebrated by the bystanders who remain in high numbers. The Sons of Liberty do not miss the opportunity to discard one last barrel of tea in such a way that all the remaining people —such as William Johnson, a rich merchant and the chief negotiator with the Iroquois, and General Charles Lee, who later becomes famous within the game-world and tries to profit from smuggling tea— will see the victory of the Sons of Liberty. Shortly afterwards, the crowd leaves the wharf. Connor is the last to leave the area where the fighting has taken place. In the end, over 100 barrels of tea are destroyed and dozens of British soldiers have been killed by the Sons of Liberty during the BTP, with at least a dozen revolutionaries also killed. One of the bloodiest days of the Independence Movement ends like this and leaves —in contrast to the Boston Massacre— a high number of deaths on both sides. This kind of massacre is something the Sons of Liberty have to cope with in future.[25] This sums up the historical narrative of the BTP that is outlined by the gameplay in *Assassin's Creed III*— a narrative worthy of careful comparison with the current historiography.

6. The Boston Tea Party in *Assassin's Creed III* vs. historiography

The "climatic meeting of the Tea Act crisis at Old South Meeting House on December 16, 1773", as described in the historiography, plays a minor part within the game-world (Raphael 126). The three characters Connor, William Molineux and Stephane Chapheau only wait for Samuel Adams in front of the building. The attendance of people who are dressed up as Mohawks is not represented in the game at all. Connor's criticism is at the center of this cutscene. In his criticism, he reviews the actions of the Sons of Liberty as useless to save the territories of his tribe. Some Sons of Liberty were interested in new settlements and land speculation, a factor that always mattered to the Independence Movement. In contrast, the British crown insisted on preservation of the Proclamation Line from 1763 limiting the westward settlements (Hochgeschwender 102-103). The problem

arising from white colonists stealing land from indigenous people is an important aspect of the American Revolution that is "game-worldly" mixed up with a historical event, which comes up in history books for different reasons. Therefore, the central moment in the historical narrative of the game concerning the BTP and the act of destroying the barrels of tea at Griffin's Wharf, linked to the killing of dozens of British soldiers, ends up contradicting existing historiographic narratives (Berg 14-15; Hochgeschwender 22). According to historiography, the British military stayed in the garrison and did not intervene in the revolutionary actions of December 1773. Likewise, the fleet did not show up, and the commander-in-chief —General Hutchinson— barricaded himself away from the action. Thus the rebellious colonists, who were disguised as Mohawks, did not have to fear British resistance. Ultimately, the officers and sailors of the freighters were smart enough not to risk their lives for the property of the East-India-Company (Hochgeschwender 22).

It seems unrealistic that the Sons of Liberty would have been able to historicize the BTP as a glorified revolutionary Act, if it happened the way it is depicted in the game, that is, by killing dozens of British soldiers. Of course, there had been potential for escalation, since the governor at the time had consulted with the leading generals of the Royal Navy to summon warships to Boston Harbor (Hochgeschwender 111). Large numbers of British soldiers had already been stationed there because of the tense situation at the Proclamation Line (Hochgeschwender 111). However, the Royal Navy and the British soldiers did not intervene while the tea was being destroyed (Hochgeschwender 21-22, 120-135). Since the Sons of Liberty massively criticized the Boston Massacre within the flourishing publishing business, it would have been difficult to justify the killing of dozens of British Soldiers during the BTP (Berg 14; Humphrey 13, 70-73; Kratzke 179-195). If the BTP happened the way the game-world suggests, it could not have been historicized as such a significant act in the Independence Movement and used as a valuable strategy of political inclusion, as well as to motivate critical discussion about British interference (Rozbicki 105-106; Humphrey 76). Presently, public history sites and guided tours continue to emphasize this patriotic call for "freedom" without reflecting on the individual motives and political involvement of the Sons of Liberty (Schocket 116-121).

The BTP happened in a disciplined and organized manner, without excessive violence. However, it was a provocation that was supposed to force the British crown into taking retaliatory action and which finally created solidarity among the colonists (Berg 14-15). In the game, the violence used by Connor is not criticized by any member of the Sons of Liberty. On the contrary, violence is presented as the only available option to deal with the situation.[26] Only two entries in the Animus database refer to the BTP, and even they do not address the counterfactual violence. In the late 18th century, the Sons of Liberty had reservations about the radical act of destroying tea that was worth around 10,000 pounds (Lerg 29). Contemporary moderate elites believed the right to own private property was such a crucial part of life that they finally ended up offering to compensate the East Indian Company for the lost tea (Hochgeschwender 22). Killing dozens of British soldiers, as depicted in the game, would have lowered the chances the Sons of Liberty had to mobilize the masses in the colonies. Destroying the tea was only deemed a viable action after multiple debates had been held — taking place as the first ship, the Dartmouth, arrived on the 27th of November— and was considered to be the last resort (Woods Labaree 147). We should keep in mind that radical Sons of Liberty under the leadership of Samuel Adams insisted on more drastic measures, for example, returning the British ships to their mother country as more moderate Sons of Liberty in Philadelphia had done (Hochgeschwender 19-21).

It has to be noted, however, that the oligarchy in the thirteen New England colonies had trouble preventing the aspiring lower classes from participating in politics since the 1760s. The colonies were in a social ferment, making it impossible to implement a bicameral system based on the British model. The radical nature of the measures taken by the Sons of Liberty are a reaction to social riots in the 1760s; Boston was worst affected, which threatened the political and socioeconomic hierarchy of local

elites (Hochgeschwender 34-36). Commercial success in the colonies encouraged the demand for freedom among the colonial elites. They did not want to submit to British interests any longer (Hochgeschwender 35-36). The Sons of Liberty developed into an expanding community of interest. Due to the multitude of resolutions under King Georg III regarding the North American colonies, mainly custom and tax resolutions, a group of people from all 13 colonies formed to defend their interests against "foreign" rule. This enabled the Sons of Liberty to take more radical measures, since they were sure to have comprehensive support from colonists.

After the British governor of Boston, Thomas Hutchinson, set a deadline for unloading the tea by the 16th of December 1773, two more ships arrived in Boston loaded with Indian tea, which threatened to escalate the situation. Governor Hutchinson believed that he needed to enforce British law, in this case the Tea Act. After the deadline expired, the tea would have been confiscated and sold by local authorities (Hochgeschwender 19-20). Hutchinson had ensured that the ships would not be able to return to England. The local Sons of Liberty and the Bostonians, estimated to be radical, prevented the tea from being unloaded and sold —creating a stalemate. Destroying the tea was the last resort of the Sons of Liberty to deal with the situation. In the end, Bostonian elites were afraid of losing control of the revolutionary process again (Hochgeschwender 120).

> Samuel Adams rose at that point to proclaim that he did not see what more the inhabitants could do to save their country. Perhaps this was the prearranged signal. From a gallery came a war-whoop, answered in kind by a small group at the doorway who were disguised as Indians (Woods Labaree 141).

The developer historians of *Assasin's Creed III* attach great importance to correct depictions of dates and purportedly historical facts. Interestingly, the fact that Samuel Adams himself was a former taxman is overlooked (Hochgeschwender 21).[27] In the game he is depicted as a patriot representing the greater good of the Independence Movement, the only flaw being his attitude regarding slaves, which Connor criticizes. Within the in-game database of the Animus, the clean and patriotic spirit of Samuel Adams is evoked.[28] It does not become apparent that the Sons of Liberty were supported by rich local merchants and landowners, who would profit from a separation from the mother country in various ways, such as seizing and selling the lands of Native Americans (Hochgeschwender 11-12). In the game, only William Johnson enriches himself through selling the Mohawk territories. William Johnson, who was the superintendent for all Native American tribes in the north, is also depicted as a tea smuggler. This cannot be refuted or proven, but requires skepticism, since the smuggled goods came from lands of Bourbon rule (Hochgeschwender 26) and the ships docked during the BTP belonged to the East Indian Company, as is correctly depicted in the game-world. Smuggling tea was both unnecessary and nearly impossible. William Johnson would have profited from unloading the cargo, as he was a merchant and could have sold it in Boston. Through his business he had built up a lot of assets and could afford to buy a lot of land from the Mohawks. It was of no interest to him that this land had been offered by the Iroquois who had not been the rightful owners of the property to begin with (Hochgeschwender 45). In the end, William Johnson was definitely less interested in smuggling the suggested goods, as presented in the game-world. In fact, John Hancock – one of the most notorious tea smugglers of the time — was a supporter of the Sons of Liberty, probably because he had smuggled with the French during the Seven-Years' War (Hochgeschwender 110-111). Surprisingly, John Hancock is not a significant character with the game-world.

The Tea Act, which has to be seen as the trigger of the BTP, was not at all an increase in taxation; in fact it led to cheaper tea imports (which is mentioned in the Animus database). The Tea Act was intended to end the smuggling of tea to the North American colonies and simultaneously open a market for the crisis-ridden East Indian Company and their overproduction of tea (Hochgeschwender 119; Williams 64). Even though the background

and motives for the outbreak of the BTP are not sufficiently represented within the game-world, the criticism by the Sons of Liberty preceding the Tea Act is expressed. However, the "game-worldly" William Johnson smuggles the tea off the ships of the East Indian Company, which is contrary to the historiography.[29] Many of the smugglers of that time were part of the Sons of Liberty movement (Hochgeschwender 119). This aspect particularly explains why the Sons of Liberty tried to prevent the enforcement of the Tea Act. In *Assassin's Creed III* this is not disclosed. Within the game these interests and roles of historical individuals blur. One cannot be sure whether they acted for political or financial motives. The representation of the BTP within the game-world and the accompanying agitations regarding the Sons of Liberty let us make superficial conclusions, at best, about the diverse motives of the Sons of Liberty.

Contemporary observers noticed that the American colonists were the first revolutionaries in the history of the world that went on the warpath for a severe lowering of the price of trade goods (Hochgeschwender 122). Who were these revolutionaries dressed up as the Mohawks at the BTP (Jennings 143)? Approximately 50 to 100 laborers and merchants led by the Sons of Liberty destroyed 342 barrels, or 45 tons, of tea (Hochgeschwender 120; McDonnell 105-106; Humphrey 78-81). The revolutionaries in *Assassin's Creed III* are therefore correctly depicted as working men and small merchants. The number of people involved, at least on the wharfs, seem to be close to the numbers in the relevant historiography. Surprisingly, the Native American costumes of the revolutionaries, as iconographically depicted through paintings and lithography, are not represented within the game-world at all. Not even the protagonist Connor changes his outfit for the BTP. He rather remains in his assassin-outfit, even though he is of Mohawk descent. Actually, the Sons of Liberty chose this Native American outfit on purpose, trying to send a symbolic message to England. The most common interpretation of this behavior is, that the colonies thought of themselves as an independent culture in contrast to the British mother country (Hochgeschwender 122; Humphrey 59-82).

The player is placed at the front of the crowd by Samuel Adams, which creates strong identification and involvement with the character, as well as a feeling of self-effectiveness. That only the four protagonists, namely William Molineux, Stephane Chapheau, Samuel Adams, and Connor are already at the "game-worldly" harbor, is explained by picking up further supporters at Nathaniel Bradley's house. During this scene the Sons of Liberty are fighting British soldiers and are supported by militia and regular soldiers, which probably never happened. Hochgeschwender argues that the activities of the Sons of Liberty were planned, since it would have been hard to find and use costumes spontaneously (Hochgeschwender 121). In the game, this scene does not appear to be well planned, since there are British soldiers at the harbor and the Non-Player-Character (NPC) Samuel Adams comments on this: "Damn, more soldiers."[30] Of course, there are no indications in the historiography that Samuel Adams said anything like that. There is also no indication in the historiography that the fictitious character, the assassin Connor, actually led the revolutionaries to Griffin's Wharf. Although it still is not completely resolved who took part at the BTP (Woods Labaree 142; Raphael 27-30), Samuel Adams was instrumental in planning the BTP (Dippel 23). In *Assassin's Creed III,* the representation is based on the fictitious story of Connor with a deterministic story structure. That Paul Revere and William Molineux actively engage in the fighting and need to be protected by Connor has to been seen as historical nonsense. However, this is definitely caused by game mechanics which are needed for the selected kind of representation within the game through narrative gardens. Because of the counterfactual representation of the BTP within the game, the storyline must be seen in high contrast to the inherent reconstructionist history approach of realist simulation and realist time structure. Great emphasis has been put on the visual depiction of the harbor —the exact and empirically proven reconstruction of the harbor remain uncertain— and the historical personas. This is enhanced by the visual representations of characters in the game that are clearly based on their historical origins, whereby Charles Lee is

depicted more aggressively and unappealingly than the allegedly "good guy" Samuel Adams (see figure 3).

Figure 3: Portrait of Samuel Adams from 1772 and a depiction from 1773 in *Assassin's Creed III* as well as a portrait of Charles Lee compared to the depiction in the game.[31]

While 100 barrels of tea have to be destroyed by the end of the in-game scene, it has been surmised in the historiography that 342 boxes were destroyed (Mc Donnel 105-106). Since the ship Beavor was docked at a different harbor (Lerg 29; Woods Labaree 144), which is not a site of action in the game-world, the number of barrels destroyed during the mission is reasonable. However, the depiction of how the tea was destroyed is not at all ideal. Throwing the intact barrels —which are depicted as being smaller than they should be— into the water does not always lead to the tea's destruction (Raphael 27-28). It has to be assumed that some bystanders tried to fish the tea out of the water in order to save a little for their own personal use, which the Sons of Liberty tried to prevent by using some violence. However, the ships were not damaged according to the historiography (Williams 65). While the BTP takes place during a time period of 10 minutes in the game, the real action probably took around three hours and was not supported by a roaring group of people at the harbor (Lerg 29; Raphael 27). Even though a lot of upset Bostonians went to the harbor, the action was relatively silent (Woods Labaree 144). They quietly retired to their residences "without having any conversation" because of the fear of British armed ships nearby (Raphael 27). In the game, the BTP is transformed into an action scene through the background music and the crowd at the wharf.

The peak of the organized protest of the Sons of Liberty was the BTP, at which the disguised colonists dressed up as Mohawks not only tried to avoid physical violence, but also showed their respect regarding private property through replacing an actual padlock which was broken during the action (Breunig 53). Instead of breaking a padlock to gain access to the ships, the user needs to eliminate 15 British soldiers in *Assassin's Creed III*. The real BTP happened in a less spectacular way, since, as Breunig argues, the violence was directed at destroying the tea, not against humans and certainly not against British soldiers. In reality, it was Samuel Adams who reframed the Boston Massacre from a mass brawl with casualties into an act of deliberate cruelty by the British military (Hochgeschwender 114). He was not the flawless hero fighting for freedom and liberty as depicted in the game. The BTP is shown as an act of violence in the game, a false representation. The use of violence by Connor can be seen as an indication that the Sons of Liberty saw violence as a legitimate method. However, the use of violence is placed incorrectly. Apart from this, the bystanders —most of them surely radical Bostonians— would have prevented the British soldiers from entering

the ships and it can be assumed they would not have played such a passive role as represented in the game-world, if you bear in mind the radical protests in the city of Boston since the 1760s (Dippel 18-21).[32]

If the BTP had happened the way the game-world represents it, it would not have been possible to historicize it as a significant act of independence. In the end, the depiction of the BTP in the game glorifies the agitations of the Sons of Liberty to the user, and demonstrates the use of violence as a legitimate method against a conspiracy within the colonies, not against the British crown. The question remains why John Hancock is not mentioned in the game-world. Including his character would have made the personal interests of the individuals behind the BTP more obvious. An implementation of the BTP, without the elimination of dozens of British soldiers, would have been possible with different game-structures. For example, the parkour-like climbing by the protagonist Connor could have been used to gain access to the ships in a peaceful way. Nevertheless, the analysis shows the "game-worldly" representation of native land appropriation by the colonists, but in a harbor basin full of confusing interests based on fictional protagonists, the Sons of Liberty, radical Bostonians, as well as British soldiers and officials. The confusing representation of the BTP within the game is not resolved and can be seen as a consequence of the selected deterministic story structure with unalterable framing controls of the main character Connor, finally remaining in high contrast to the realistic style of simulation, and leads to a questionable historical narrative.[33]

7. Conclusion

The analytical framework by Chapman works well at a macro-perspective, focusing on the entire game-world and possible actions of the player, to reveal the form of representation of history in digital game-worlds by using the dimensions of simulation style, time, space, and narrative. Furthermore, this enables the use of a meso-perspective, focusing on a selected episode, for example historical events, by using a historical narrative dimension. It is especially important to analyze the game-structures with a macro-perspective to enable a meso-perspective to reveal the "game-worldly" induced historical narrative. A description of the selected historical event in text form is helpful for the subsequent comparison with the relevant historiography. This creates the possibility to suggest alternative narratives based on the game-structures which might better represent historical events in *Assassin's Creed III*; avoiding the killing of dozens of British soldiers through a focus on climbing and traversing the ships by the main character Connor. The exemplary analysis of the BTP in *Assassin's Creed III* shows the strikingly high influence of the game-structures regarding the historical narrative. This leads to a peaceful event in history being converted into an excess of violence. The Sons of Liberty would not have been able to construe the BTP as a glorifying revolutionary act, if, as in the game, dozens of British soldiers had been killed. Furthermore, an opportunity was missed to implement a hearing and justification for the actions of the Sons of Liberty due to their personal interests. Nevertheless, the game — besides all of the counterfactual representations —shows the radicalism of the Bostonians and provides a starting point to reflect upon the appropriation of land beyond the Proclamation Line by colonists after they had won the War of Independence. The representation of the BTP in *Assassin's Creed III* is therefore a brilliant way to access problem-oriented teaching, reflecting the influence of game-structures based on a semi-fictional historical narrative.

Notes

1.See *Gespielt*, "Manifest für geschichtswissenschaftliches Arbeiten mit Digitalen Spielen."

2. History is of course not only a marketing tool for digital games, since there are different ways of using it. For more information on this, see Siller's master thesis (Siller 46-52).

3. For the concept as a whole, aimed at explaining the gameplay including the quality of historical representation within the game-world, Chapman uses the ecological approach from Gibson (Chapman, *Digital* 173-175). Accordingly, affordance means that information is already enclosed in the entities which surround us. They only have a requesting or offering feature. Chapman argues that the input devices are automatically connected with this concept ("Great Game" 171-180). Constructions of meaning are

therefore externalized and influenced by the surroundings (Mausfeld 103-105). Since there is little knowledge about the current level of development of the user's individual acquisition-processes as well as their understanding of history, it is impossible to derive anything from how the user receives game information. Thus, the analytical framework of the historical representation will be used without the concept of affordances.

4. The following scenes from the gameplay of the author are cited as recommended by the Arbeitskreis Geschichtswissenschaft und Digitale Spiele, see *Gespielt*, "Manifest." For the relevant part of the video capture of the gameplay, see Daniel Giere, "AC3: Spielsitzung1", s. 13:33 – 13:37.

5. See Daniel Giere, "AC3: Spielsitzung1," s. 13:22 – 14:58.

6. See Daniel Giere, "AC3: Spielsitzung2," s. 01:21 – 02:15.

7. See also, gaming session within a Mohawk-Settlement: Daniel Giere, "AC3: Spielsitzung5," s. 03:20 – 07:18.

8. See for example, Daniel Giere, "AC3: Spielsitzung5," s. 02:32 – 03:18.

9. See, for example, Daniel Giere, "AC3: Spielsitzung1," s. 51:58 – 52:21; "AC3: Spielsitzung5," s. 19:51 – 19:57.

10. See Daniel Giere, "AC3: Spielsitzung9," s. 05:22 – 05:30.

11. See Daniel Giere, "AC3: Spielsitzung4," s. 28:38 – 29:13 and s. 1:19:35 – 1:19:44.

12. See picture by Anne E.

13. As can be seen at the frontier: Daniel Giere, "AC3: Spielsitzung7," s. 02:13 – 05:06. See also, what happens leaving the Game-world: Daniel Giere, "AC3: Spielsitzung10," s. 1:28:47 – 1:29:00.

14. See for example: Daniel Giere, "AC3: Spielsitzung6," s. 13:20 – 14:55.

15. See Daniel Giere, "AC3: Spielsitzung8," s. 53:15 – 53:30.

16. See Daniel Giere, "AC3: Spielsitzung2," s. 05:05 – 06:04.

17. See Daniel Giere, "AC3: Spielsitzung1," s. 14:41 – 15:30.

18. See Daniel Giere, "AC3: Spielsitzung7," s. 35:49 – 39:42.

19. See Daniel Giere, "AC3: Spielsitzung9," s. 04:46 – 04:53.

20. See Daniel Giere, "AC3: Spielsitzung11," s. 00:20 – 00:33; 02:58 – 09:05 and 1:22:15 – 1:22:37.

21. See Daniel Giere, "AC3: Spielsitzung12," s. 1:44:26 – 1:45:33. See, also Daniel Giere, "AC3: Spielsitzung8," s. 55:34 – 55:45.

22. The synchronization with the Animus constitutes an internal reward system, which does not have any effect on the historical narrative represented within the game-world.

23. This statement is supported by contributions in the official community-page of *Assassin's Creed III*, see for example: handballer, "100% Sync (Assassins Creed 3)."

24. The database of the Animus is an encyclopedia with additional information about historical places, persons, events and objects. The entries originate from the fictive protagonist Shaun Gilbert Hastings, who serves as a lexical narrator within the current setting in the year 2012. This is an attempt to create real historical coherency through sometimes amusingly written texts.

25. See Daniel Giere, "AC3: Spielsitzung9," s. 00:00 – 14:20.

26. See Daniel Giere, "AC3: Spielsitzung6," s. 34:11 – 1:28:44.

27. Most of the contemporary taxmen or custom officers were rightfully afraid. Isolated acts of violence, happening even in the calmer years between 1770 – 1773, almost always affected them. Similar to the taxmen during the Stamp Act riots, the people having a trading commission for goods with the East Indian Company became victims of several attacks which led to most of them abandoning their privileges (Lerg 28).

28. See Daniel Giere, "AC3: Spielsitzung8," s. 25:25 – 1:22:23.

29. See Daniel Giere, "AC3: Spielsitzung8," s. 1:03:52 – 1:05:24.

30. See Daniel Giere, "AC3: Spielsitzung9," s. 01:25 – 01:30.

31. See portrait of Samuel Adams by John Singleton Copley and the portrait of Charles Lee by G. R. Hall.

32. See Daniel Giere, "AC3: Spielsitzung9," s. 05:07 – 13:10.

33. See Daniel Giere, "AC3: Spielsitzung14," s. 1:28:25 – 1:31:05; and "AC3: Spielsitzung15," s. 00:00 – 23:11.

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"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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Columbian Nightmare: Narrative, History, and Nationalism in *BioShock Infinite*

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Abstract

This article analyzes the video game BioShock Infinite for how its world, the history of the city it is set in, and its narrative events are suffused with questions of nationalism and imperialism. As an alternate-history first-person shooter, the game does not deal with imperialist or colonialist topics in a direct narrative manner or explicitly through its gameplay, but it does depict a world whose society is characterized by nationalism, discrimination, and racial oppression. Accordingly, in a close reading of the game's narrative and discursive elements, I work towards uncovering the 'narrative background' of the world that BioShock Infinite lets players explore by analyzing the way it presents its setting to players, its use of history, and its narrative complications. I thus argue that these aspects are used particularly to criticize the nationalist elements of Columbia's society, to complicate simplistic portrayals of binary oppositions, and to point to the constructedness of narrative and history.

Keywords: narrative; transmediality; US nationalism; imperialism; history of US colonialism

1. Introduction

At first glance, the 2013 video game *BioShock Infinite* might seem like an unlikely candidate for a thorough criticism of or engagement with the history of US imperialism, as it is a first-person shooter set in the fictional floating city of Columbia in the year 1912, sharply deviating from US history through this fantastic device and instead entering the realms of alternate history.[1] However, in this article, I want to demonstrate that it is exactly this fantastic setting that allows the game to use exaggeration and satire to point to nationalistic and imperialistic tendencies characterizing parts of US society, politics, and culture around the turn of the 20th century and throughout its entire history. Specifically, the game interweaves world-building, historical, and narrative elements to criticize underlying notions of nationalism and imperialism in US history. While, outwardly, *BioShock Infinite* is very much a story about the fates of its protagonists (Booker and Elizabeth) and about the struggle between a hero (Booker) and a villain (Comstock), beyond that, I point out how it also tells a compelling story about the city of Columbia and the excesses of nationalism and fanaticism that are both explicitly and implicitly displayed as part of this setting.

I argue that *BioShock Infinite* fosters discussions about US nationalism by the way it lets players explore a setting fused with historical elements and combines its larger narrative arc with what I call the 'narrative background' of this setting. The game initially frames Columbia as a potentially utopian society, only to thoroughly dismantle that first impression particularly through players' exploration of the narrative background. Ultimately, this effort primarily works to complicate binary representations of heroes and villains, good and evil, oppressor and oppressed, and to point to the narrative constructedness of history. To arrive at this argument, this article devotes itself to a detailed case study and close reading of *BioShock Infinite*'s narrative and discursive elements, with a particular eye towards its setting's narrative background. I first briefly outline how I understand a video game like *BioShock Infinite* as a narratively liminal text and then analyze the game from three larger angles, centering around setting, history, and narrative complications. In the first and largest section, I examine the game's setting, the floating city of Columbia, which can be read as an exaggerated microcosm of parts of US society of the time. I

analyze a number of carefully selected examples from the game that representatively establish a pattern of how the game chooses to (narratively and visually) portray a world characterized by a nationalistic and imperialistic ideology. Secondly, I look at how the game makes use of history to connect its world to questions of colonialism and nationalism, through both its references to US history and its deviations from historical reality. Finally, I bring these considerations together by examining the game's larger narrative and discursive elements, both in terms of the main story and particularly in relation to the game's final twist. This final revelation prompts players to reevaluate previous aspects of the game and overall connects its concerns with specific aspects of US history to a discussion of history and narrative more generally.

2. Video Games as Narratively Liminal Texts

The still relatively new field of game studies has varyingly discussed how video games can (and cannot) be studied as a kind of narrative, a text, a medium, a simulation, a set of rules, an activity akin to play (*ludus*), a cultural artifact, etc. This early formalistic debate of what video games 'are' has generated much contention and is often summarized as the so-called ludology vs. narratology debate.[2] Rather than repeating these arguments here, I want to transcend this divide by sidelining formalistic concerns about video games and instead focus on how *BioShock Infinite* can be studied as *one* particular kind of game from the methodological point of view of literary and cultural studies. This understanding is thus not meant to provide an answer to the question of how video games, in general, can be studied—a question to which, partly due to video games' diversity, there can be many equally productive answers—but to provide an approach to elicit particularly interesting insights from one particular game (and, potentially, similar ones).

This point of view understands video games such as *BioShock Infinite* as narratively liminal texts, that is, as a kind of text that fuses the symbolic form of play (*ludus*) with that of narrative.[3] While video games are clearly played according to certain rules, with which their recipients have to engage in order for the text to 'work,' many video games also try to tell a story during that process, remediating storytelling insights from media such as films and novels but also adapting well-known techniques to this specific (interactive) medium. In order to adequately analyze such a text, the narratological concept of the storyworld helps to understand how a game like *BioShock Infinite* functions narratively and creates meaning(s). David Herman defines storyworlds as the "mental models of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion in the world to which interpreters relocate ... as they work to comprehend a narrative" (9). Referring primarily to novels, his use of the term highlights the role of readers "trying to make sense of a narrative" as they "attempt to reconstruct not just what happened ... but also the surrounding context or environment" (Herman 13) that embed "existents, their attributes, and the actions and events in which they are more or less centrally involved" (Herman 14). It is highly productive to make use of this concept for the process of narratively engaging with video games as well, since more than 'narrative,' thinking of the storyworld of a text emphasizes the process of creating an understanding of how the story, characters, setting, etc. of a text come together on the side of the audience. As players engage with a video game, what is presented to them triggers a mental process of (re)creating what they (visually and aurally) witness as the storyworld of the game. In this sense, I understand players of a game as that game's audience as well, even if, of course, they are physically much more actively involved in the text than readers of a novel or viewers of a film might be.[4]

This methodological shift towards the storyworld also allows for a deeper analysis of two particularly important elements of video games: interactivity and space. As an interactive medium, video games necessitate a (physical) player 'input' in order to function as a text; an effort that Espen Aarseth calls "nontrivial" (1) in order to distinguish it from how we physically engage with most novels or films. In many games, this interactivity also creates narrative nonlinearity—specific choices that players can make in a game can lead to different narrative outcomes later on and, overall, to different playing experiences.

Focusing on the storyworld that is created in the process of playing a game allows for more flexibility in understanding how games produce narratives and how, in turn, players engage with them, generally emphasizing the role players (or other kinds of readers) assume in the experience of text.[5] However, since, in terms of its main plot, *BioShock Infinite* works rather linearly (cf. also Buinicki 733-34), I cannot focus on possible choices players could make in terms of affecting the plot's outcome; instead, I concentrate on the agency players have in their exploration of the game's narrative background.

As a second aspect, in their storytelling, many video games focus particularly on the exploration and construction of space (cf., e.g., Jenkins). In fact, the active exploration of and interaction with a fictional world can often take on an important part of many games' narrative and gameplay, and some games might feature optional areas/spaces that players can but do not have to explore, tying this aspect back to narrative nonlinearity (Jenkins 121-22; Murray 79-80). Storyworlds, already in their name, place more emphasis on this spatial construction of narratives—Herman similarly mentions that the term "suggest[s] something of the world-creating power of narrative" (14). By highlighting the process of exploring a world and actively reconstructing what players experience as a storyworld, these spatial elements of ludic storytelling can more neatly be taken into consideration, pointing to the narrative significance that the engagement with space can have in video games. This focus particularly on the narrative background of the world presented to players is thus also similar to Shoshana Magnet's term 'gamescape,' which looks towards "the way in which landscape in video games is actively constructed within a particular ideological framework" (142).

In addition to highlighting the importance of space and player interaction in video games, looking at how players re(construct) a storyworld also takes 'ludic' aspects of games into consideration, i.e., their gameplay. Specifically, when analyzing a video game via the concept of the storyworld, I do not, of course, simply reconstruct how a player might go through that particular process, as that would entail a rather descriptive approach. Instead, it is particularly significant how *BioShock Infinite* influences, encourages, hinders, complicates, etc. that process of creating a storyworld through its narrative, discursive, and ludic elements. In other words, the specific gameplay of a video game equally influences the way a storyworld is created and the meanings that are thus engendered. Still, in *BioShock Infinite*'s case, as I hope to demonstrate, it is primarily narrative elements that establish the game's engagement with nationalism, rather than its gameplay, which is why I focus on the former.[6] In this sense, analyzing a game's narrative through a focus on the storyworld takes into account all elements constituting that game's effort at telling a story—its narrative discourse, its mise-en-scène, its visual and audio elements, etc.

Finally, such a focus on how *BioShock Infinite* works narratively is also well-suited to exploring how it engages with questions of imperialism, colonialism, and nationalism. In video games like *Sid Meier's Colonization* (1994) or *Empire: Total War* (2009), which deal with these topics more directly, it seems intuitive to focus on the main narrative setup and the gameplay in order to examine the ways in which, for instance, colonialist ideologies are ingrained in the rules of the game and might become naturalized and go unnoticed as part of the gameplay (cf. Mukherjee). For *BioShock Infinite*, however, the more intriguing aspect is how these questions figure both in the way it tells its story and in how it depicts the world that players are thrust into as part of its spatial storytelling. As I am going to show, while the entire game is set in Columbia and thus only deals with an alternate version of the United States, Columbia's history and the world it presents are imbued with imperialist, colonialist, and nationalist elements.[7] In the way it depicts the city with exaggerated elements of a highly patriotic and nationalistic version of the US around the turn of the 20th century and ultimately exposes Columbia as a society that fanatically discriminates against, subjugates, and oppresses racial minorities, it relates to historical US involvements in imperialism and colonialism. This subtext of the game becomes particularly visible in how it engages with questions of nationality and nationalism. In line with postcolonial thinking on the connections

of nationalism and colonialism, Columbia's rulers use "nationalism to maintain [their] own power" and "[take] over the hegemonic control of the imperial power" (Ashcroft al. Griffiths, and Tiffin 151). Invoking nationalism within Columbia's society works very much according to constructing an "imagined political community" (Anderson 6), crucially by way of excluding certain members of society from that community—through oppression and exploitation primarily on the grounds of race and class. These efforts are hardly at the forefront of *BioShock Infinite*'s gameplay or plot, but they distinctly characterize the narrative background of the world in which the events are set, which is why an approach focusing on how that world is mentally reconstructed by players seems well-suited to analyzing the game's engagement with nationalism.

3. Exploring Columbia

To better understand some of the intricacies of the game's setting, a brief plot summary is in order. As mentioned before, *BioShock Infinite* is set in the floating city of Columbia. Throughout the game, players take control of the story's protagonist Booker DeWitt, from whose perspective they explore the city. Booker is a former Pinkerton agent who now works as a private investigator and searches for a woman named Elizabeth, whom he is meant to rescue from Columbia, as she is being held captive in a tower by Columbia's ruler and the game's antagonist, Zachary Hale Comstock. Comstock quickly notices Booker's presence in Columbia, denounces him as the 'false shepherd' whose arrival he has foreseen in a vision, and then sends a variety of Columbia's soldiers and war machinery to defeat Booker. Booker then fights against these enemies and advances through Columbia's different areas (or levels). In addition, exploring the world and its different environments takes up a relatively large amount of the game, since there are a number of optional areas in which Booker can find various items as well as additional background information on the history of Columbia, its different locations, and many of its inhabitants. The game's story thus first revolves around finding Elizabeth, but later on, after having accomplished that, shifts its focus towards trying to end Comstock's oppressive rule over Columbia and, in the meantime, finding out more about the mysterious past of all three main characters. One central part of these findings is the revelation that Booker and Comstock are actually the same person, but from different alternate universes, a twist I discuss more extensively later.

Although Comstock stylizes Columbia as a utopian society in his speeches and writings, the game ultimately exposes the city as characterized by sharp contrasts and binary oppositions (cf. also Peaty 198-99): While many of its upper-class citizens do enjoy a luxurious lifestyle and are depicted as content with the city's rulers, beneath the surface—and in later areas—players also gain glimpses of the city's underbelly, of working- and lower-class citizens living in poverty in the city's slums. Comstock's utopian vision of Columbia as a city for people willing to achieve the American dream has instead turned into a dystopian nightmare for the vast majority of those citizens that the city's rulers have cast as ethnic others, something that is gradually revealed to players as they venture deeper into Columbia.

Visually, the way Columbia is initially presented to Booker—and thus to the game's players—reinforces Comstock's utopian vision for the city. The city appears in an exceedingly positive light: When players first see Columbia, the floating city is portrayed as a spectacle—a city whose buildings and streets magically float in the air on airships, with zeppelins flying around, bridges connecting individual islands, large statues adorning the scenery, and everything surrounded by clouds. Color plays an important symbolic role in the overall portrayal of Columbia, with these early parts of the city all appearing very colorful and bright, the light symbolically expressing the positivity and optimism that Columbia seems to exude. Likewise, when players leave the first area and open a set of doors to step out onto the streets of Columbia, the sunlight briefly seems to blind Booker, but then gives way to a utopian scene, with doves flying away into the distance, where we see more islands suspended in the

sky, bright buildings, giant statues, and so-called skylines on which goods and people are transported, all underscored by peaceful music and pervasively colored in shades of white, blue, and light red. This impression is equally strengthened by many of the posters and other signs throughout the game, for instance when Columbia is early on proclaimed as "this new Eden, a last chance for redemption," which—along with countless other biblical and Christian references—also firmly establishes the Puritan idea of Columbia as a 'city upon a hill' (or, in this case, even higher than that, in the skies). In fact, religion plays a crucial role in Columbia's society and in how it is connected to nationalism (cf., among others, Bosman; Heidbrink al.) How Columbia sees itself thus corresponds to similar self-images of the US shaped by the 'myth of the Promised Land,' "one of the most prevalent of America's national mythical narratives" (Paul 140). Finally, this positive first impression of Columbia is accentuated by the parades and the fair taking place when Booker arrives in the city, as it celebrates the anniversary of its secession from the US. The parades, replete with the accompanying patriotic music, fireworks, and colorful displays, thus all combine to showcase the city's wealth, ubiquity of goods, and technological superiority, mirroring real-life exhibitions like the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 (also known as the Chicago World's Fair).

As players witness this setting by actively moving their player avatar around the city and exploring different parts of it, the early outwardly positive presentation of Columbia is also quickly complicated by signs that not everything is so utopian underneath. In terms of the playing process, the most (visually) apparent elements with which players reconstruct the storyworld are thus subtly contradicted by additional information they can glean from exploring areas and carefully listening to the city's residents, already forming part of the game's narrative background. While a lot of the main story of *BioShock Infinite* as it concerns Booker and Elizabeth is presented to players in dialogue, the (hi)story and society of Columbia is narrated and presented more subtly through the player's exploration of the world. That world, in turn, is characterized by divisions and contrasts, an ambivalence prevalent throughout the entirety of the game. Just when Booker takes his first steps onto the pristine streets of Columbia in all their bright and colorful glory, he also walks past a number of citizens and can overhear, for instance, a conversation in which a man complains: "Yesterday I had to take a gondola. Rubbing elbows with all sorts," pointing both to inconveniences in transportation and, more importantly, to a class disdain for people of "all sorts." Another pair of citizens can be overheard to have an argument, during which one warns the other to "keep an eye on that kind of talk," to which the other replies: "Oh, don't turn

into some Finkton radical on me, John. I do not want to be some character out of *I Married a Vox Populi*, now do I?" This is an early hint towards dissent within Columbia's society, foreshadowing the eruption of a full-scale civil war between Columbia's ruling elite, The Founders, and a populist uprising, the Vox Populi. Additionally, the game's intertextual reference to the 1949 film *I Married a Communist* (also the title of a 1998 novel by Philip Roth) clearly aligns the Vox Populi's interests with communist ideas, giving power to the people and criticizing the US capitalist society. Significantly, the conversations between these people are scripted events that occur if Booker walks close enough by them, but they do not have to be listened to in their entirety, and depending on how quickly or inattentively players move through the city, many of them might not be heard at all. On a narrative level, these gameplay decisions constitute the major agential acts players have in actively affecting their reconstruction of the game's storyworld. Additionally, the subtlety with which these occurrences become part of the storyworld adds to painting a more complex picture of Columbia early on, where the visual marvel of the city's buildings is contrasted with some of the narrative developments players can glimpse from its citizens.

As the game's story progresses, these contradictions within the city are exposed to be clearly demarcated along racial and class lines. Early on, this becomes most apparent at the culmination of the parade scene, when the grand prize of the raffle is the possibility to throw the first baseball at an 'interracial' couple in what amounts to Columbia's equivalent of a public stoning. The couple is booed and mocked by the audience, and on stage they are framed by a mock-wedding ceremony that references established racist stereotypes of African Americans as monkeys. This is clearly a spectacle and a pleasurable show for Columbia's citizens, but even though it still uses the bright colors and the generally 'not-too-realistic' look of the game's characters, it is a haunting image for players. It exposes Columbia as a society that takes pleasure in inflicting violence on an 'interracial' couple, a union against which so-called 'anti-miscegenation laws' existed long into the twentieth century in the actual US, only nationally overturned in 1967 by the Supreme Court's decision in *Loving v. Virginia* (Moran 6). In this sense, the entire sequence exposes "Columbia's militant white-supremacist ideologies" (Peaty 199). However, later in the game, such explicit scenes are rather rare, since the main story elements instead concern Booker and Elizabeth, but not so much the surrounding Columbian society. Rather, this scene of the public stoning serves as an end of the early exploration of Columbia and initially getting to know its society, as only and directly after this scene do players begin having to fight against Comstock's forces, which forms the main gameplay from then on, with exploration remaining an optional side element.

However, these racial and class divisions are all the more prominent in the narrative background of the game, becoming apparent through visual propaganda throughout the city, in the way certain environments are depicted, and by how this ideology has taken effect in the minds of Columbia's citizens. They all hint at the Founders' rule over Columbia being an oppressive regime that stays in power through violence, fearmongering, Othering, and the subjugation of minorities. Visually, this becomes apparent through the numerous posters and other pieces of propaganda found throughout the city. Some of these are about Comstock specifically and establish a cult of personality surrounding the self-proclaimed prophet: In the temple in which Booker first arrives, it becomes apparent that Comstock is worshipped alongside the Founding Fathers as a messiah, since, as writing above a painted church window has it, "the Prophet shall lead the people to the new Eden." His image is plastered throughout the city, usually showing his face along with the words "Father Comstock" and "Our Prophet." Indeed, throughout the game, he is often referred to as Father Comstock, which points to his self-stylization as the patriarchal head of a family, a vision of Columbia's society that casts it as a tight-knit, homogeneous community.

Many other propaganda posters focus more directly on Columbia's society and feed into feelings of paranoia and division. Some tell citizens, for instance, to "arm thyself against the foreigners & anarchists" and that it is their "holy

duty to guard against the foreign hordes." The latter poster distinctly combines nationalism and religion by depicting George Washington, with the Liberty Bell and the Ten Commandments, holding off immigrants of various racial stereotypes. Remarkably, while the poster includes a variety of stereotypes of different ethnic groups, among them Chinese, Arabs, and Native Americans, it depicts all of them closely huddled together, using the same colors for all of their portrayals to overall distinguish them from Washington, who stands for the white Columbians. The poster thus ignores their national differences and instead combines them into a foreign 'mass,' clearly establishing an 'us vs. them' mentality, which proposes to understand all nonwhite people as enemies that do not belong in Columbia. Another of these posters shows a presumably white woman next to the words "Her eyes ... so blue! Her skin ... so white! ... or *are* they? We must *all* be vigilant to ensure the purity of our people!" The poster thus refers to the phenomenon of 'passing' as another race, which points to the actual constructedness of race, "represent[ing] race to be a fiction of identity" (Wald 8), but which also encourages a kind of paranoia among its citizens, casting divisions between them by suspecting each other of not being 'racially pure.' Such a fear also goes back to US history, in which the so-called 'one-drop rule' "designated as 'black' any person seen as possessing even a single 'drop' of 'black blood'" (Wald 11), which had crucial legal consequences for Americans suspected of trying to 'pass' as white. Overall, many of these posters are clearly racist and peddle ideas of white supremacy, casting nonwhite minorities as inferior Others. At the same time, they try to incite the white population against them and attempt to create a unified society of whites by neglecting and subjugating minorities, speaking to the nationalist tendencies of Columbia's rulers in imagining a unified, racially 'pure' community. For players, while some of these posters appear repeatedly throughout the city, others are only found in specific optional areas, thus constituting a kind of narrative 'reward' for actively exploring the environment by adding some 'backstory' and more richly portraying the setting of the city. Exactly how many of these elements players uncover from the city's surroundings depends on how they choose to explore it, which then affects how players recreate the storyworld in terms of Columbia's society—the basic implication of its nationalistic tendencies is always evident, but the more intricate understanding depends on players' choices in exploration.[8]

The racism that suffuses Columbia's society also becomes subtly visible on a visual level through the game's environments. In the early level of "Battleship Bay," which comprises a large artificial beach, players see, for the first time, a number of nonwhite citizens, all of whom are employed as workers or servants for white Columbians, scrubbing the floorboards or cleaning the bathrooms. There are a number

of posters in the workers' quarters as well, which remind them, for instance, to "always address patrons as 'Sir' and 'Madam.'" The poster shows a white couple dressed in white and blue on the right and two servants with a tray and a broom on the left as silhouettes, completely in black, again establishing a strict binary with clear connotations of positive (light) and negative (dark) for two different ethnic (and class) groups of the city. Moreover, players walk past segregated bathrooms, with one labeled "Colored & Irish Washroom," which also hints at the few white workers they can see being Irish. When Elizabeth sees these, she asks Booker why there are two separate bathrooms. Booker simply replies: "There just is," to which Elizabeth adds that this seems like an "unnecessary complication" to her. This scene showcases the game's awareness of race as a social construct and alludes to a time when Irish Americans in the US were not considered 'white' either (cf. Ignatiev). Booker's "there just is" along with Elizabeth's subsequent evaluation point to the arbitrariness along which racial lines are drawn, highlighting their injustice but also, at the same time, firmly establishing that Columbia is tightly structured by them. Furthermore, seeing a number of nonwhite workers in this area also emphasizes the fact that, so far, all of the wealthy citizens that players encountered have been white. After all, as a fantastic/science-fiction game, it was not immediately clear that nonwhite people would exist in this world at all. While they do exist, in the early, wealthier areas of the city, nonwhite characters are only encountered as servants and workers active 'behind the scenes' of the pristine images Columbia likes to present. In this sense, their presence makes the whiteness that characterizes Columbia more visible, questioning the assumed normativity of whiteness, which mirrors Richard Dyer's point that a way to "see the structures, tropes and perceptual habits of whiteness, to see past the illusion of infinite variety, to recognise white *qua* white, is when nonwhite (and above all black) people are also represented" (13).[9]

Columbia's racial divisions are furthermore not just witnessed as a doctrine propagated by the Founders but also seen as an ideology at work in the minds of its citizens. Apart from listening to a number of so-called voxophones—recordings by some of Columbia's citizens that can be found throughout the city—this can again be deduced by overhearing conversations between citizens. For instance, on the Battleship Bay beach, a group of women talk about a friend of them having had lunch with a mechanic who "makes a good living," which one of the women disapprovingly comments on: "An Irishman can make a good living but that doesn't mean I want to have lunch with one." This exchange establishes an understanding of class that is not just about money, categorizing a mechanic as lower-class regardless of how wealthy he might be, and instead also connects class with questions of lifestyle and power—"the power some people have over the lives of others, and the powerlessness most people experience as a result" (Zweig 19). Moreover, the conversation also interweaves racism with classism by equating the lower-class mechanic with being Irish, the negative association of which seems to be a given to these citizens—as these two lines of discrimination intersect. Being Irish, for most Columbians, would automatically mark somebody as lower class, regardless of his or her actual income (cf. Anthias on the intersectionality of race and class in particular). On the other hand, the game also shows glimpses of resistance to this prevailing racism, for instance when Booker goes through a house that appears to belong to sympathizers of the Vox Populi, where a poster states that "Until the Negro is equal none of us are equal." While it seems unusual for people to have such a poster in their house, it also speaks to the game's investment in telling parts of its story in this visual way.

The early (primarily visual) impression of Columbia as a utopia thus is subtly contradicted throughout the game by exploring and looking more closely at the setting, yet that contrast finds its culmination in later parts of the game, when Booker and Elizabeth venture into the poorer areas of the city. In the working-class district of Finkton, players constantly hear a variety of propaganda messages by Jeremiah Fink, who owns all of the factories in the city, as public announcements, many of which try to justify the exploitation of workers, for instance by proclaiming:

> The most common complaint I hear from the working man is that they are ... unhappy ... with their lot. "Why torment yourself?" I ask. The ox cannot become a lion. And why would you want to? Who wants all those responsibilities and worry? You do your job, you eat your food, you go to sleep. Simplicity is beauty.

These and many other speeches by Fink demonstrate his ideology of grouping people into different orders, casting the ruling elite as 'lions' and the working masses as 'oxen' and 'cows,' who do not amount to more and should be happy with their lot. His credo of not "torment[ing] yourself" argues against an idea of the American dream for these lower-class workers, against the possibility of climbing up the social ladder, urging them to accept the exploitation of the status quo, symbolically figured in the working animal of the ox. The different announcements are heard by players as they go around Finkton, and along with Fink's upbeat tone, their over-the-top content works to expose the Founders' underlying (hyper)capitalist ideology through satire. This point is further accentuated when players enter Finkton Proper and witness what amounts to a 'labor auction,' in which work that needs to be done is sold to the worker who claims that they can do it in the smallest amount of time. When the auction is over, a man left without a job can be heard screaming: "My family's gotta eat! We need work!" The scene establishes the inhumanity of Fink's system, which does not see the (predominantly black and Irish) working-class citizens as human beings but simply as laborers to perform tasks.

Eventually, players arrive in Shantytown, the poorest district of Columbia, which they reach by taking a long elevator down from Finkton into Shantytown, symbolically climbing down the social ladder to the lowest rung of Columbia. The game presents this district very differently from all previous parts of the city: The bright colors from 'above' give way to a very bleak depiction of the streets and buildings, with brown colors dominating the surroundings. The streets are lined by dark, dirty factories, many vacated houses with broken windows, water leaking in different places, other parts burning and smoke rising, and writings on the walls such as "My family is starving. We need food." For the first time in Columbia, the majority of the people Booker and Elizabeth meet are black. Likewise, the patriotic music of the parade has been replaced by much quieter, darker tunes, with audible background noises of trashcans being kicked, bottles being broken, and trains running by. In short, the visual depiction of this part of Columbia appears as the polar opposite of the opulent areas visited particularly at the beginning of the game. When they arrive in Shantytown, players can overhear a character identified as Brother Love preaching to a group of people:

> This is what they want, brothers … To keep you so hungry you can't speak but to beg … To keep you so ignorant you can't think of solutions to all your problems … To keep you chasin' that almighty silver eagle, so you can buy everything they're sellin' to keep you down, brothas … But Daisy Fitzroy says there's another way ... Another way comin' real soon …

His speech spells out the tenets of the Founders' cruel ideology that players have been witnessing and explicitly points to 'another way' to fight this capitalist ideology, the impending socialist-populist revolution led by a black woman, Daisy Fitzroy. A bit later, the extreme poverty they witness here prompts Elizabeth to say: "I don't understand why some people are treated like men, and others like animals." For players that have so far explored most of the optional areas of the game and spent some time taking in the narrative background, the answer to Elizabeth's implied question is quite simple, as it is exactly the ideology players have gradually witnessed so far that works to categorize people into differently valued groups, primarily based on class and race. Elizabeth's specific phrasing—"humans" and "animals"—makes the divide that Columbia's society casts between its members explicit, and her choice of words also echoes Fink's propaganda.

Overall, Columbia's initial visual presentation tries to establish it as a utopia, yet there are also immediate cracks and fissures visible in that display. These contradictions become clearer as the game progresses, eventually revealing a city built on the oppression and subjugation of poorer citizens and ethnic minorities. While discussing this ideology is also a significant theme in the game's main story, it is actually exposed more thoroughly in the way the game uses its setting to tell a story about Columbia and its society. The effect of seeing this ideology at work becomes much stronger by first having players immersed in the fiction of Columbia as a utopia and then gradually peeling away that image, rather than if the game had immediately started to criticize a society that, at that point, players would not have known. Fittingly, after Shantytown, players visit Emporia, the richest part of the city, after these areas have been partly destroyed by the ongoing civil war. After Shantytown, players can never fully go back to the early pristine image and idea of Columbia, metaphorically mirroring what players have learned about the city and its society through the narrative background.

4. Columbia's (Alternate) History

BioShock Infinite's setting and the picture of a society it paints thus also relate to questions of nationalist ideologies, even as the city is clearly fictional and a fantastic deviation from actual US history. Nevertheless, the game engages in alternate history exactly because it wants to relate to American history, which is why the way it depicts its own city's past and how it infuses it with elements of US history merits a closer look.

BioShock Infinite's principal deviation from US history concerns, of course, the existence of Columbia itself. Again, these elements of the city's history are not prominently presented to players, but rather, their reconstruction depends on players' willingness to explore the narrative background provided in the game. As they can piece together from different voxophones, kinetoscopes, and various writings, in the game's fictional history, Columbia was founded by Comstock in 1893 after securing funding from the US Congress. The floating Columbia toured multiple US cities and was a major attraction during the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. However, over the years, Comstock sought more independence from the mainland US, and eventually, in 1902, Columbia seceded from the union. Soon after, the first resistance against Comstock's oppressive rule began to form under the leadership of Daisy Fitzroy as the Vox Populi; when players visit the city ten years later, this conflict is about to culminate in a revolution. Yet in order to work as an alternate history, while the game naturally has to deviate from its players' common understanding of 'history,' it also has to include enough elements in order to make it recognizable as relating to known historical events (cf. also Singles 48-56). For the storyworld players construct while playing, the references to US history might encourage them to generally assume parallels between

US history and Columbian history, and to be particularly receptive to explicit deviations from the reality they know. Hence, there are a number of elements that, at times, refer to US history accurately or, at other times, reference certain details but present them in a vastly different light. For instance, one of the first sights when Booker arrives at Columbia is how people adore the Founding Fathers of the US, with worshippers gathered around three large statues depicting "Father Franklin," "Father Washington," and "Father Jefferson." The Founding Fathers themselves are, thus, historically correct, yet how they are religiously and fanatically worshipped is a clear exaggeration—which nonetheless can also be read as commentary on the contemporary veneration of the Founding Fathers particularly in more conservative or nationalist circles. As Gavriel Rosenfeld points out about alternate histories in general: "[W]hen we speculate about what might have happened if certain events had or had not occurred in the past, we are really expressing our feelings about the present" (92-93).

Another significant deviation from historical events concerns the figure of Abraham Lincoln—in an ironic and somewhat macabre twist, in Columbia, it is not Lincoln whom conservatives adore but John Wilkes Booth, his assassin. He is worshipped particularly by the so-called Fraternal Order of the Raven, whose appearance in the game is reminiscent of the Ku Klux Klan. Their beliefs are visually displayed in a statue in the courtyard of their headquarters, where Comstock is seen fighting the so-called serpent of nations, which is depicted with stereotypically racist caricatures of black, Asian, and Jewish men. Lincoln, in turn, is vilified by Comstock as "the Emancipator" or "the Apostate" for his role in abolishing slavery. Comstock's crude beliefs become apparent in a voxophone:

> What exactly was the 'Great Emancipator' emancipating the Negro from? From his daily bread. From the nobility of honest work. From wealthy patrons who sponsored them from cradle to grave. From clothing and shelter. ... No animal is born free, except the white man. And it is our burden to care for the rest of creation. (*BioShock Infinite)*

Comstock's crass racism puts him firmly in line with anti-abolitionist and pro-slavery forces in the US, misrepresenting history by praising the alleged merits of the slavery system and completely neglecting the violence, exploitation, and lack of freedom that actually characterized it. In the context of the overall way in which the game depicts Columbian society, this deviation from history serves to again showcase the racism that characterizes the city, in such a crude and obvious way for players knowing about Lincoln and Booth that its satire becomes even more apparent than in the previous, more subtle elements characterizing the game's setting.

However, the most important encounter with both Columbia's own history and its relation to US history occurs in the Hall of Heroes, a kind of museum that features (interactive) exhibitions of the Boxer Rebellion and the so-called Battle at Wounded Knee, two pivotal events for Columbia's history. As the exhibit shows, in the game's version of US history, Columbia intervened in the Boxer Rebellion in 1901 by firing on Chinese citizens, ending the rebellion and revealing that the city also functions as a heavily-armed gigantic airship. It is this event that prompts the US government to question Comstock's rule over Columbia, which leads to the city's eventual secession. More important than their mere existence in Columbia's history, however, is how both the Boxer Rebellion and Wounded Knee are depicted in the Hall of Heroes, showcasing how the city's rulers officially want these events to be remembered. In both exhibits, the ethnic Others—Chinese and Native Americans, respectively—are portrayed as the sole aggressors, as savage warriors depicted through familiar stereotypes, whom the Columbian forces heroically defeated. In the Wounded Knee exhibition, the Native Americans are portrayed in dark and red colors and as hiding in bushes, trying to heighten the idea that they represent danger, and we see them attacking and capturing a white woman. The background music and the loud shouts and chants by Native Americans add to the tension in this area, further fueling the depiction that they are aggressive and war-hungry. In reality, Wounded Knee was also sometimes, and initially, misrepresented as

a battle in US official history (Buinicki 729-30), and twenty-nine Medals of Honors were issued to soldiers participating in it (Valandra 34). Today, it is clearly labeled as a massacre, but this somewhat complicated history is mirrored in how Comstock unquestioningly portrays the event as a noble battle. The depiction highlights the heroism of the white soldiers, and of Comstock in particular, about which Cornelius Slate, a soldier and old friend of Booker who participated in the massacre, complains; according to Slate, Comstock did not even take part in any of these 'battles.' In this sense, the game also builds on players' knowledge of the actual history of Wounded Knee, since they then immediately notice the clear deviation that this representation constitutes.[10]

The Hall of Heroes as a location in Columbia is thus particularly significant because it explicitly discusses the *writing* of history—by the victors—and how it can potentially be misused to justify ideologies of nationalism, nativism, and jingoism.[11] Through the disparaging comments of Slate, we learn that this is a deviation not just from the players' reality but also from the diegetic reality of the game's world. Comstock thus clearly misrepresents history, as Slate speaks of "the history that does not fit in their books." No voice is given to the oppressed, powerless, and wronged parties in these depictions; rather, these exhibits constitute a white man's idealized fantasy (understanding) of history. In its many references to historical realities, such as the allusions to the founding of the US Republic, Jim Crow laws, and the civil rights movement mentioned above, *BioShock Infinite* thus models its fantastic world after our historical one, an inclusion of 'realist' elements typical of the fantastic mode (cf. Koenen 42). As Marcus Schulzke notes about dystopian worlds in particular, "even those game worlds and virtual worlds that are ostensibly much different from the real world tend to reproduce the institutions and ideologies of the real world in new settings" (316). Hence, Columbia appears not as a decontextualized fantasy world but, rather, as a postmodern bricolage built from references to historical reality. In turn, by referencing and then deviating from US history so distinctly, these elements also work to activate audiences in more carefully evaluating the knowledge they gain about Columbia, having to be wary of the unreliability of these depictions in terms of the storyworld that players construct.

5. Narrative and Narrative Instability

Finally, the significance of Columbia as a society and of its history becomes entangled and most visible in connection with the narrative events of the game. These can be further divided into two larger aspects—one is the story itself, the events that transpire throughout the game, the other concerns the discursive telling of these events, as the game features a twist towards its end and thus engages in narrative instability.[12] Overall, this neatly brings together the game's efforts to expose Columbia's inherent ideology and blur simplistic binaries.

The narrative events in the game unfold on two main levels—one concerns Booker's, Elizabeth's, and Comstock's fates, the other focuses on the city of Columbia itself. Whereas the former constitutes the main story that is clearly foregrounded by the game through various dialogues, what happens to Columbia as Booker ventures through its different areas is often told more subtly in the background, in line with how the setting is established, as previously discussed. At critical junctions, however, these two aspects of the narrative overlap. Most significantly, in Booker's quest to escape the city with Elizabeth on an airship, they help arm the Vox Populi, leading to an intensification of the civil war they wage against the Founders, which the Vox eventually win as they take over the more affluent districts of the city. After having been in Shantytown, Booker and Elizabeth travel to Emporia, the city's wealthiest district, after it has already been taken over by the Vox. In these levels, players witness the destruction the Vox have wrecked upon the city and how the upper-class citizens have either been killed or are frantically trying to flee Columbia.

Significantly, these events ultimately serve to demonstrate the similarities between the Founders' oppressive regime and the revolt by the Vox Populi—the violence against ethnic minorities and the lower class that players

witnessed earlier is replaced by violence against the upper class, committed by the Vox. While many aspects of the game's story can be read as supporting the socialist revolt that the Vox plan, these areas depict the bloody side of such a revolution, instead of reverting to a representation in more stereotypical and binary terms. On a gameplay level, the waves of enemies Booker had to fight up until Shantytown are now replaced by Vox fighters, with their appearance slightly changed but the basic gameplay elements of fighting them staying exactly the same, which symbolically highlights their similarity. Another hint towards that parallelism is how the propaganda announcements by Fink have been replaced by Daisy Fitzroy's speeches to the masses. Her speeches point out that she is clearly aware of the fissures and contradictions in the Founders' ideology, as she tries to educate the people on how exactly they have been subjugated. However, the way these speeches are presented—basically taking over exactly the same position as Fink's, and one shown while Fitzroy's face is superimposed on a building, mirroring the personality cult around Comstock—highlights the parallels between Fitzroy and Fink/Comstock, in that a power-hungry individual has taken over a political movement. When Booker and Elizabeth later witness the scalps of some of Comstock's lieutenants being publicly displayed, it prompts Elizabeth to claim that "Fitzroy's no better than Comstock," (*BioShock Infinite*) again complicating binary and static portrayals of heroes and villains.

Booker's role in this revolt is crucial, and it becomes even more important after the final twist of the game, when players, along with Booker and Elizabeth, realize that multiple alternate universes exist in their world and that they have traveled to some of them thanks to Elizabeth's supernatural powers. Towards the end of the game, these revelations are presented to players in what I understand as narrative instability, since these scenes fundamentally destabilize the audience's process of reconstructing the storyworld of the game. Eventually, Booker and Elizabeth realize that, due to the existence of multiple universes, they can only decisively stop Comstock if they prevent him from being born in the first place, since he otherwise continues to exist in parallel universes. Accordingly, Elizabeth brings Booker to a place where he was baptized long ago, after having participated in the Wounded Knee Massacre, in order to be 'born again.' However, as Booker tells Elizabeth, he did not go through with the baptism at the very last second. This culminates in the most important revelation of the game's story: The Booker whom we have played so far was indeed not baptized; however, the Booker who, in a parallel universe, *was* baptized then found new meaning in his life, became deeply religious, and consequently founded Columbia—and then changed his name to Zachary Hale Comstock. The protagonist Booker and the antagonist Comstock are thus one and the same person, but from different parallel universes. Elizabeth, who was believed to be Comstock's daughter throughout the game, is thus also revealed as Booker's daughter. These revelations challenge the storyworld players had constructed so far, turning it unstable, as significant events and characters' identities have to be updated with new information. Even more so than with the paralleling of Fink/Comstock and Fitzroy, the revelation that the main protagonist and antagonist are actually the same person further strengthens the game's efforts to complicate clear binaries. The (partially) good deeds by Booker that players witness throughout the game are thus counterbalanced by his potential, in another universe, to commit all the acts of discrimination and oppression pointed out so far as well—as Martin T. Buinicki phrases it, through these revelations, "DeWitt and the player learn they have been fighting themselves all along" (734).

In a larger context, this revelation also speaks to the constructedness of worlds, of narrative, and of history. Metatextually, the different parallel universes that Booker and Elizabeth can travel to function as different narratives as well, since they both emphasize the process of narratively creating a world. Going back to the depiction of Wounded Knee in the Hall of Heroes, this twist also casts Slate's criticism of Comstock's revision of history in a slightly different light. For Slate, the historical misrepresentation in the exhibits focuses centrally on Comstock's own involvement in Wounded Knee—he is enraged

that Comstock uses this part of history to stylize himself as a war hero when, in Slate's opinion, he did not even participate in it. Yet with the knowledge of the game's twist, players realize that this central part of Slate's criticism is not actually valid—Comstock *was* at Wounded Knee, but he was still known as Booker DeWitt back then. While overall, this is still clearly a misrepresentation of history that does grave injustice to the actual victims of Wounded Knee, it also points to the complications of representing history 'accurately' in the first place, and it establishes this issue as going beyond simply being right or wrong (cf. Ankersmit 196-97). Being able to travel between parallel universes complicates a distinction between 'the past' and 'history,' as it is at times unclear what the exact past events in a given universe are, making it more difficult to ascertain if a specific history refers to events that happened in this or in a parallel world. As Karen Hellekson argues about alternate histories in general, texts like *BioShock Infinite* thus prompt readers/players to "rethink their world and how it has become what it is. They are a critique of the metaphors we use to discuss history. And they foreground the 'constructedness' of history and the role narrative plays in this construction" (5).

In *BioShock Infinite*, then, setting, history, and narrative work together to make the city's nationalist ideology visible and to question the ways in which it tries to present itself. The game's setting works to gradually help players overcome the false consciousness of Comstock's dominant ideology, to realize that the utopian society he tries to present is actually marked by stark injustices and inequalities. Similarly, the game's narrative developments work towards deconstructing binary oppositions between good and evil or heroes and villains, instead eventually showing a number of characters and events in different lights. Through the narrative twist at the end of the game, this blurring and complication works not just in terms of one specific event or one particular society but is instead transferred to history and narrative itself, highlighting their constructedness and cautioning players not to believe in binary understandings of truth or reality.

From a postcolonial point of view, the game does not fully succeed in its project of deconstructing nationalist and colonialist ideologies and showing a successful revolution against an oppressive regime, mainly because it is, after all, presented and played from the perspective of the colonizing subject, a white male, and because it stresses individualism. It is not, in this sense, an instance of 'writing back' or 'counter discourse' (cf. Thieme 1). While the way the game exposes Daisy Fitzroy as, ultimately, succumbing to power herself and becoming almost as ruthless a leader as Comstock or Fink is important for complicating stable dichotomies of good and evil, her narrative treatment in the game's story is still troublesome, since she is the main representative and voice of the oppressed. After Fitzroy kills Fink and is about to also kill his son, it is actually Elizabeth who stabs her and thus saves the child. In these later parts, Fitzroy is presented as overly radical and violent, encouraging players to lose sympathy by showing her about to murder a child, thus demonstrating how a revolution can be taken too far (cf. Elmore 99-100). Still, if minorities are oppressed as much as they are in Columbia, Fitzroy's resorting to violence is also presented as one of the only options to end that oppression, and in this context, her final scene shows how Elizabeth, a white woman, literally backstabs and kills Fitzroy, a black woman, preventing her from rising to power. With the perspective constrained to white points of view and the major nonwhite character killed off, *BioShock Infinite* fails to truly depict a deconstruction of nationalistic and imperialistic ideologies. Yet the game itself is also more ambiguous in these efforts, since it does not, in the end, present Booker's involvement in the history of Columbia as a kind of 'white savior' narrative (cf. Hughey). Instead, the final scenes of the game suggest that in order to 'correct' the course of history, to end Comstock's oppressive hegemonic rule over Columbia, Booker/Comstock, the white male hegemon, has to be killed, so that the splitting of the worlds after his baptism never occurs. Accordingly, Elizabeth drowns him in the baptismal waters, suggesting that, at least in the universe we witness as players, this prevents Comstock from ever existing. In addition, it is

significant how the game sets up the overall engagement with Columbia's nationalistic ideology, by putting players in the position of the 'unmarked' powerful norm and gradually making Booker see the discrimination and oppression characterizing Columbian society, representing a way out of ideological indoctrination.

6. Conclusion

Overall, while *BioShock Infinite* might, at first glance, not engage with questions of colonialism or imperialism in its outward plot or gameplay, the analysis of its setting, history, and later narrative complications has hopefully shown how it deals with nationalism in more 'covert' and subtle ways, which can heighten the effect on players as they recreate a storyworld of what they witness. The game's cultural work thus lies particularly in providing a fantastic vessel through which nationalistic and oppressive tendencies in US society can be depicted in an exaggerated way, in turn prompting a reflection on US history along similar lines. In its efforts to make Columbia's ideology visible, to question clear-cut binaries, and to point to the constructedness of narratives and history, *BioShock Infinite* is effective precisely because it is a game, a text that has to be played and interacted with. Even though it features an ultimately quite linear main story, with relatively few narrative or gameplay decisions to be made, the way it has players actively explore the city of Columbia and tells a large part of its story spatially, making different reconstructions of the storyworld possible, demonstrates how the (inter)active engagement with a ludic text can also lead to an active rethinking of what is represented, and of how that representation works.

Notes

1. As a kind of alternate history, *BioShock Infinite* also shares many themes with its predecessor, the 2007 *BioShock*. Cf. Lizardi for a discussion of all games of the *BioShock* series as alternate histories, and cf. Schmeink for an analysis of *BioShock* in particular.

2. For a summary of this debate, cf., for instance, Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al 189-204; and for examples of scholarship from these different approaches, cf. particularly Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan.

3. Calling a video game a kind of text might be controversial in the context of the ludology-narratology debate as well; here, I understand the term 'text' in its broadest cultural-studies sense, referring to a large range of genres, media, or, even more generally, "any organized set of discourses (and meanings)" (Lewis 403). My understanding of video games as 'narratively liminal,' in turn, owes to discussions within the research network "Narrative Liminality and/in the Formation of American Modernities", funded by the German Research Foundation.

4. Accordingly, this focus on storyworlds is also related to possible-worlds theory in narratology (cf. Ryan), as Herman equally notes: "[W]hen interpreting fictional narratives, recipients relocate to an alternative possible world, with a number of factors determining the accessibility relations between the fictional and the factual world" (15).

5. In postclassical narratology, this focus on reception, on the "interactions between narratives and recipients," is part of "cognitive approaches" to narrative (Sommer 152). In literary theory, reader-response criticism (e.g. in the work of Stanley Fish or Wolfgang Iser) puts a similar emphasis on the reader of a text.

6. Still, a number of gameplay elements could, of course, productively be read as relating to nationalistic and related discourses as well, such as the game's individualistic focus on one single person fighting against masses of enemies, the omnipresence of weapons, the different ways in which the player character's abilities can be augmented, etc. For related analyses of these gameplay aspects in the first *BioShock* game, cf. Packer 215-21; van den Berg 19-22.

7. In fact, the name 'Columbia' already hints at this nationalist impulse as well, as it references the figure of Columbia, who personifies the United States and who David Hackett Fischer traces back to the "goddess of liberty," having become an "American image of liberty and freedom" (234).

8. This aspect of choice in exploration works similarly in *BioShock* as well—cf., e.g., Tulloch; Schubert, "Objectivism."

9. This extends to Booker's whiteness as well—as the whole game is presented from his perspective, players only rarely get an idea of how he looks. Since all they see at the beginning of Columbia are other white people, they might, however, also assume Booker to be white, in line with Columbia's rulers' attempts at establishing whiteness as the 'norm.' This implicit assumption becomes more noticeable when players encounter nonwhite characters in these levels, and it is also made explicit by a few glimpses of seeing Booker in a mirror and by the nickname we learn he was given during Wounded Knee, 'the white injun.'

10. Presuming such knowledge also works similarly for the many anachronistic songs that are featured in Columbia. Cf. Ivănescu for a longer analysis of musical elements in *BioShock Infinite*, including these anachronisms.

11. In this case, *BioShock Infinite* presents a particularly crass example of the dangers of using the (mis)representation of history to support a specific ideology, which, of course, has been academically discussed with much more nuance and complexity. Nevertheless, this particular episode still relates to questions and problems raised in historiography, particularly in terms of the intermingling of history and narrative: cf. Jameson's dictum that "history is not a text, not a narrative, ... but ... it is inaccessible to us except in textual form" (35) and, particularly, White 142-68; Ankersmit.

12. For a more general understanding of narrative instability, cf. Schubert, "Lose Yourself."

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The Post-Apocalyptic and the Ludic: An Interview with Dr. Stephen Joyce

MAHSHID MAYAR (BIELEFELD UNIVERSITY) & STEPHEN JOYCE (AARHUS UNIVERSITY)

Mahshid Mayar (M.M.): Stephen Joyce, tell us more about your forthcoming book: what are the main arguments you make in *Transmedia Storytelling and the Apocalypse* about our twenty-first-century views of the world in response to what we consume as entertainment?

Stephen Joyce (S.T.): My initial question was simply wondering about the profusion of post-apocalyptic entertainment over the past twenty-five years. The end of the Cold War reduced anxiety about a potential global nuclear war, so one might think we would see less interest in post-apocalyptic scenarios – instead, the genre exploded across all platforms, from *The Walking Dead* to *The Last of Us* to *The Road*. Many people associate the genre's popularity with current anxieties such as climate change, but in my book I try to break the Big Question into smaller questions: Why are media producers drawn to the genre? What are the attractions of the genre for fans? How do its characteristic textual features and motifs interact with modern storytelling techniques? These questions led me to consider the genre's relationship to transmedia storytelling and media franchising.

One of the distinctive qualities of modern media, with on-demand content, technological hybridity, and active fan communities, is that it enables immersive transmedia worldbuilding. At the same time, media conglomeration and franchising have created a demand for storyworlds, such as *Star Wars* or the *Harry Potter* series, that can be spread across all platforms. One key reason for the post-apocalyptic's current popularity is that it creates a portal to flexible yet coherent fantasy worlds derived from our own which can be the basis for multiple stories by different creative teams across various platforms. *The Walking Dead* is probably the premier example of this, with the award-winning comics by Robert Kirkman, AMC's hit TV series (and now spinoff series *Fear the Walking Dead*), the successful videogames by Telltale Games, the novels by Jay Bonansinga, not to mention the online content, fan art and fan fiction, and zombie runs worldwide. This ability to create immersive transmedia worlds is a defining characteristic of modern media.

Of course, there's also a cultural dimension to the genre's popularity, but I'll say more about this a bit later. One of the main points for me was to get away from interpretive strategies that read cultural products the way Freud read dreams, as something that can be directly psychoanalyzed to reveal our society's fears and anxieties. What primarily interests me is how cultural preoccupations are processed and filtered through our media eco-system.

M.M.: What is the place of video games in the complex image you sketch of the 'trans-media eco-system'? In giving shape to and popularizing this genre across the media, what is the advantage of video games over other media?

S.J.: For me, video games have had a bigger impact than many people realize on how narratives are told across media. This is partly for aesthetic reasons and partly industrial reasons. The aesthetic influence is that videogames are the art form that is most directly concerned with active audiences. How do you tell a coherent story when the audience chooses where to go and what to look at? The key game for me is a post-apocalyptic classic: *BioShock*. What *BioShock* did so well was that to create a character-driven arc and a worldbuilding arc. The character's story ran the player through a linear sequence of events, but around that story was the question of what happened to the city of Rapture to turn it into an underwater nightmare.

This can be explored to different depths, with smaller stories embedded into the environment in audio diaries, in the décor, even in the music. The post-apocalyptic is really a perfect genre for this kind of storytelling because one of the major questions in any post-apocalyptic narrative is: what happened to turn our world into this? This kind of environmental storytelling has been really influential in developing transmedia franchising because transmedia franchises can never be sure if audiences have experienced all the extensions, so the extensions focus, as *BioShock* did, on embedding information on characters and world histories that enriches our experience if we find them. So I think part of the reason post-apocalyptic videogames are so popular is the genre is perfect for this kind of storytelling, and this kind of storytelling has also had a major influence on transmedia narratives, which helps explain why the post-apocalyptic is such a popular transmedia genre.

One broader industrial reason this gaming narrative technique has been influential across media is that the gaming industry has become significantly more powerful, leading to demands for a more flexible approach to media franchising. Typically, film and television are the dominant partners in any transmedia storyworld and can dictate terms to writers of tie-in novels and comics and other ancillary media. What has changed over the past twenty-five years is that video games now rival Hollywood in terms of revenue and blockbuster budgets. This makes them less willing to create game versions that simply follow a film's plot because if the film fails then it will take the expensive video game down with it. This is a process I call franchise entropy, which is the opposite of synergy. Because of this, games, films, and television may share the same IP, such as *Tomb Raider* or *Assassin's Creed*, but instead of copying each other they focus more on storyworld expansion, so we follow different characters or backstories in the same narrative universe. That way even if one entry in the franchise fails, it doesn't necessarily destroy the audience for other media. So, the flexible way games tell stories has now become the default way transmedia tells stories.

M.M.: In the introduction to your book, Stephen, you mention the by-and-large unknown roots of the post-apocalyptic literature in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* in 1826. How does the genre's timeline look like?

S.J.: Although people often lump the apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic together, they are actually really different genres that share a similar event: a civilization-destroying catastrophe. In the religious apocalyptic narrative, it makes no sense to talk about a group of survivors after the Last Judgment. God isn't going to forget anyone and leave a few random people wandering around on Earth afterwards. It's only with the emergence of industrial civilization that we get the post-apocalyptic and I think that's because industrial civilization is so complex it makes people wonder if it's possible to survive anymore in its absence. There's a quote from Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) that I think helps explain the attraction:

If we examine, I say, all these things, and consider what a variety of labour is employed about each of them, we shall be sensible that without the assistance and co-operation of many thousands, the very meanest person in a civilized country could not be provided, even according to what we very falsely imagine, the easy and simple manner in which he is commonly accommodated. (1.11)

So, instead of seeing it alongside the apocalyptic, the genre's closest relation may be the Robinsonade, stories of castaways on desert islands who must also survive without modern civilisation. However, Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* didn't spawn any real successors. There are some scattered works throughout the nineteenth century, but there's no real recognition of anything like a post-apocalyptic genre. It really only comes into being after 1945.

M.M.: I am particularly interested in your opinion about the post-WWII allure of the genre. What is so remarkably 'contemporary' about the post-apocalyptic?

S.J.: Obviously, the A-bomb and the threat of nuclear war made the possibility of a global holocaust more real. But I think the bomb also provided concrete expression of a general fear about the pace of technological and industrial

change. The more power technology gives us over nature, the more we worry about technology's power over us, because we are also a part of nature. Hence, a key motif in the post-apocalyptic genre is ambivalence about technology, with characters desperately seeking the remains of our industrial civilization (searching for bullets, tinned food, scanning radio channels, etc.) even as the causes of disaster are often things like AI or genetic engineering.

The other aspect that feels contemporary is how the post-apocalyptic offers a chance to rewrite the social contract. Although many people see the genre as an expression of fear, I think it's most positive attraction is that it offers what Richard G. Mitchell calls culture crafting, the chance to imagine a new culture from scratch. How would it be governed? What would be a standard unit of trade? What tools would be useful and what would become redundant? One chapter in my book looks at doomsday preppers and survivalists as a growing subculture. Although many see them as lunatic conspiracy theorists, I think when you examine their practices you see that they are really trying to immerse themselves in their own storyworld and most of them value the experiences the genre provides. Preppers really value things like sustainable living, healthy eating, and personal fitness (to outrun the zombies), so a lot of their activities dovetail well with contemporary trends in personal maximization. On the other hand, their desire to rip down society and start anew also articulates a disaffection with contemporary society and politics, and a sense of powerlessness to change their direction other than by tearing it all down. This is also very contemporary, I think.

M.M.: How American is the genre? How global is it?

S.J.: Today, the genre is global, but the USA still exerts the strongest influence on its development, simply because it is the most dominant media producer. But the USA isn't monolithic. One cultural aspect I look at in the book is how the post-apocalyptic transformed into a counterpoint to the apocalyptic rhetoric used by the Bush administration to frame 9/11 and the War on Terror. In his speeches from that period, Bush tended to frame 9/11 as a defining historical moment that had revealed America's mission and clearly divided the world into good and evil, paving the way for the final battle. In contrast, post-apocalyptic narratives such as *Battlestar Galactica* (2003-2009) began strongly emphasizing moral ambiguity, the blurring of boundaries between right and wrong, and the absence of any clear plan or strategy in confusing times. So, elements that are now characteristic of the genre gained prominence as a cultural response within the USA to the dominant political narratives of their time.

The post-apocalyptic is one of the only sci-fi and fantasy genres that can be done on a low budget, so it's popular across the globe, and it's flexible enough to adapt to local environments. The videogame *Metro: Last Light*, for example, is set in the Moscow Metro following an apocalyptic event and was made by the Ukraine-based 4A Games with Russian author Dmitri Glukhovsky. What I love about it is that it has a distinctively Russian feel, even though it draws on many of the genre's characteristic tropes. One example of how the post-apocalyptic genre is different in other countries compared to the USA is that, in the American post-apocalyptic, the end of the USA = the end of the world. This type of equivalence isn't true of other places. In the British film *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, 2002), for example, there's a crucial moment when the protagonist is about to give up and then he looks up and sees an airplane. Suddenly, he realizes that the apocalypse is localized to Great Britain and the rest of the world has simply quarantined the island and is going on as normal. Such moments don't happen in American movies. Japan has its own post-apocalyptic genre culture, which has been highly influential (e.g. *Godzilla*, the cyberpunk anime *Akira*). So it's a genre which has many regional inflections, even if the dominant tropes are still often determined by American media productions.

M.M.: In the 'game-over era' we live in—this post-imperial, post-colonial moment in contemporary history—how do video games grapple with the ideological, the historical, and the individual while still remaining highly entertaining?

S.J.: I think videogames are only beginning to grasp how to conjoin serious issues with gameplay mechanics and narrative. For me, a landmark in this development is *BioShock*, which juxtaposes a critique of libertarianism with the player's desire for greater control over gameplay, all experienced through a shocking twist when we expect to have the power to act but cannot. *The Last of Us* contains a similarly thought-provoking loss of player choice near the end, which has provoked a lot of insightful discussion, as it only has an effect within a medium predicated on player choice and agency. The ability to create storyworlds and give players freedom to explore and decisively change the environment is something games increasingly do very well. The *Assassin's Creed* series as a whole does a good job of recreating different cities and time periods that players can explore, even if games have a harder time with dialogue, characterization, and non-stereotypical programming of NPCs. *Assassin's Creed III* surprised a lot of people by incorporating a critical reflection on the American War of Independence into the gameplay, which sparked a lot of discussions about the actual history behind the game. In many ways, the content of games isn't as important as the conversations they enable.

Because of what the medium can do, I think videogames are ideally suited to experiment (as the post-apocalyptic genre does) with alternate histories and alternate worlds, where players explore the paths not taken. I'd love to see certain genres critically reflect more on their own premises. For example, a lot of strategy games still depend on conquering enemy territories and imperial expansion and game mechanics reward players for seizing new territories and resources – I'd like to see game developers think about ways to complicate that premise and make gamers reflect on the violence they are unleashing, the way *BioShock* did in the famous cutscene with Andrew Ryan. If there's a strategy game out there that does this, then I'm not familiar with it. Something like a reverse strategy game, in which players desperately attempt to hang onto their land and culture in the face of an unstoppable European invasion, might be interesting. I think building up these discussions about how gameplay can be conjoined with narrative and theme are vital for the development of games, more so than any technological development.

M.M.: What in your view are some of the ways the post-apocalyptic and the post-colonial meet in video games? And, how comparably rendered are these themes in movies and video games?

S.J.: I think at a basic level both are united by the desire to rebuild after a catastrophic event and to imagine an alternate world in which things turned out differently or in which we have more agency than many feel they currently possess. Post-apocalyptic worlds offer a chance to wipe the slate clean of colonial legacies. For example, in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*, it is only late in the novel that we discover the main character is black, because in a zombie apocalypse, race becomes meaningless and the only meaningful distinction is living/undead.

I think videogames would benefit from taking on more of a postcolonial perspective, and not just from a public service perspective. I would like to see strategy games in which the player is not the conqueror but the invaded, or possibly a first-person game where race is a key theme but you don't know the race of your own avatar until late in the game, as in *Zone One*. The race of your character in the fantasy game *Morrowind* actually conditions how NPCs interact with you, but I'm not familiar with any non-fantasy applications of this idea. It's also a question of framing these ideas persuasively for the gaming community. I suspect demanding such changes out of political correctness would lead to a vitriolic backlash, a la Gamergate, when instead they can be seen as ways of invigorating clichéd genres with new perspectives. I don't think it's a good medium for teaching didactic lessons, but it does excel at creating challenging worlds to explore, after which gamers have to determine their own view on events, as in e.g. *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, with its internal debates on human enhancement technologies. Illustrating how postcolonial perspectives can enrich the gaming experience may be one role of critical debate during the game-over era.

M.M.: Thank you so much for this interview!

Author's biography

Mahshid Mayar is an assistant professor of North American Literature and Culture at Bielefeld University, Germany. She holds a Ph.D. in history from the Bielefeld Graduate School in History and Sociology (BGHS). While her doctoral project (under review for publication as her first book) examined the cultural geographical formations of the U.S. Empire at the turn of the 20th century, her postdoctoral/Habiliation project focuses on U.S. history through the lens of video games. Her research interests include childhood studies, history of globalization, American studies, 19th century U/S. history, cultural geography, and critical game studies.

Stephen Joyce is an Associate Professor in media, literature and culture at Aarhus University, Denmark. His newest book is Transmedia Storytelling and the Apocalypse (Palgrave Macmillan 2018), which examines the coevolution of transmedia storytelling, media franchising, and the post-apocalyptic genre. He has published numerous articles on film, television, video games, and literature. He is also the author of A River of Han: Eastern Tragedy in a Western Land (Heidelberg: Winter Verlag 2015), which explores Asian American literature, postcolonialism, trauma, and tragedy in a transnational context. His current research interests include the influence of transmedia on journalism and politics.

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Cultural Code: Video Games and Latin America, *by Phillip Penix-Tadsen. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016. (Book Review)*

NAIMA SHAHEEN (BIELEFELD UNIVERSITY)

The main objective of Phillip Penix-Tadsen's *Cultural Code: Video Games and Latin America* is to provide the "first synthetic theorization of the relationship between video games and culture" (1). His theoretical and critical attention is drawn towards video games and the ways in which they are shaped by culture and how, in turn, video games shape culture. Penix-Tadsen is an associate professor in Spanish and Latin American studies at the University of Delaware. His interest in Latin American culture and video games is combined in *Cultural Code*, in which he particularly focuses on Latin American culture and its relationship to games. To establish his theory, the author benefits from the Uruguayan game theorist Gonzo Frasca's term "ludology" in reference to video games. Penix-Tadsen expands upon Frasca's definition and further develops it into "cultural ludology," a concept which he further utilizes throughout the volume. Cultural ludology serves here as a tool to examine how culture is incorporated in the development of video games and how cultural practices change the perception and content of video games. Exploring the visual-narrative and algorithmic nature of video games, the term sheds light on the interplay between culture and video games as well as explaining how video games can visually represent a culture.

The book is divided into two sections. The first section *How Culture Uses Games* focuses on Latin American gaming practices from the early years of video games' popularity to the present. The author elaborates on the use of video games in culture in this section, such as for commercial, recreational, serious and persuasive reasons. Penix-Tadsen therefore concentrates on video games in South and Central America (for example Mexico, Venezuela, Cuba) and the Caribbean Isles. He further includes areas in the United States which are highly influenced by Latin American culture due to a large percentage of the Latin American population (such as in Los Angeles or Miami) in order to demonstrate how video games can be used for political purposes. To cite examples, he analyzes "persuasive games" such as *La Migra* (Rafael Fajardo 2001) and *Crosser* (Fajardo 2000). Both these games deal with the issue of "illegal immigration" but from different perspectives. In these games, the player is either the "illegal immigrant" whose goal is to cross the border without being caught (*Crosser*) or the border patrol whose responsibility is to prevent "illegal immigrants" from crossing the border (*La Migra*) (90f.).

The book's second half *How Games Use Culture* examines the representation of culture in popular video games set in Latin America, and it explores how sound elements, visual iconography and other factors are used to add meaning to video games. He suggests reading video games as a sign system in order to understand the so-called "third meaning" or "obtuse meaning" (144), which cannot be reduced to a signifying system of language (a reference to the formal linguistic theory by Ferdinand de Saussure). Penix-Tadsen analyzes various games such as *Tomb Raider*, *Uncharted*, and *Red Dead Redemption* in order to examine the extent to which a game can represent Latin American culture through the representation of the Latin American space. Furthermore, he analyzes *Grand Theft Auto V* to demonstrate how multiculturalism is represented in a video game (see chapter 5). Penix-Tadsen claims that these game environments support players in creating a cognitive map. The player, he asserts, not only perceives the game's environment as spatial context but finds themselves its inhabitant. The space within the video game becomes "an environmental context for the active creation of culturally contextualized meaning"

(178). As such, sounds, iconography, and the representation of culture become essential parts of such a game-space. Penix-Tadsen closes his book by expressing a continuing desire to explore various cultures, their codes, and their relation to video games, which are set in or focus on Latin America.

Penix-Tadsen's study contributes to our understanding of the dynamics between video games and culture. Especially in the second section, the usefulness of his approach with regard to the analysis of video games and culture are demonstrated. His intellectual framework is influenced by various scholars of the field of Latin American studies and his lines of argumentations are carefully mapped out and easy to comprehend. Overall, the volume offers a thorough investigation of Latin American culture and video games. With this, Penix-Tadsen raises awareness toward the sparsely researched exchange of Latin America and the video game industry. Penix-Tadsen is one of the first to elaborate on this topic and the first one to display the importance of understanding how Latin America is represented in video games and which functions video games have within Latin America. This creates a general awareness of the importance of video games with regard to various other purposes beyond the ludological aspect. His study also raises the question as to why there is so little knowledge about such a large and complex space and relatively prominent setting for video games. Given the increasing number of works which have focused on video game culture in/about the United States in the past years, Latin America, as a part of the Americas and a significant market for the video games produced by global gaming companies, deserves more scholarly attention, too. Penix-Tadsen's *Cultural Code* encourages the exploration and research on these matters and provides a basis for this new academic conversation.

Author's biography

Naima Shaheen is completing a master's degree in British and American Studies at Bielefeld University. Her major research interest lies in analyzing the representation of human psychology in digital games, especially concerning the question how mental diseases of playable characters are reflected in horror games. She is further interested in how new narrative possibilities provided by video games change the reception and understanding of mental illness and of narratives in general.

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Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice, *by Adam Chapman. New York: Routledge, 2016. (Book Review)*

LEONID MOYZHES (RUSSIAN STATE UNIVERSITY FOR THE HUMANITIES)

Adam Chapman is a senior lecturer at University of Gothenburg, with PhD in media, culture and society and background in history and cultural history. The main subject of his research is how videogames shape our understanding and representation of history. «Digital Games as history» collects and summarizes his previous articles in a single volume.

The main question in Chapman's book is whether we can use video games to tell history and, if so, how games, as a medium, influence historical narrative. There are, of course, a number of researchers in the fields of both history and game studies who have addressed this very subject. Their evaluation of videogames' potential varies from an optimistic approach, such as Niall Fergusson's (cf. Vasagar) suggestion to include historical videogames into school curriculum, to argument about the possible harm they can cause, presented by scholars like Alessandro Testa. Among these, Chapman's work stands out because it is not confined to analysis of one game or genre. Instead, it explores the medium itself in all its generic variety and the ways it represents historical content in general.

Chapman's work is well grounded in the existing game studies theory. His analysis relies upon such concepts as procedural rhetoric (cf. Bogost) and ludic space (cf. Arseth). But his main method is based on applying Gibsonian psychology to videogames, as suggested by Jonas Linderoth (cf. Linderoth and Bennestedt). He also relies on studies about historical representation in cinema, especially Robert Rosenstone.

Digital Games as History consists of three parts. The first part introduces some introductory concepts in the study of digital games as historical matter. Chapman thoroughly discuss the problem of "popular history" as opposed to "academic history". His main idea (9) is that difference between those two fields is a matter of degree and purpose, but not the kind. Chapman states that popular history, presented in such medias as films and videogames, can still be used to make statements about the past and, therefore, can and should be studied and respected. He also point out that videogames have become too influential to be ignored and must be studied as a new medium whether we like the content of particular games or not. In the same part, he introduces ideas and terms crucial for the book. Most importantly - the concept of "historying" (21), making one's own statements and propositions about the past, which differs from history as the passive reception of information presented by historians. Chapman insists that historying is one of the most important practices that videogames can offer

The second part is dedicated to the formal analyzsis of videogames as historical medium. Here, Chapman uses broad categories, like time and space, different simulation styles and the relationship between player's agency and narrative restriction to propose a theoretical framework capable of describing any historical game. He introduces realistic (61) and conceptual (69) narrative styles, connecting them to different historical epistemologies. Realistic narrative style, presented mainly in shooters, favors showing history, relies on the visual element of the game and is best suited to the reconstructionist approach. Conceptual style, used in global strategies like Sid Meier's Civilization, prefers to tell history and allows players to interact with more abstract historical concepts and better understand historical causality, and can be compared to

constructionist history. Chapman also mentions a third epistemology, deconstructionist, mainly focused in the process of writing history itself. This approach does not have any particular corresponding narrative style, but still can be found in videogames, thanks to some of their postmodern qualities (81)

Finally, the last part considers practical approaches for using videogames as a medium for representation of historical content and, especially, for historying. Here, Chapman proposes three main roles: videogames as heritage experience, reenactment and narrative historying. All three roles are then described through the lens of affordance – a concept borrowed from Gibsonian ecological psychology. Chapman uses this idea on two levels. First, he notices that historical videogames themselves deal with affordance. Because of player agency, Chapman argues, games tell us more about what historical agents could do and less about what they actually did. This, obviously, sets them apart from linear narratives presented in history books and historical movies. However, videogames as a medium offer another kind of affordance making heritage experience, reenactment and, most important, narrative historying more available to individual players.

The last thesis Chapman proffers is both the most ambitious and the most problematic idea in the book. He proposes that videogames with conceptual narrative style can be used in order to give players the ability for historying. By supplementing necessary factual knowledge and, partly, scientific apparatus with information presented inside the rules of the game, they allow individual players to create narratives about the past, deepening their historical understanding (189). Chapman insists that even counterfactual narratives fall into the domain of history, since they can serve as a tool for a more complex understanding of historical causality and reasons behind real past events. All of this serves as a method of enfranchisement (272). In the words of de Groot, enfranchisement can be understood as a "mode of theorizing access to the past which attempts to somehow allow the ordinary citizens democratic access to the institutions and discourse of history." (De Groot 60)

While Chapman makes some compelling argument in support of using videogames for this purpose, his thesis itself is somewhat controversial because of the ideological layer presented in any videogame and, especially, in any conceptual videogame. Chapman himself admits this earlier in the book and advises critical thinking when dealing with historical narratives in videogames. However, in the chapter dedicated to discussion about enfranchisement, he does not address that problem. While that does not strip his proposition of its merit, it does present an obstacle for using videogames' potential for historying. Another problem, in my view, is the rather uncritical acceptance of some tendencies in videogame industry as a solid characteristic of the medium itself. Some of his generalizations for example, in the analyzes of space in videogames (chapter 4, pp 90-119) leaves the impression that violence and competition are so essential for this medium that it's hard to create a game around a historical topic other than war or similar situation. While videogames (and games in general) do lean towards competition, this is obviously not as universal and widespread a tendency as it may seem. In fact, we already know historical videogames like The Guild series, which present almost no direct conflict, instead focusing on economic development and roleplaying.

Having said all this, Digital Games as History is an insightful work, persuasive and accessible for everyone interested in the questions around videogames and history, both scholars and common readers. one strength of the work lies in the fact that the author attempts to provide an answer to all the questions he raises in the beginning of the book. Furthermore, many of Chapman's findings regarding the structure of historical games can be applied to other fields of game studies, making his work an indispensable read in the pool of works dealing with the value of videogames as more than entertainment.

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Author's biography

Naima Shaheen is completing a master's degree in British and American Studies at Bielefeld University. Her major research interest lies in analyzing the representation of human psychology in digital games, especially concerning the question how mental diseases of playable characters are reflected in horror games. She is further interested in how new narrative possibilities provided by video games change the reception and understanding of mental illness and of narratives in general.

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Afterword: Regional Game Studies and Historical Representation

PHILLIP PENIX-TADSEN (UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE)

Video games are perhaps the most prevalent medium for cultural and historical representation in 2018, with well over 2 billion players worldwide playing games on their smartphones, tablets, social networks, personal computers, and consoles.[1] Given the popularity of games throughout the world and the global nature of game development and game culture, it is ever more important that we, as scholars and analysts of culture, pay attention to the ways games represent culture and history for a mass consumer audience.[2] It is important to understand the obstacles and affordances that define video games' potential for historical depiction, realism, accuracy and scope. Since games can provide rich, interactive opportunities for conveying knowledge about real-world history and culture, we must seek to better understand the advantages and disadvantages of games for bringing distant cultures and remote historical eras to contemporary players across the globe.

Game studies is responding with ever more attention to regional perspectives on games and game culture, as well as critical research by scholars like Adrienne Shaw and Bonnie Ruberg, whose work has helped expand discussions of intersectional identity and gaming beyond representation in order to address the ways gender, sexual identity, race, class, nationality and other factors affect the experience and meaning of games from production to reception.[3] And indeed, questions of player identity and involvement don't end there, with prosumer audiences and modding communities building upon the spaces and worlds provided by games' original publishers with innovative content tailored to diverse audiences and tastes. Significant recent work on postcolonialism and gaming, especially research by Souvik Mukherjee, has helped to shed light on the ways game design can reflect imperialist ideology, as well as how players and game developers can "play back" against Empire through a variety of gaming-related practices.[4] Scholars of games and culture like those mentioned here are navigating uncharted territory in the relationship between video games, history and culture, discussions that are ever more significant to understanding our world.

This special issue of *forum for inter-american studies*, "Encounters in the 'Game-Over Era': The Americas in Videogames," offers key contributions to regional game studies, postcolonial game criticism and cultural analysis related to in-game representation. Editor Mahshid Mayar has brought together scholars approaching games and history from a variety of critical perspectives, offering a multidisciplinary focus on medial, rhetorical, literary and historical analyses of the relationship between video games and colonialism. In her introduction, Mayar lays the groundwork for the types of explorations featured in this special issue: the impact of postcolonial studies on game analysis, imperialist dimensions of game design, questions of accuracy and diversity of in-game historical and cultural representations, the representation of empire in video games about the Americas, the role of cultural heritage in player identity and the relationships between games and other types of media. Each in its own way, the four articles, one interview and two book reviews included in this special issue on the Americas in video games, help to move our discussions of games, history and colonialism forward in significant ways.

Eugen Pfister's essay "'In a world without gold, we might have been heroes!' Cultural Imaginations of Piracy in Video Games" provides a well-researched overview of the pirate genre in video games, tracing the intermedial relationship between games, film, literature and the visual arts in an examination

of the ways pirate topoi and narrative elements are transformed and modified in their transferal between different types of media. Beginning with a review of 18th- and 19th-century literary representations of piracy, Pfister proceeds to trace the transformations in these depictions in 20th- and 21st-century film and video games. The article provides an excellent framework for approaching an intermedial genre adapted in game form, presenting a thoroughly-researched history of pirate video games. Pfister's analysis traces the genre's history to Scot Adams' 1978 textual game *Pirate Adventure* and reviews familiar titles from "narrative" game series like *Monkey Island* and *Assassin's Creed*, which borrow heavily from the symbolism of pirate narratives and films, as well as simulations like Sid Meier's 1987 game *Pirates!* or the *Tropico* series, which focus more on facets of robbery, trade and commerce related to the pirate milieu. Perhaps most importantly, Pfister focuses notable attention to these games' reflections of dominant U.S.- and Eurocentric cultural perspectives, including a lack of depth in their stereotypical depictions of native populations and a focus on the viewpoint of the foreign explorer-conqueror. In light of this important groundwork, it would be extremely interesting to consider how games produced in the global south, by developers in former colonies working in languages other than English have dealt with piracy in their games.

In the article "Columbian Nightmare: Narrative, History, and Nationalism in *BioShock Infinite*," Stefan Schubert reads *Bioshock*, developed by Massachusetts-based studio Irrational Games, as a "narratively liminal text" in an analysis that focuses on the ways the storyworld alternately enables and limits player agency. Schubert's essay looks at what happens when we move beyond facile assumptions about the relationship between video games and imperialism, nationalism and dogmatic views of history, and examines the way complex narratives in games like *Bioshock* deal specifically with colonialism and its legacies. As Schubert's analysis demonstrates, the game's developers immerse the player in a gamescape that is presented deliberately and procedurally: the game's layered narrative first presents the player with a utopian vision of the fictional world of Columbia, only to undermine and expose the "cracks and fissures" in this surface to ultimately reveal "a city built on the oppression and subjugation of poorer citizens and ethnic minorities." Games like *Bioshock: Infinite* exemplify the way a well-designed gameplay experience can provide players with critical insights that relate to their real lives, in this case by highlighting the constructedness of history and narrative in a quest that guides the player to see past the false discourse of Columbia's dominant ideology and to perceive the stark inequalities underlying this utopian projection. This points to a further avenue for research on player response: when games like *BioShock* point their players in the direction of greater truths, do players seek out these truths, and if so, what resources are available to them?

Several similar issues are raised by Daniel Giere in the article "Let's Play the Boston Tea Party – Exemplary Analysis of Historical Events in Digital Games," which analyzes elements of historical (in)accuracy in the depiction of the Boston Tea Party in the Ubisoft game *Assassin's Creed III*, developed in Montreal. Giere pays careful attention to the uses of time and space that impact any discussions of "historical accuracy" in relation to video games—in general, Giere's analysis suggests, it is less important to determine whether a game is accurate or inaccurate than to understand games' specific mechanisms and systems for conveying historical and narrative content. Through a detailed comparative analysis between the game's (more violent) depiction of the historical event and the current historiographical understanding of the actual event itself, Giere ultimately suggests that the historical inaccuracy of the game may be a kind of "teachable" aspect and an entry point for problem-oriented learning. This type of perspective—relating in-game learning to other forms of historical narrative, historiography and history education—is essential for understanding how games don't just teach players the "wrong" history, but can function in concert with other materials and media to improve players' understanding of history, when approached critically as an important and relevant form of historical representation.

Mahshid Mayar's interview with Stephen

Joyce, "The Post-Apocalyptic and the Ludic," sheds light on Joyce's recent work, which focuses on the profusion of post-apocalyptic entertainment over the past quarter century, with particular attention to the genre's relationship to transmedia storytelling and media franchising. Joyce's work examines the attraction of games like *BioShock*, *Fallout* and *The Last of Us* and multi-platform fictional worlds like *The Walking Dead* within a "trans-media ecosystem," helping to understand games' relationship to other media and platforms. Joyce attributes the surge in popularity of the post-apocalyptic genre to a generalized fear about the pace of technological and industrial change, combined with the dawn of the nuclear era following World War II. Perhaps most provocative is Joyce's idea of the post-apocalyptic as a chance to rewrite the social contract: if we could imagine a different world, how might it be better, not just worse? How can we use post-apocalyptic and/or fictionalized history in games to reimagine history and geopolitics? To respond to some of these questions, Joyce provides much-needed attention to examples from outside of the English-speaking world, like the Ukrainian-Russian collaboration *Metro: Last Light*, which provide important context for understanding how a U.S.-dominated genre is interpreted in less-frequently-examined countries and languages. Ultimately, Joyce's research offers an important exploration of how postcolonialism is informing the design of mainstream games like *Bioshock*, *The Last of Us* and *Assassin's Creed*, but also points to the importance of looking beyond mainstream "postcolonial" game series produced in the United States to better comprehend how this critical trajectory is impacting gaming as a global phenomenon.

The original and promising scholarship included in this special issue points to several significant areas for development and growth in regional game studies. Likewise, the reviews of Adam Chapman's *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice* and my own book *Cultural Code: Video Games and Latin America* help illustrate how current scholarship is grappling with many of the issues addressed in the current issue's articles: how history is transformed when conveyed in video games, the obstacles and affordances to representing real-world events in ludic game spaces, and the impact of cultural perspective and identity on video games' production and reception.

There is a need for further analysis of the impact of the specific national, cultural and geographical contexts in which games are created, circulated and consumed—how does the location in which a game is developed affect its content and meaning? Likewise, scholars that focus attention to the ways the dynamics of gender, class, race and sexual identity impact games from production to reception, as well as those who make use of primary and secondary sources in languages other than English, are providing key insights that enrich and diversify our understanding of how games create unique experiences for different audiences worldwide. Cultural and historical representation in video games remains an important concern for postcolonial and decolonial game scholarship, and works such as Pfister's historico-critical review of piracy games points to the possibility of critically examining other types of topoi and conventional settings in games. Overall, the contributions to this special issue demonstrate the importance of in-game depictions of history and culture, while simultaneously signaling the need to understand the context of a game's development, and how location, culture and nationality inform the types of assumptions, narrative elements and symbolism included in video games played by an ever-increasing number of individuals across the globe. I applaud the efforts undertaken by Mahshid Mayar and her collaborators on this special issue, as their work points to a bright and ever-more complex future in regional game studies.

Notes

1. See Newzoo, *2018 Global Games Market Report*, light version, pp. 17-22.

2. See Bjarke Liboriussen and Paul Martin, "Regional Game Studies."

3. See Ruberg, Bonnie, and Adrienne Shaw, eds., *Queer game studies*, Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*

4. Mukherjee, Souvik, *Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back*,

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