Ludohistorical Thinking: Gaming the Gap between Academic and Popular Histories

By

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DECLARATION

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the potential of video games as a tool for communicating history to a popular audience and engaging them in historical thinking. It seeks to understand how games can involve the public in historical thinking, arguments and practices approaching those of professional historians. The research questions include how video games can encourage historical thinking in a mass audience, and what limitations exist in using games as a tool for public history. The thesis is divided into two parts, with the first three chapters exploring theoretical concepts relating to history in gaming and the issues they present. These themes include the relationship between the immersive nature of video games, historical empathy, and critical thinking, non-linearity and historical truth, and themes of historical choice, morality, and complicity. My research draws on case studies of existing games, including *Paradise Killer* (2020) and *Papers, Please* (2013), to explore how games can engage with sophisticated historical epistemologies and draw popular history closer to academic historical practice. In Part Two, Chapters Four and Five closely examine the theme of the Holocaust in video games. This case study is used to test the perceived limits of ludic historical representation and assess how these limits are negotiated in the public sphere. Chapter Four examines the popular and critical reception of three cancelled Holocaust games and identifies major themes that emerge in public discourses surrounding them. Chapter Five closely analyses *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* (1995), an adaptation of the Harlan Ellison short story, as a game that depicted traditionally taboo Holocaust content without notable controversy. The thesis proposes some ways to communicate historical research and foster historical understanding in a digital media-dominated world.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis investigates the use of video games for communicating history to a popular audience. It seeks to understand how games can engage with the complexity and sophistication of scholarly historical discourses. I am interested in how games can involve the public in aspects of historical arguments, processes, and thinking strategies that approach those of the professional historian. My research questions are: how can video games encourage historical thinking in a mass audience? Where might the limitations lie for the use of games as a tool for public history? In order to answer these questions, I examine a series of conceptual issues relating to history in gaming, and how these issues manifest in case studies of existing games. This question is timely and important as digital media increasingly dominates everyday life, including how we interact with history. Educators, institutions, and developers are seeking more ways to utilise games to communicate historical research and foster historical understanding.

In the four years since I commenced this project, the discipline of historical game studies has seen a proliferation of activity. What I believed was a small field in its infancy in 2019 has now grown into a rich, innovative, multidisciplinary field. Approaches to historical gaming span diverse areas such as archaeogaming, psychological studies of cognition and VR, and anthropological studies of history-gaming communities. It is currently an exciting time to be a historical game scholar.

Despite the field's growth, there are still many underexplored areas of study. Complex concepts such as historical empathy, immersion, shared authority, and counterfactual 'historying' in gaming remain blurry and require continued attention. Detailed investigation of case studies and praxis still lag behind the cutting-edge theories that have contributed so much to our understanding of games-as-history (or history-as-games). Although historical game studies is

becoming accepted by the mainstream historical profession as an important subject of inquiry, the potential of games to be media of historical scholarship remains nascent and underexplored. It is my aim to attempt to fill some of these gaps in this thesis.

This thesis does not address the question of whether games can be a medium for historical communication. The discipline seems to have moved past this debate, and so I would argue that games-as-history is no longer a question but a widely accepted fact.[1] I am following the lead of Adam Chapman and other scholars in this field by taking history games as a form of historical expression as a starting point.[2] In other words, I am investigating what kind of history that games already are and what kinds of history they could be. By 'games-as-history', I echo Chapman and Robert Rosenstone in defining a work of history as something that 'seriously attempts to make meaning out of the past', whether it be a book, film, game, or other media object.[3] By 'serious', I do not necessarily mean that it must be scholarly. Even fictionalized, frivolous, or myth- and cliché-ridden works can communicate concepts, arguments, ideas, and understandings of the past, however un-scholarly or inaccurate they may be. However, the capability of games to reach the level of scholarly historical discourse is something I return to throughout my argument. I also use 'history' to refer to the act of constructing history itself, as in 'writing history' or 'crafting history'. In this way, I argue games can also be ways of 'doing' the scholarly practice of history.

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[1] For some examples, see Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice* (Taylor and Francis: 2016); *Pastplay: Teaching and Learning History with Technology*, ed. Kevin Kee (University of Michigan Press: 2014); Jeremiah McCall, *Gaming the Past: Using Video Games to Teach Secondary History* (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2011); *Historia Ludens: The Playing Historian*, ed. Alexander von Lünen, Katherine J. Lewis, Benjamin Litherland and Pat Cullum (New York: Routledge, 2019).
[2] Chapman, *Digital Games as History,* 15.
[3] Chapman, *Digital Games as History,* 11; Robert Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (Harlow, England: Longman/Pearson, 2006), 37.

Chapman has suggested that games could serve as a link between academic and popular history.[4] This thesis argues that there are numerous ways games can achieve this due to their unique epistemological and philosophical implications. I define 'games' broadly as any piece of interactive media developed, sold, marketed as, or commonly understood to be a 'game'. This definition encompasses games without obvious win-states, text-based games, and 'walking simulators' that eschew gameplay mechanics other than movement and instead emphasise exploratory, environmental storytelling. 'History' as used here encompasses the discipline's methods, skills, and modes of understanding, as well as particular interpretations of a given historical subject.

The aim of this project is to advance our understanding of the use of games as a way of communicating history to a broader audience. It assesses how epistemologically viable video games are as a historical medium. It examines how and why video games can be used to communicate historical knowledge and encourage historical thinking. This involves identifying the theoretical and practical challenges inherent to 'ludifying' history and suggesting ways they might be overcome. To achieve this, I engage with the theoretical literature in this field, closely analyse video games to assess their engagement with history, and draw on popular discourses to supplement my analysis. Practical challenges to the creation of historical games are discussed through detailed case studies of cancelled Holocaust-themed games in Chapter 4.

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[4] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 277. The apparent gap between the public and their work has long troubled historians. For examples of research into this topic, see Peter Burkholder and Dana Schaffer, *History, the Past, and Public Culture: Results from a National Survey* (Washington, DC: American Historical Association, 2021), and Theresa Miller, Emilie L'Hôte and Andrew Volmert, *Communicating about History: Challenges, Opportunities, and Emerging Recommendations* (Washington, DC: Frameworks Institute, 2020).

My original contributions stem from bringing together a range of related but disparate theories: 1. historical thinking (Peter Seixas), 2. deconstructionist historical epistemologies (Hayden White, Alun Munslow), 3. the historical video game theories of Chapman and Jeremiah McCall, 4. literature on empathy and immersion, and 5. theories about popular historical media including historical film (Rosenstone) and digital engagement (Alison Landsberg). I extend these interrelated frameworks and apply them to a crucial but thus far under-researched case study: the Holocaust in video games. I introduce theories of Holocaust memory and representation to the web of history and video game theory established in earlier chapters.

This thesis is not intended to be a comprehensive framework or instruction manual for the creation of historical games. Also beyond the scope of this thesis is the experimental testing of the various theories and strategies. Rather, this is a theoretical and exploratory project aimed at interrogating key ideas. Although I discuss case studies at length and suggest some hypothetical design concepts based on my research, I intentionally remain propositive. Experimental testing would be a fruitful avenue for future studies, from which more concrete and specific design principles could then be drawn.

Video games: a cultural juggernaut

Video games are an increasingly central part of everyday twenty-first-century life. The growing global video game market was estimated to be worth USD$178.73 billion in 2021. When this thesis project began, industry revenue was projected to reach only USD $90 billion by 2020. Actual figures therefore show an astonishing 76.8% increase beyond what was predicted in 2016, a sign that the gaming industry could continue to experience growth beyond our expectations.[5]

[5] 'Video Game Industry Statistics, Trends and Data In 2022', *WePC*, last updated January 18, 2022, https://www.wepc.com/news/video-game-statistics/.

There are an estimated 3.2 billion gamers all over the world. This large audience is increasingly diversifying and maturing. Currently, the average gamer is 34 years old. In defiance of stereotypes, adult women make up a greater percentage of gamers (33%) than boys under 18 (17%).[6] Digital interactive media is becoming an increasingly significant form of entertainment and communication.

Leaps in technology and creativity have resulted in a diverse, highly sophisticated gaming landscape. Far from the days of *Pong* (1972), simple mechanics, and 8-bit graphics, games now have the capacity to be visually breathtaking and mechanically complex. Games like *No Man's Sky* (2016) contain infinitely procedurally generated universes. Immersive virtual reality technology is now moving into households via the Oculus Rift, HTC Vive, and PSVR devices. The subject matter and content of gaming is also maturing and diversifying alongside its audience. We have seen games that cover grief and childhood illness (*That Dragon Cancer*, 2016), immigration policy and totalitarianism (*Papers Please*, 2013), spiritual journeys of human connection and reincarnation (*Journey*, 2012) and other topics previously considered too serious for a game-based entertainment medium.

Since the inception of the gaming industry, historical video games have maintained strong popularity. An enormous number of games adapt historical settings, locations, and stories into interactive experiences. These include meticulously crafted and realistic historical air combat simulators (*Red Baron,* 1990*; Rise of Flight,* 2009; *Il-2 Sturmovik,* 2001-2020), military strategy games (*Company of Heroes,* 2006-present), and grand strategy games that allow the player to build civilizations (*Civilization,* 1991-2019; *Europa Universalis,* 2005-2013). The *Call of Duty* (2003-present) and *Medal of Honor* (1999-2020) franchises have allowed players to

[6] 'Essential Facts About the Video Game Industry', *Entertainment Software Association*, 2018, www.theesa.com.

experience fast-paced ground combat in a range of historical conflicts, particularly in the Second World War. *Assassin's Creed* (2007-present), meanwhile, uses its richly recreated historical environments as its calling card, allowing the player to run, jump, climb, explore, and fight in settings such as Renaissance Italy, Victorian London, and Ancient Egypt.

More recently, indie developers have created games that integrate and foreground scholarly historical research. *Attentat 1942* (2017) and *Through the Darkest of Times* (2020) trade on their historically accurate depictions of the experiences of people living under Nazi occupation. Story-driven games such as *11-11: Memories Retold* (2018) and *Valiant Hearts* (2014) present emotional, personal First World War narratives that are frequently neglected in most war-based games. Games such as *Heaven's Vault* (2019), *Treasures of the Aegean* (2021), and the upcoming *Dream of Darkness* emphasise their historically engaged experiences, foregrounding the process of historical research and their diverse, nuanced narratives and perspectives. The popularity of historical settings in blockbuster action games has been clear for many years, but these indie examples demonstrate that there is a growing desire to create games that are historically engaged on a more scholarly level.

As the popularity and prominence of video games continues to rise, so does the amount of time people spend engaging in interactive, procedural, and simulative histories. Digital histories present opportunities for new ways of engaging a wider audience in history. It is therefore necessary for historians to understand exactly what sorts of histories audiences are currently engaging with in video games, and what untapped possibilities remain for historical communication through the medium.

What kind of history?

To understand the communication of history through video games, we must first briefly engage with the theoretical fields that examine the construction and communication of history more broadly, especially in fictional media works. Postmodernist and poststructuralist historians such as Hayden White and Alun Munslow have theorised about the literary and fictive nature of the construction of historical knowledge.[7] White's influential work asserted that 'history' and 'the past' are not the same. He argued that historians actively construct 'history' out of traces of an essentially unknowable past. They create form and meaning out of the past by 'plotting' these traces into a narrative form that is essentially fictive.[8] In suggesting that all history is a construction, White raised the possibility that history need not necessarily be a solely textual enterprise. The practice of history might also be conducted through images, sounds, and as this thesis argues, action and simulation.

Film scholar Robert Rosenstone built on White's work by advocating for film as a legitimate historical form. He argued that film has epistemological strengths and weaknesses that are different from, but not necessarily inferior to, written history. Rosenstone coined the idea of the 'filmmaker-as-historian', and argued that history can be constructed through film in addition to the written text.[9] In response to Rosenstone's work, White proposed the term 'historiophoty': the representation of history in film and image (as opposed to written *historiography*).[10] By acknowledging that written history is not the only valid or useful form of historical communication, Rosenstone and White have laid the foundations for my work, which argues that

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[7] Alun Munslow, *Narrative and History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Hayden White, *Metahistory: the Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).
[8] White, *Metahistory*, 7-8.
[9] Rosenstone, *History on Film*, 6-8.
[10] Hayden White, 'Historiography and Historiophoty', *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (1988): 1193-1199.

video games can similarly be used to foster historical thinking and engagement. In doing so, I contribute by synthesizing film theory, history, and games.

The nature of video games: theories and analyses

To analyse historical games, we also need to be familiar with academic video game theory. Initial activity in the emerging field of game studies began in the 1990s and grew substantially in the mid to early 2000s. The extent to which games can be considered narratives was one of the most pressing conceptual issues for early scholars in the field. This debate is considered somewhat outdated in the game studies discipline today. However, it is still important to address the analytical frameworks that emerged from it, as they have bearing on my discussion of games as history. Tensions formed during this early period regarding whether it was appropriate to use traditional analytical techniques drawn from other forms of media to analyse games. For example, in 2001, Espen Aarseth famously accused humanities disciplines of 'colonising' game studies. He argued that other disciplines were inappropriately projecting the concepts and methods of their disciplines onto games and treating them indifferently from other forms of media.[11]

Edited volumes such as *Handbook of Computer Games Studies* (2005) and *Understanding Digital Games* (2006) frequently engaged in discussions on this theme, which became known as the *narratology* versus *ludology* debate.[12] Narratologists viewed games as narratives that can be analysed using techniques drawn from film and literary studies. Ludologists argued that games are foremost formal procedural systems, not narratives, and must

[11] Espen Aarseth, 'Computer game studies, year one', *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001).
[12] Joost Raessens and Jeffrey H. Goldstein, *Handbook of Computer Game Studies* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005); Jason Rutter and Jo Bryce, *Understanding Digital Games*, 1st ed. (London: SAGE Publications, 2006).

be approached as such. Janet Murray's classic monograph *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (1997) discussed games as interactive narratives. Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (2006) advocated for the merits of applying film analysis to games. In response, Aarseth, Jesper Juul and Markku Eskelinen challenged the notion that games could be read as narratives.[13] The extent to which games can be characterised as narratives is important for historians looking to understand how history is presented in games. As discussed above, the 'narrative turn' in history has proposed a theory of history as a narrative construction. We must consider whether video games are narrative forms which similarly construct history as narrative, or whether they are something else entirely. If games are not primarily narratives, it therefore follows that they can construct history in non-narrative ways, and must be approached as such.

Game studies scholars are increasingly leaving the narratology/ludology debate behind, or arguing that it was a false dichotomy to begin with.[14] Instead, the dominant position in the field has emerged as a 'functional ludo-narrativism' that acknowledges how both the strategic ludic elements and representational narrative features of the game work together to create meaning for the player.[15] Juul's monograph *Half-Real* (2005) was one of the earliest and most important works to attempt to provide a methodological framework for holistically analysing both the narrative and ludic structures of video games. Juul argued that games are made up of two layers of meaning: the *rules* (programmed mechanics and gameplay systems) and the *fiction* (the traditional textual and audiovisual representation). Here, Juul abandoned his earlier belief that the relationship between fiction and rules is merely arbitrary. Instead, he asserted that fiction

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[13] Aarseth, 'Computer game studies'; Markku Eskelinen, 'The gaming situation', *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001); Jesper Juul, 'A Clash between Game and Narrative', MPhil diss. (University of Copenhagen, 1999); Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska, 'Film studies and digital games', in *Understanding Digital Games,* eds. Rutter and Bryce, 112-128; Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (New York: Free Press, 1997).
[14] Ryan Lizardi, 'Bioshock: Complex and Alternate Histories', *Game Studies* 14, no. 1 (2014).
[15] Marie-Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 203.

in games is important, and furthermore, that 'fiction in games depends on rules'.[16] The idea that game rules and fiction interact to produce meaning is crucial to analysing games broadly and especially as works of history.

Video games can contain ideologies and arguments embedded into their rules of interaction. In order to examine how games communicate history, it is crucial to understand how player interaction with game rules can convey meaning. The argumentative potential of game rules has been extensively theorised by Ian Bogost through his concept of *procedural rhetoric*. Bogost's 2007 book *Persuasive Games* defined procedural rhetoric as 'the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures'.[17] In a video game that utilises procedural rhetoric to communicate its messages, Bogost writes, 'arguments are made not through the construction of words or images, but through the authorship of rules of behaviour, the construction of dynamic models. In computation, those rules are authored in code, through the practice of programming'.[18] By playing a game, the player can interact with and come to understand the arguments embedded in its systems.

Bogost gives an example of a game using procedural rhetoric with *The McDonalds Game*, a simulation game released in 2005 by Italian social critic collective Molleindustria. In *The McDonalds Game*, the player assumes the role of a McDonald's executive and controls four arms of business operations: the third-world cattle farms where the company sources their meat, the slaughterhouses that process the cattle, the restaurants where burgers are sold, and the corporate offices that manage public relations, marketing, and lobbying. The player must

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[16] Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 121.
[17] Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: the Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), ix.
[18] Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 29.

simultaneously manage these four sectors while maximizing profits. Playing *The McDonalds Games* provokes a series of challenging moral decisions. For example, the player may find that, in order to produce enough meat to satisfy demand, it is necessary to engage in extreme and unethical tactics such as bribing local governors, bulldozing rainforests, or processing diseased cows. To buffer against blowback from rights groups and health organizations, it is possible to offer bribes or engage in lobbying. The player eventually discovers that it is almost essential to engage in these ethically and legally questionable practices in order to achieve long-term success in the game. The game therefore 'makes a procedural argument about the inherent problems in the fast-food industry, particularly the necessity of overstepping environmental and health-related boundaries', as well as the necessity of corruption.[19] It mounts these arguments by simulating the processes required to operate a fast-food corporation. The win state of the game is especially crucial to its ideological argument about corruption. Since the player must act corruptly to win, the message communicated by playing the game is that corruption is necessary to be successful in the fast-food industry.

Procedural rhetoric is especially relevant to historical video games and their arguments about historical processes of change and continuity. Bogost defines procedural rhetoric as 'the practice of using processes persuasively', and one way to do this is to '[explain] processes with other processes'.[20] According to Bogost, games that simulate historical processes, such as the *Civilization* series, 'can be seen as historiographies, representing history with rules of interaction rather than patterns of writing'.[21] Games can mount procedural rhetorics by modelling theories of historical change, political systems, chains of cause and effect, and other historical phenomena.

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[19] Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 31.
[20] Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 3-15.
[21] Bogost, *Persuasive Games,* 125.

Put another way: while the written word can describe how the world functions and visual media can show images of it, video games can explain how the world functions through action and 'doing'. Historical game scholars have identified this phenomenon as a method through which games can convey historical meaning. It has therefore become an important mode of critical analysis.

The dimension of player choice and consequence is another element of procedural rhetoric. It is important to acknowledge that video games inherently place boundaries on player action. There is currently no game that can allow a player to do anything they wish without limitation. Bogost argues that 'games become procedurally expressive by what they do and do not allow the player to do'. Excluded affordances have a significant impact on a game's argument. *The McDonalds Game*, for example, does not allow its player to donate food to the homeless or pledge profits to charity. Disallowing the player from performing these actions could be interpreted as a statement about the profit-driven greed of fast-food corporations. As Bogost writes, these choices are 'selectively included and excluded in a procedural representation to produce a desired expressive end'.[22] To return to a historical example, one could understand the lack of civilian presence or interaction in most Second World War shooter games as a procedural expression of militarism, *machismo*, and the primacy of the masculinized solider figure in popular understandings of war. Holger Pötzsch has argued that the filtering out of civilians in war shooters is a form of 'selective realism' that 'glorifies warfare and soldiery and that supresses unpleasant, yet salient features and consequences of military and other violent conduct'. The removal of particular affordances can also communicate an argument about an individual's lack of agency or historical limitations, as Pötzsch argues is the case in *Spec Ops:*

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[22] Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 43-45.

The Line (2012).[23] In this game, the inability to refuse to kill non-combatants becomes a statement on military coercion, trauma, and institutional abuses during the War on Terror. It therefore provides an example of how affordances and limitations can be designed to interrogate relationships between individual agency and broader social forces in historical settings. The relationships between human choices, game affordances, and historical understanding will be explored in depth in Chapter Three.

Discussions of procedural rhetoric raise questions about the ideologies underpinning game design and creation. It is important to think about why a particular historian may have included or excluded particular people, events, and narratives from their account. It is likewise important to think about why game designers may have included certain affordances, limitations, and win/lose conditions in their game. We can thus investigate which worldviews and assumptions influence a game's design as well as those communicated by the game's internal logics. We can therefore begin to understand not only the historical arguments made by particular games, but the historical contexts, memory cultures, and ideologies they are born from.

Historical game studies: a general overview

Historical game studies has developed into a thriving interdisciplinary field over the past ten to fifteen years. It has become generally accepted that games can communicate historical arguments with their rules and interactive structures, as Bogost has suggested. Interactive structures can thus be considered another way of 'doing' history. Chapman has argued for scholars to understand the creators of these games as 'developer-historians', as they attempt to make

[23] Holger Pötzsch, 'Selective Realism: Filtering Experiences of War and Violence in First- and Third-Person Shooters,' *Games and Culture* 12, no. 2. (2017): 158-9, 168.

meaning out of the past much like historians do. Chapman has also tentatively proposed the term 'historioludicity' to describe games that make historical arguments through procedural rhetoric, drawing on 'historiography' and White's coined term 'historiophoty'.[24] I prefer the term, 'ludohistory', and the associated concept of 'ludohistoriography', which I explore as a new form of historical game design in Chapter Two.

Several sub-bodies of literature can be identified within the broader field of historical game studies. For example, many scholars have written about depictions of modern military conflicts in video games. Critics have discussed how games reinforce popular views of the Second World War as the 'Good War', commonly remediating other pop-cultural works into ludic challenges of simplistic morality and militarism.[25] In contrast, it has been noted that the morally ambiguous and tragic understandings of the First World War have been difficult for video game developers to resolve into a mainstream commercial game. This is because such games tend to require fun, mastery-based gameplay and valorisation of player goals.[26] Other authors have focused on the various ludic glorifications and criticisms of the War on Terror in the Middle East, from *America's Army* (2002-2022) to *Spec Ops: The Line*.[27] Overall, this body of literature tends to combine insights from memory studies with methodological approaches from video game studies to assess how games depict military conflicts.

The popular genre of historical strategy-simulation games has also drawn much scholarly attention. A large portion of this literature focuses on the possibilities and problems of using such

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[24] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 22.
[25] Tanine Allison, 'The World War II Videogame, Adaptation, and Postmodern History', *Literature/Film Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (2010): 183-193; Harrison Gish, 'Playing the Second World War: Call of Duty and the Telling of History', *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture* 4, no. 2 (2010).
[26] Adam Chapman, 'It's Hard to Play in the Trenches: World War I, Collective Memory and Videogames', *Game Studies* 16, no. 2 (2016); Chris Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015).
[27] Kristine Jørgensen, 'The Positive Discomfort of Spec Ops: The Line', *Game Studies* 16, no. 2 (2016).

games to teach history in the classroom, a topic that will be discussed further in the next section. Other themes in this category include critiquing depictions of Eurocentric colonialist and imperialist ideologies in the genre.[28] A number of authors have discussed the historical values and discourses that emerge in the modding communities of historical games. Modding is an amateur hobby where players develop expansions and modifications for existing games.[29] The simulation of historical processes via procedural rhetoric is a major theme in this body of scholarship.

In light of the recognition that game systems can present defensible historical arguments, authors have begun to interrogate more deeply the nature and philosophy of the construction of history in video games. Scholars and historians including Chapman, Kevin Kee, William Uricchio, and Tara Jade Copplestone have theorised about what kind of historical epistemologies are embedded into video game structures.[30] Chapman's influential work, *Digital Games as History* (2016), is a landmark attempt to provide a comprehensive theoretical framework for the analysis of games-as-history. In this book, Chapman maps historical epistemologies onto various gameplay genres. He links immersive, 'realist' action/adventure/shooter games with reconstructionist histories that emphasize witnessing and experiencing the past 'as it really was'. According to Chapman, conceptual simulation games that place the player at the diegetic level of the historian are largely constructionist histories, closer to written history than filmic history. These games allow players to experience and understand macro-processes, compare explanatory

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[28] Alex Burns, '*Civilization III*: Digital game-based learning and macrohistory simulations', *Australian Foresight Institute* (July 2002), 4-5; Matthew Kapell and Andrew Elliott, eds., *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History* (Bloomsbury, 2014); Raessens and Goldstein, *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*.

[29] Trevor Owens, 'Modding the History of Science: Values at Play in Modder Discussions of Sid Meier's Civilization', *Simulation & Gaming* 42, no. 4 (2010).

[30] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*; Tara Jane Copplestone, 'But that's not accurate: the differing perceptions of accuracy in cultural-heritage videogames between creators, consumers and critics', *Rethinking History* 21, no. 3 (2016); Kee, *Pastplay*; William Uricchio, 'Simulation, History and Computer Games', in *Handbook of Computer Game Studies* eds. Raessens and Goldstein, 327-338.

chains of cause and consequence, and engage in counterfactual simulations that test historical hypotheses. Very few games, however, endeavour to express deconstructionist historical arguments that question and critique the very act of constructing history itself. Crucially, Chapman acknowledges that the complexity of the relationships between narrative and rule systems in games mean that 'multiple, and even competing, historical epistemologies [can] be in simultaneous operation in the same game'.[31] Deconstructionist and postmodern historical philosophies are a major theme in Chapter Two of this thesis, and a theme I return to throughout my argument. They are central to my argument for two main reasons. Firstly, they are understudied in relation to historical games. Secondly, they embody the complicated, critical, and historically conscious forms of historical thinking that I argue could be ideally disseminated through games.

Formal and informal learning

Using historical games in the classroom is one of the most extensively studied themes in historical game scholarship. The field stretches back to the 1960s, when authors discussed the use of tabletop games and role-playing simulations as tools for teaching history.[32] With the advent of modern digital gaming, possibilities for teaching history with games have significantly expanded, and so has research into their use. Research has offered significant support for the efficacy of game-based learning.[33] A 2015 meta-review of studies evaluating game-based

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[31] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 150.
[32] Some early examples include Clark C. Abt, *Games for Learning* (Cambridge: Educational Services, Inc.; Washington, L.C: National Science Foundation, 1966); E.H. Baker, 'A pre-civil war simulation for teaching American history', in *Simulation Games in Learning*, eds. S.S. Boocock and E.O. Schild (Beverly Hills: Sage Press, 1968).
[33] Some places to start include: Hans Christian Arnseth, Thorkild Hanghøj, Thomas Duus Henriksen, Morten Misfeldt, Robert Ramberg and Staffan Selander, *Games and Education: Designs in and for Learning* (Boston: BRILL, 2018); Eric Klopfer, Jason Haas, Scot Osterweil and Louisa Rosenheck, *Resonant Games: Design*

learning, for example, found that the approach created ‘enthusiastic, confident, and strategic learners’ through high levels of engagement.[34] Theories of constructivist learning such as those espoused by Seymour Papert, and the efficacy of learning-through-interaction, are persuasive arguments for history educators to use games in the classroom.[35] Research on games for education frequently emphasises *experiences* and *processes.* These features facilitate the development of problem solving and thinking skills, rather than solely information delivery and fact-recall.[36] These ideas provide a crucial foundation for my research in this thesis.

Rather than merely using games as a fun ‘hook’ to stimulate interest, scholars have investigated the potential of games as forms of historiography to be studied by history students. Authors such as Kee, Jeremiah McCall, James Gee, and Kurt Squire have contributed significantly to research on how digital games simulate and teach historical arguments. McCall’s *Gaming the Past: Using Video Games to Teach Secondary History* (2011) is an especially important text in this area. McCall provides comprehensive practical models for the effective use of historical simulation games in the classroom. One of his key insights is that, in order to be useful for educational purposes, a historical game’s ‘core gameplay must offer defensible explanatory models of historical systems’. For example, although the particulars of the Civilization games may be counterfactual, they offer historically defensible models of civilizational growth and progress. Therefore, according to McCall, games like Civilization

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Principles for Learning Games that Connect Hearts, Minds and the Everyday (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018); Richard E. Mayer, *Computer Games for Learning: an Evidence-Based Approach* (MIT Press, 2014).

[34] Azita Iliya, Abdul Jabbar and Patrick Felicia, ‘Gameplay Engagement and Learning in Game-Based Learning: A Systematic Review’, *Review of Educational Research* 85, no. 4 (2015): 779.

[35] Idit Harel and Seymour Papert, *Constructionism* (Norwood: Ablex, 1991); Kevin Kee, ‘Computerized History Games: Narrative Options’, *Simulation & Gaming* 42, vol. 4 (2011): 423–440; Jean Piaget, *The psychology of intelligence* (New York: Routledge, 1950).

[36] Arnseth et. al., *Games and Education*, viii-ix.

present valid historical arguments through their procedural rhetoric and can be used effectively to teach the practice of history.[37]

It is clear that there is significant utility for video games in a formal learning context, but what about outside of the classroom? In this thesis, I approach historical video games through the framework of informal learning. Distinctions between formal, non-formal, and informal learning have emerged from efforts to understand the concept of 'lifelong learning'.[38] Whereas formal learning takes place in the classroom, non-formal and informal learning takes place outside of the classroom. Non-formal learning describes institutional learning in a non-school environment, such as a museum or memorial site. It is still relatively structured and generally led by a guide or mediator, but motivations may be more intrinsic, and the learner is not usually evaluated. Informal learning refers to any sort of learning that happens outside of a structured learning environment. It is usually spontaneous, voluntary, non-evaluated, and learner-led. This sort of learning takes place in a broad personal and environmental context. It may happen within the family or neighbourhood. It includes what a person reads, watches, listens to, talks about, and practices as a hobby.[39]

Education researchers have increasingly paid more attention to learners' wider contexts and environments through the useful framework of *learning ecologies*. John Seely Brown's analysis of the internet as a transformative learning medium describes an ecology as 'an open, complex, adaptive system comprising elements that are dynamic and interdependent'. A learning ecology, such as the internet, is described as 'a collection of overlapping communities of interest,

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[37] McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 23.
[38] D. W. Mocker, 'Lifelong learning: Formal, nonformal, informal, and self-directed', *Adult Education Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (1983): 260.
[39] Haim Escach, 'Bridging In-school and Out-of-school Learning: Formal, Non-Formal, and Informal Education', *J Sci Educ Technol* 16 (2007): 171–190. It is important to note that Escach's usage of the terms formal, informal and non-formal learning differ from Mocker's.

cross-pollinating with each other, constantly evolving, largely self-organising'. Brown links learning ecologies to informal learning through 'the joint construction of understanding around a focal point of interest'.[40] More recently, researchers have described learning ecologies as the 'unstructured, hybrid contexts where the individual seamlessly interacts with their physical, digital and social environments in order to make sense of the world around them'.[41] Video games have been suggested as a crucial element of 21st-century digital learning ecologies, particularly due to their increasing global use and relevance for younger generations.[42]

An increasing number of studies have attempted to measure the educational impact of video games in an informal context. These studies have taken steps to rectify the dearth of audience and reception studies in the field.[43] However, the majority of existing research focuses on science learning and education. There are currently few studies on informal historical learning through games. A handful of studies have attempted to measure empirically the learning impact of historical games in a non-classroom setting. These studies have yielded promising results, but more research is still needed.[44] The approach of this thesis focuses largely on analysing the epistemological implications and potentialities of games, rather than collecting empirical,

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[40] John Seely Brown, 'Growing Up: Digital: How the Web Changes Work, Education, and the Ways People Learn', *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 32, no. 2 (2000): 18-19.
[41] Donatella Persico, Marcello Passarelli, Francesca Pozzi, Jeffrey Earp, Francesca Maria Dagnino and Flavio Manganello, 'Meeting players where they are: Digital games and learning ecologies', *British Journal of Educational Technology* 50, no. 4 (2019): 1688.
[42] Lorna Arnott, Ioanna Palaiologou and Colette Gray, 'Digital devices, internet-enabled toys and digital games: The changing nature of young children's learning ecologies, experiences and pedagogies', *British Journal of Educational Technology* 49, no. 5 (2018): 803-806; Perisco et. al., 'Meeting players'.
[43] DeVaughn Croxton and Gerd Kortemeyer, 'Informal physics learning from video games: a case study using gameplay videos', *Physics Education* 53, no. 1 (2017): 1-12.
[44] Lukáš Kolek, Vít Šisler, Patrícia Martinková and Cyril Brom, 'Can video games change attitudes towards history? Results from a laboratory experiment measuring short- and long-term effects', *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning* 37, no. 5 (2021): 1348-1369; Farzan Baradaran Rahimi, Beaumie Kim, Richard M. Levy and Jeffrey E. Boyd, 'A Game Design Plot: Exploring the Educational Potential of History-Based Video Games', *IEEE Transactions on Games* 12, no. 3 (2020): 312-322; Assunta Tavernise & Francesca Bertacchini, 'Designing Virtual Worlds for Learning History: The Case Study of NetConnect Project', in *Serious Games and Edutainment Applications*, eds. Minhua Ma and Andreas Oikonomou (Springer: Cham, 2017), 273-285.

experimental data about educational impact, although Chapters Four and Five engage in reception studies. However, it is my goal for the discussions in this thesis to spur further interest in researching the impact of video games on historical thinking and learning, and to lay some solid groundwork for future studies in this area.

Historical thinking

A major point of interest is whether games can encourage the development of historical thinking skills. It is often repeated that the past is usually merely a 'backdrop' to games which are ultimately about their skill-based mechanics.[45] However, much of the literature on using history games in the classroom argues in favour of video gaming's capacity to teach students critical thinking and interpretative skills. McCall, for example, has argued that games are an ideal tool for teaching the higher-order critical thinking and reasoning skills that constitute the practice of history.[46] As suggested above, games can also simulate the processes of 'selectivity, simultaneity, and the shifting of scale' inherent to the work of the historian.[47] Though much work has been done on using games to teach historical thinking skills in the classroom, I am more interested in how popular commercial games might be able to encourage sophisticated critical historical thinking in a broader popular audience. Without the crucial role of the schoolteacher as third-party facilitator of historical thinking, can a game still be useful for such a purpose? With clever design, the game itself might assume the role of teacher and facilitator. Chapman, for example, suggests that games might 'supplement some skills by providing a

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[45] Gish, 'Playing the Second World War'; Emil Lundedal Hammar, 'Counter-hegemonic commemorative play: marginalized pasts and the politics of memory in the digital game Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry', *Rethinking History* 21, no. 3 (2016); Kee, *Pastplay*; Clemens Reisner, '"The Reality Behind It All Is Very True": Call of Duty: Black Ops and the Remembrance of the Cold War', in *Playing with the Past*, eds. Kapell and Elliott, 247-260.
[46] McCall, *Gaming the Past*.
[47] John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 22.

structure' for the player-historian. As a result, they can 'offer everyday people access to history' – not just factual information, but the professional historian's methodology of constructing the past.[48]

What do we mean when we talk about 'historical thinking'? Canadian scholar Peter Seixas is one of the foremost theorists of historical thinking in an educational context. Although Seixas' framework is not the only one on this topic, the literature on history education widely draws on his ideas. I will also draw on them in this thesis as the basis for my understanding of 'historical thinking'. In *The Big Six: Historical Thinking Concepts* (2013), Seixas and Tom Morton broadly define historical thinking as 'the creative process that historians go through to interpret the evidence of the past and generate the stories of history'.[49] Their six key historical thinking concepts therefore identify the problems inherent to the construction of history, with an aim of engaging students in the processes of professional historians. The six concepts identified are:

1. **Establishing historical significance**: understanding why we choose certain events to study over others, and how they fit into a larger narrative of meaning. Seixas uses this concept to distinguish historians from 'antiquarians' who are 'fascinated by old things simply because they are old' without the need to 'tie the old things to a larger framework of meaning'. Historians and students of history, in contrast, should be able to 'articulate the narratives that may be legitimately constructed around a particular event, resonating in a larger community'.[50]

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[48] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 271-2.
[49] Peter Seixas and Tom Morton, *The Big Six: Historical Thinking Concepts* (Toronto: Nelson Education, 2013), 2.
[50] Peter Seixas, 'A Model of Historical Thinking', *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 49, vol. 6 (2017): 598-9.

2. **Using primary source evidence:** making a historical claim requires 'finding, selecting, contextualizing, interpreting, and corroborating sources'.[51] This dimension requires us to dig into the nature of primary sources and understand three interrelated elements: the text itself, the context of the source, and the questions that drive the inquiry.[52]
3. **Examining continuity and change**: Seixas frames continuity not as an assumption but as a question for inquiry: what changed and what remained the same over the period being studied? Historians may look for hidden continuities within dramatic periods of change, or look for subtle changes within things that seem to be continuous. Patterns of continuity and change thus emerge as coexistent throughout history.[53]
4. **Analysing cause and consequence:** Seixas asserts that 'causation is fundamental to history, as it is to any storytelling'. Without understanding causation, historical events become disconnected and lose meaning. The role of human agency and choice in explanations for historical events is relevant here. The challenge for the historian is to 'set human decisionmaking in context in a way that communicates choice and intention, while accounting for historical context and conditions'.[54]
5. **Historical perspective-taking**: this dimension encompasses treating the past as a 'foreign country' and asks the question of 'how we can understand the minds of peoples who lived in worlds so different from our own'.[55] Historians must attempt to see through the eyes of people living in the past and understand their actions in light of their

[51] Seixas and Morton, *The Big Six*, 5.
[52] Seixas, 'A Model', 599.
[53] Seixas, 'A Model', 600.
[54] Seixas, 'A Model', 601.
[55] Seixas and Morton, *The Big Six*, 6; Seixas, 'A Model', 601-2.

particular contexts. At the same time, we must always remember that we see the past inescapably through our own contemporary lenses.

6. **Attempting to understand the ethical dimensions of history**: this dimension includes the problems of judging past actors, dealing with the ongoing legacies of past crimes and injustices, and the relationship between historians and memorial practices as exemplified by the field of memory studies. Some argue that ethical judgments are outside the bounds of the job of the historian. However, drawing on scholarly reviews of ethical thinking in history, Seixas asserts that 'the vast preponderance of opinion now understands such judgments as unavoidable'. They are an especially central part of the German conceptualisations of historical thinking discussed below.[56]

In this thesis, I use the term 'historical thinking' to talk about specific techniques in the historical discipline as outlined by Seixas. I also sometimes use 'critical thinking', especially when the cognitive processes and approaches at play have application outside the discipline of history. This is in order to emphasise the general importance of these methods of thinking, and to highlight the broad everyday utility of skills such as research, source evaluation, critiquing accounts, and comparing explanations. The term 'critical' is useful to emphasise how these intellectual practices can help us cut through the information-overload and uncritical assumptions of daily life. This is particularly important in our present digital age, which requires the constant evaluation of avalanches of information encountered in online spaces.

Seixas also outlines a distinctive twentieth- and twenty-first-century German contribution to conceptualisations of historical thinking that revolves around the building of 'historical

[56] Seixas, 'A Model', 602.

consciousness'. Historical consciousness has been defined as 'a complex interaction of interpretations of the past, perceptions of the present and expectations towards the future'.[57] Seixas identifies three main interrelated strands within this broader concept of historical consciousness. The first is the relationship between history and daily contemporary life, fostering a practice of 'historical sense-making' for the general public. The second is a sense of the learner's location within a broader historical timeline, or, as Seixas explains it, 'a subject's historically situated orientation to the temporal world'. Lastly, German conceptualisations of historical consciousness entail the expression of morally oriented historical narratives.[58] The fostering of historical consciousness in the public sphere is a major motivation behind the development of this thesis. The German concept of building historical consciousness as a goal of history education, and the three interrelated concepts within, strongly inform my evaluation of historical thinking in games.

I wish to add one more dimension to my construction of historical thinking in this thesis: a deconstructionist, metahistorical awareness of the way history itself is created, informed by the postmodernist theorists discussed earlier in this introduction. This dimension encompasses understandings about how history itself is constructed via narrative and literary devices, how traces of the past become evidence through processes of selection and exclusion, and the 'incredulity towards metanarratives' that characterizes the postmodern turn in the humanities.[59] These deconstructionist approaches already have a presence in the related literature on historical thinking. For example, Seixas outlines three models of historical practice: a) The Best Possible

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[57] Sebastian Bracke, Colin Flaving, Manuel Köster and Maik Zülsdorf-Kersting, 'History education research in Germany. Empirical attempts at mapping historical thinking and learning,' in *Researching History Education: International Perspectives and Disciplinary Traditions*, eds. Manuel Köster, Holger Thünemann and Maik Zülsdorf-Kersting (Schwalbach/Ts.: Wochenschau Verlag, 2014), 23.
[58] Seixas, 'A Model', 593-605.
[59] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), xxiv.

Story (a single chronological narrative), b) Disciplinary History (students evaluate competing accounts), and c) Postmodern History (critique historians' crafting of accounts).[60] These three models can be mapped onto Chapman's realist, constructionist, and deconstructionist historical game epistemologies. I aim to develop this idea further in my thesis by examining the unique affinities between digital gaming and deconstructionist historical thinking practices in much greater detail than has been done thus far.

Existing research shows immense potential for games to engage with history and historical thinking as much more than a decorative 'backdrop'. For example, Timothy Compeau and Robert McDougall have examined how history-based ARGs (augmented reality games) such as *Tecumseh Lies Here* (2011) have players perform actions that are 'very close to the process of real historical research'. In this game, players must explore museums, archives, and libraries to find historical evidence and formulate their own interpretation of the past.[61] Research has also shown that interactive museum exhibits are able to encourage historical thinking skills in children, an indication that video games may be able to achieve the same effect. A study by Megan Martinko and Jessica Luke indicated that moral understandings and cause-consequence effects were the least effectively encouraged dimensions in child attendees of interactive museum exhibits.[62] However, the literature on games in education, discussed above, has detailed how games are particularly effective at creating empathy and teaching chains of historical cause and consequence. This literature suggests that digital games may be able to fill the gaps in

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[60] Peter Seixas, 'Schweigen! die kinder! Or, does postmodern history have a place in the schools?' in *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History: National and International Perspectives,* eds. Paul Stearns, Peter Seixas and Sam Wineburg (New York: New York University Press, 200), 20-39.

[61] Augmented reality games (ARGs) are interactive narrative games that use the real world as a setting. They are usually developed and presented through multiple media channels, especially mobile apps and the Internet. See Timothy Compeau and Robert MacDougall, '*Tecumseh Lies Here*: Goals and Challenges for a Pervasive History Game in Progress', in *Pastplay,* ed. Kee, 87-108.

[62] Megan Martinko and Jessica Luke,'"They Ate Your Laundry!" Historical Thinking in Young History Museum Visitors', *Journal of Museum Education* 43, no. 3 (2018).

fostering historical thinking identified elsewhere. So far, however, little research in a non-classroom setting exists to address the question.

Taken together, the investigative fields discussed above point towards a ludic historical praxis that embraces the full epistemological advantages of interactive, simulative digital history. As McCall has asserted, ‘if history is the study of the past and the exploration of how people lived and died, the possibilities and limitations on action, and the context that shaped past action, historical games become a potentially critical tool’.[63] By looking at the critical and practical affinities between the work of historians and the capabilities of interactive media, we begin to discover ways of doing history that deviate from epistemological ideas about text and truthfulness, fixed historical narratives, and authority concentrated in the hands of the historian. Digital history projects are emerging that aim to integrate some of these new, flexible, user-driven approaches to historical engagement. Examples include the aforementioned *Tecumseh Lies Here*, which argues for a critical, engaged mode of ‘playful’ historical thinking, and Steve Poole’s ‘Ghosts in the Garden’ project, which advocates interactive ‘historical interpretation from below’.[64] As I will argue in this thesis, video games may offer opportunity to develop the epistemological affinities between historical thinking and ludic interaction.

Thesis outline

This thesis investigates the following hypotheses: that video games can engage players in historical thinking, that games can be an effective way of communicating scholarly historical research and concepts, and that games can bridge gaps between popular and scholarly histories.

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[63] McCall, *Gaming the Past*, 527.

[64] Steve Poole, ‘Ghosts in the Garden: locative gameplay and historical interpretation from below’, *International Journal of Heritage Studies: IJHS* 24, no. 3 (2018): 300–314.

In order to test these hypotheses, I have carefully chosen key issues in the literature on historical games that persist as 'pain points' and worked through some of the conceptual and practical problems therein. The issues selected for analysis have all been previously suggested either as reasons why video games cannot communicate scholarly history, or as unique advantages of the medium that have not been fully investigated.

This thesis is divided into two parts. Part One comprises the first three chapters, which each address a theoretical concept challenging the field. Chapter One delves into the relationship between the immersive nature of video games, historical empathy, and critical thinking. My discussion draws on the work of Alison Landsberg to explore how oscillation between immersion and distance can facilitate empathic critical thinking in commercial video games.[65] I argue the formal features of the gaming medium make them especially suited to achieving this oscillation. Chapter Two focuses on themes of multiplicity, non-linearity, and the uncertain ontology of historical truth. It discusses how video games can engage with sophisticated historical epistemologies and draw popular history closer to academic historical practice. My contributions in this chapter reveal new epistemological implications of two previously unstudied games. The first is *Paradise Killer* (2020), an investigation-based game that subverts ideas of a single discoverable truth through its open, non-linear story structure and lack of a win/fail state. The second is an analysis of a 'ludohistoriographical game' titled *Detritus: A History Book* (2019), a game that dramatizes the process of constructing a historical text. In Chapter Three, I explore how games can engage with themes of historical choice, morality, and complicity. I argue the interactive nature of games makes them uniquely suited to sophisticated explorations of bystandership, conformity, and complicity. With careful design, games can

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[65] Alison Landsberg, *Engaging the Past: Mass Culture and the Production of Historical Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

provide nuanced explorations of historical choice, consequence, and the ethical considerations implicit therein.

In Part Two of this thesis, Chapters Four and Five dive deeper into a thematic case study: the Holocaust in digital interactive media. I have devoted the second half of this thesis to the Holocaust for several reasons. If we are to assert that video games can be a tool for historical communication, it should stand to reason that even the most traumatic and difficult-to-represent histories can be depicted in interactive media. Although I do not argue the Holocaust is unique, its memory culture in the West has often framed it as a uniquely unrepresentable event. It has spawned more discussion about the 'rules' of its depiction than most other violent and traumatic historical events.[66] The Holocaust is frequently considered an 'untouchable' topic in video games, and something that no video game could ever appropriately address.[67] There is a need to investigate whether this argument holds validity, and whether it hinders the full adoption of video games as a serious medium for historical communication. Put simply, if games can indeed engage with the Holocaust, they may well be able to engage with any sort of historical material, including other genocides and crimes against humanity. Therefore, the second half of my thesis is devoted to this 'litmus test' for the efficacy and suitability of video games to engage with the full complexity of the human past.

Chapter Four assesses the popular and critical reception of three cancelled Holocaust games. I take the novel approach of studying cancelled games for two main reasons. A significant portion of Holocaust-themed game projects have been cancelled, and this notable

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[66] For some discussions on this topic, see: Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer, *Between Witness and Testimony: The Holocaust and the Limits of Representation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001); Saul Friedlander, ed. *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the 'Final Solution'* (Harvard University Press, 1992); Berel Lang, *Holocaust Representation: Art Within the Limits of History and Ethics* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).
[67] Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, 99.

phenomenon demands closer examination. Studying the events and discourses surrounding cancelled projects is essential to answer questions about societal attitudes towards allegedly 'unacceptable' depictions of the Holocaust. My investigation therefore uncovers some of the historical values that the public associates with ludic Holocaust depiction. It also reveals how issues of historical representation are constantly renegotiated in the public sphere. My findings show that there has historically been significantly less opposition to the idea of a Holocaust game that often thought. Chapter Five is devoted to a case study that ties the thematic threads of my thesis together. In this chapter, I closely analyse the game *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* (1995), an adaptation of the Harlan Ellison short story of the same name. It is a fascinating case study as a game that depicts traditionally taboo Holocaust content and yet has escaped condemnation for doing so. My examination of this game reveals some of the factors that allow it to transgress accepted norms of taste and appropriateness without controversy. I thereby suggest some possibilities for building a digital, self-critical Holocaust memory culture through the medium of video games.

PART ONE

CONCEPTS IN HISTORICAL GAMING

CHAPTER ONE

EMPATHY, IMMERSION, AND CRITICAL THINKING IN INTERACTIVE HISTORIES

Chapter Outline

Chapter One investigates historical empathy, an important concept in the literature on historical thinking and interactive history. It addresses whether video games can effectively foster historical empathy, or whether the problems of over-immersion and over-identification hinder productive historical engagement. This chapter first expands upon Seixas' dimension of 'perspective-taking' by incorporating recent definitions of empathy from psychology and social sciences. These fields of inquiry define empathy as a dual-domain construct consisting of both cognitive and affective components. Scholarly work on historical empathy as a higher-order concept has similarly moved towards a definition that integrates both emotional connection and critical thinking.

I then discuss the theories of Alison Landsberg, who has outlined how historical media can foster the dual-domain mode of empathic engagement that leads to historical understanding. Landsberg argues media can 'oscillate' between emotional immersion and critical distance in order to catalyse understanding. Such a method prevents the audience from becoming either uncritically overwhelmed or uncaringly detached.[1] This chapter fills a gap in Landsberg's work by applying her model to video games. My analysis is situated within the debate over whether video games and virtual reality experiences are emotionally immersive and overwhelming to the point of critical anaesthesia. I discuss the distancing mechanism of the Animus in the *Assassin's Creed* franchise (2007-present) to illustrate some of the ways games can facilitate critical

[1] Alison Landsberg, *Engaging the Past: Mass Culture and the Production of Historical Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 27.

distance and metahistorical thinking. Ultimately, I argue that the unique formal properties of interactive video games may make them capable of achieving Landsberg's 'oscillation' effect and facilitating dual-domain historical empathy.

<u>Games, immersion, and empathy</u>

As video games grow in sophistication and virtual reality technology becomes more accessible, scholars have begun to debate the implications of the immersive qualities of digital interactive media. Works that achieve immersion as 'the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality … that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus' seem increasingly commonplace.[2] Games can immerse us not only audiovisually but emotionally; they have the potential to 'take us seamlessly into a character's mind' with 'unmediated intimacy'.[3] Traditional non-interactive media such as films and books can also be highly absorbing and elicit high levels of emotional and affective engagement. However, the meaningfully interactive nature of games can give the player direct access to influencing the fictive space. Games can therefore offer a different and greater sense of immersion and immediacy to that of non-interactive media. As Ian Bogost outlines in *Persuasive Games*, interactive media are 'meaningfully responsive to user input', and engagement is heightened by the 'strong coupling of user action and procedural representations'.[4] Being able directly to influence the events happening in the game world in real-time, and seeing the game world respond immediately to a click of a button or press of a key (or increasingly in VR, a physical motion or visual gesture), strengthens the relationship between the audience and the work. The sense of agency created by influencing the game world facilitates

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[2] Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 98.
[3] Murray, *Hamlet,* 49.
[4] Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: the Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 42.

immersion. According to Alexander Galloway, 'it is the act of doing, of manipulating the controller, that imbricates the player with the game'.[5]

Films sometimes aim to achieve a similar sense of immediacy and physical immersion through a first-person camera point of view. However, the outcome can be awkward due to the fact that the audience cannot actually influence the events on-screen.[6] A first-person viewpoint provided without the possibility of meaningful input can be alienating to a viewer. Alienation can stem from a disconnect between the expectations created by the camera point-of-view and the limited ability to interact with the fictional world. On the other hand, games create heightened immediacy due to their 'capacity to respond to our impulses and desires'.[7] The interactive responsiveness of games can create the illusion that players have unmediated access to the fictional space. As Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein observe, when we speak of our experiences playing a game, we do not describe the act of controlling an avatar or moving a cursor on the screen, but instead 'refer to our game characters in the first person and act as if their experiences were our own'.[8] For example, when recounting the experience of playing *Super Mario Bros*, we do not say 'Mario jumped down the pipe'. We say, '*I* jumped down the pipe'. We speak as if we were 'really there', taking ownership of the actions and experiences within the game space.

The immediacy of digital gaming has profound implications for the epistemology of ludic history. If historical experiences are absorbed by players as unmediated experiences, how does that affect their understanding of the relationship between themselves and the past? How does it

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[5] Alexander Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 84.
[6] Joost Raessens, 'Computer Games as Participatory Media Culture', in *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*, eds. Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 379.
[7] Henry Jenkins, 'Games, The New Lively Art', in *Handbook*, eds. Raessens and Goldstein, 182.
[8] Jenkins, 'Lively Art', 182.

influence their ability to think critically about what it is that they (virtually) experienced? History games frequently aim to immerse the player in a 'realistic' representation of the past. Sometimes this becomes a major marketing point, such as in the *Medal of Honor* (1999-2020) and *Assassin's Creed* series. Authors such as Andrew Salvati, Jonathan Bullinger, Clemens Reisner, and Marcus Schulzke have examined how military-historical first-person shooters prioritize immersion in an authentic space that 'approximates the soldier's experience on the battlefield'.[9] Douglas N. Down has discussed how the digitally recreated historical environments in the *Assassin's Creed* series become a simulated form of hyperreality, where immersion blurs the distinction between the representation and the real. This phenomenon can ultimately affect how players perceive these locations when visiting them in-person.[10] Players can express a desire to experience a 'realistic' past by 'modding' historical simulation games to make them as accurate as possible.[11] Being able to see and experience as closely as possible 'what it was really like' during historical periods is an appealing promise for many game audiences.[12]

Historical empathy

It has been suggested that the hyper-immersive nature of ludic history can create heightened historical empathy. To consider this argument, we first need to address what is meant by

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[9] Clemens Reisner, '"The Reality Behind It All Is Very True": Call of Duty: Black Ops and the Remembrance of the Cold War', in *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, eds. Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B.R. Elliott (New York, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 250; Andrew J. Salvati and Jonathan M. Bullinger, 'Selective Authenticity and the Playable Past', in in *Playing with the Past*, eds. Kapell and Elliott, 153-167; Marcus Schulzke, 'Refighting the Cold War: Video Games and Speculative History', in *Playing with the Past*, eds. Kapell and Elliott, 261-275.

[10] Douglas N. Dow, 'Historical Veneers: Anachronism, Simulation, and Art History in Assassins Creed II', in *Playing with the Past*, eds. Kapell and Elliott, 215-231.

[11] Gareth Crabtree, 'Modding as Digital Reenactment: A Case Study of the *Battlefield* Series', in *Playing with the Past*, eds. Kapell and Elliott, 199-212; Trevor Owens, 'Modding the History of Science: Values at Play in Modder Discussions of Sid Meier's CIVILIZATION', *Simulation & Gaming* 42, no. 4 (2011): 481–495.

[12] Players may form their idea of 'what it was really like' from a range of sources including history books, documentaries, and other popular historical media. A deeper discussion here is outside the scope of this thesis but may make for an interesting further study.

'historical empathy'. Although empathy is frequently invoked as a desirable outcome, it often remains a nebulous concept with many varied definitions. Reviews of the literature on empathy have attempted to synthesize disparate definitions across a number of academic fields. These findings have emphasized that empathy can have both a cognitive (imagining and understanding another's situation) and an affective (feeling as another feels) element.[13] Chi-Lin Yu and Tai-Le Chou have conceptualized a 'dual route' model of empathy that incorporates both affective and cognitive functions.[14] This conceptualization of empathy, also sometimes called the 'dual-domain' or 'dual-dimensional' cognitive-affective model, has been widely accepted by social psychologists.[15] Empathy can also be self-oriented (imagining how you would react in another's situation), or other-oriented (imagining how another person would react given their unique position and feeling for them in need).[16] Reviews of studies in the field also emphasise that a self/other distinction is essential to empathy. Self/other distinction involves an understanding that the other person is a distinct entity with their own unique thoughts, feelings, and experiences that are not necessarily shared by the empathiser. This facilitates 'recognition that the source of the emotion is not one's own'.[17] A review of the field by Jakob Håkansson Eklund and Martina Summer Meranius defines empathy as when 'the empathizer understands, feels and shares another person's world with self-other differentiation'.[18] There is also ongoing debate about how

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[13] Jakob Håkansson Eklund and Martina Summer Meranius, 'Toward a consensus on the nature of empathy: A review of reviews', *Patient Education and Counseling* 104, no. 2 (2021): 300–307.
[14]Chi-Lin Yu and Tai-Le Chou, 'A Dual Route Model of Empathy: A Neurobiological Prospective', *Frontiers in Psychology* 13, no. 9 (2018): 1-5.
[15] Jason Endacott and Sarah Brooks, 'An Updated Theoretical and Practical Model for Promoting Historical Empathy', *Social Studies Research and Practice* 8, no. 1 (2013): 42.
[16] Daniel C. Batson and Nadia Y. Ahmad, 'Using Empathy to Improve Intergroup Attitudes and Relations', *Social Issues and Policy Review* 3, no. 1 (2009): 144-145.
[17] Benjamin M.P. Cuff, Sarah J. Brown, Laura Taylor and Douglas J. Howat, 'Empathy: A Review of the Concept', *Emotion Review* 8, no. 2 (2016): 144–153.
[18] Eklund and Meranius, 'Toward a consensus', 300. 'Self-other differentiation' is used interchangerably with 'self-other distinction' in the literature.

empathy might be separated from other constructs such as perspective taking (adopting another's point of view) and empathic understanding (cognitive understanding without affective processes).[19]

Empathy becomes important for historians when we try to understand how people in the past might have felt and, consequently, why they acted the way they did. Peter Lee has asserted that, although empathy can be conflated with problematic notions of identification and shared emotions, 'empathy … remains a necessary condition for historical understanding'. Historical empathy in this case means 'seeing how, given what the agent had done and experienced, he could have come to see things and value things as he did'.[20] Lee and Denis Shemilt give another more recent definition of historical empathy that 'entails elucidation of connections between goals, beliefs and values so that we can see how a course of action was reasonable in its own terms'.[21] Self-other differentiation and other-oriented empathy thus become key elements of historical understanding. We recognize that past actors had different thoughts, feelings, contexts, and experiences from our own, albeit with a 'shared humanity' that enables us to recognize that the past was not defective or inferior.[22] Jukka Rantala et. al. emphasise that historical empathy must preserve a 'sufficient sense of otherness' whilst simultaneously invoking one's own personal experience.[23] This sense of otherness enables the empathizer to understand how others might have felt in their own (historical) contexts, rather than adopting a problematic

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[19] Cuff et. al., 'Empathy', 145.
[20] Peter Lee, 'History Teaching and Philosophy of History', *History and Theory* 22, no. 4 (1983): 36.
[21] Peter Lee and Denis Shemilt, 'The concept that dares not speak its name: Should empathy come out of the closet?', *Teaching History* 143 (2011): 40.
[22] Lee and Shemilt, 'The concept', 42.
[23] Jukka Rantala, Marika Manninen and Marko van den Berg, 'Stepping into other people's shoes proves to be a difficult task for high school students: assessing historical empathy through simulation exercise', *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 48, no. 3 (2016): 324.

overidentification or appropriation of a historical experience, or a self-oriented empathy that simplistically inserts one's own present-day self into the past.

The cognitive-affective dual-dimensionality of empathy is also reinforced in historical learning contexts. According to Jason Endacott and Sarah Brooks, cognitive empathy alone (also known as 'perspective-taking') is not sufficient for true historical understanding. This is because past actors were not purely rational, intellectual beings. Humans have always been motivated by emotions in combination with cognitive thought. The affective dimension is therefore also necessary to help students understand seemingly irrational beliefs and actions of the past. Endacott and Brooks cite seventeenth-century belief in witches and General George Pickett's decision to continue charging Cemetery Ridge as some examples of where the affective approach to understanding is especially important.[24] Rantala et. al. therefore reassert historical empathy as a 'dual-domain construct where the thoughts and the acts of the historical actor, connected with his or her affective situation, are the targets of examination'.[25] To summarize, historical empathy requires an awareness of self/other differentiation, and the use of both affective and cognitive functions. One studies the thoughts and feelings of past actors, and understands the complex similarities and differences between the present self and the historical subjects.

Historical empathy has long been an important goal of history education in schools. In the UK, for example, scholars including Denis Shemlit, Peter Lee, and Rosalyn Ashby spurred the inclusion of empathy as a tenet of history education in the 1970s and 1980s.[26] Recent scholarship continuously reemphasises the value and importance of empathy as an outcome of

[24] Endacott and Brooks, 'Promoting Historical Empathy', 41-58.
[25] Rantala et. al., 'Stepping into other people's shoes', 324.
[26] Anna Emilia Berti, Isabella Baldin and Laura Toneatti, 'Empathy in history. Understanding a past institution (ordeal) in children and young adults when description and rationale are provided', *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 34, no. 4 (2009): 278.

history education, although the field tends to focus on school environments rather than public engagement. Studies have shown that the evocation of historical empathy can 'promote complex ideas and decision making' and 'a dispositional appreciation for the complexity of situations faced by people in the past'.[27] Empathy has therefore been established as a key factor in the development of historical thinking and understanding.

Emerging literature on the links between immersion and empathy examines the premise that more immersive media can create more empathy with the subjects on screen.[28] Alison Landsberg, for example, has suggested that 'through new technologies of memory – particularly those that are experiential and involve the senses – humans are increasingly able to experience empathy'.[29] The heightened multisensory experiences of VR are therefore often considered to be especially good at achieving this effect, so much so that VR has been referred to as the 'ultimate empathy machine'.[30] Many studies have attempted to measure the extent to which VR can foster empathy. According to Marina Hassapopoulou, 'there are already some compelling studies that suggest that VR can generate empathy for others more so than any other medium due to its immersive capabilities and to the fact that the brain registers VR experiences as real experiences rather than mediated ones'.[31] However, despite the strong association between empathy and

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[27] Jason Endacott, 'Negotiating the Process of Historical Empathy', *Theory and Research in Social Education* 42, no. 1 (2014): 5.

[28] Tosti Hsu-Cheng Chiang, 'Investigating Effects of Interactive Virtual Reality Games and Gender on Immersion, Empathy and Behavior Into Environmental Education', *Frontiers in Psychology* 22 (2021): 1-13; Ana Luisa Sánchez Laws, 'Can Immersive Journalism Enhance Empathy?', *Digital Journalism* 8, no. 2 (2020): 213-228; Donghee Shin, 'Empathy and embodied experience in virtual environment: To what extent can virtual reality stimulate empathy and embodied experience?', *Computers in Human Behavior* 78 (2018): 64-73.

[29] Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: the Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 150.

[30] Chris Milk, 'How virtual reality can create the ultimate empathy machine', filmed March 2015, TED video, 10:16, https://www.ted.com/talks/chris_milk_how_virtual_reality_can_create_the_ultimate_empathy_machine?language=en.

[31] James Calvert, Rhodora Abadia and Syed Mohammad Tauseef, 'Design and Testing of a Virtual Reality Enabled Experience that Enhances Engagement and Simulates Empathy for Historical Events and Characters' (paper presented at the *2019 IEEE Conference on Virtual Reality and 3D User Interfaces (VR), Osaka, Japan, March 23-*

immersion, it is important to note that the idea that immersion itself is a direct line to empathy has drawn criticism. The idea of VR as an 'empathy machine' has been controversial, and not all studies have shown increases in empathy as a result of increased immersion.[32]

Nonetheless, there is still enough evidence of immersive media's empathic potential to have spurred innovative experimentation in its application. Museums are increasingly turning to VR and similar media to increase engagement and knowledge retention through interactive, immersive exhibitions.[33] For example, the National Trust of Scotland's *Battle of Bannockburn Experience* describes itself as 'the first heritage centre in the world using Hollywood-calibre motion capture to immerse visitors in a realistic and historically accurate 3D medieval battle'.[34] Some studies have investigated how augmented reality and virtual historical environments can increase historical empathy and emotional engagement.[35] In light of these applications, scholars have begun to draw links between the interactive, immersive nature of the video game medium and an enhanced ability to encourage historical empathy.[36]

27, 2019): 868-869; Marina Hassapopoulou, 'Playing with History: Collective Memory, National Trauma, and Dark Tourism in Virtual Reality Docugames', *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 16, no. 4 (2018): 383.

[32] Miguel Barreda-Ángeles, Sara Aleix-Guillaume and Alexane Pereda-Banõs, 'An "Empathy Machine" or a "Just-for-the-Fun-of-It" Machine? Effects of Immersion in Nonfiction 360-Video Stories on Empathy and Enjoyment', *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking* 23, no. 10, (2020): 683–88; Brook Belisle and Paul Roquet, 'Guest Editor's Introduction: Virtual reality: immersion and empathy', *Journal of Visual Culture* 19, no. 1 (2020): 7-8; Robert Hassan, 'Digitality, Virtual Reality and the "Empathy Machine"', *Digital Journalism* 8, no. 2 (2020): 195-212.

[33] Sebastian Garcia-Cardona, Feng Tian and Simant Prakoonwit, 'Tenochtitlan - An Interactive Virtual Reality Environment that Encourages Museum Exhibit Engagement', in *E-Learning and Games*, eds. Feng Tian, Christos Gatzidis, Abdennour El Rhalibi, Wen Tang and Fred Charles (Cham: Springer, 2017), 20-18; Joi Podgorny, 'Studying Visitor Engagement in Virtual Reality Based Children's Science Museum Exhibits' (Dissertation, M.A., University of Chicago, 2004), 1-43; Sebastian Pranz, 'Immersive Installations in Museum Spaces: Staging the Past', in *Augmented Reality in Tourism, Museums and Heritage,* ed. Vladimir Geroimenko (Cham: Springer, 2021), 129-139.

[34] 'Bannockburn victory at UK heritage awards', The Battle of Bannockburn, October 27, 2015, http://www.battleofbannockburn.com/updates/news/bannockburn-victory-at-uk-heritage-awards/.

[35] Tomasz Oleksy and Anna Wnuk, 'Augmented places: An impact of embodied historical experience on attitudes towards places', *Computers in Human Behavior* 57 (2016): 11-16; Sara K. Sweeney, Phyllis Newbill, Todd Ogle and Krista Terry, 'Using Augmented Reality and Virtual Environments in Historic Places to Scaffold Historical Empathy', *TechTrends* 62 (2018): 114-118.

[36] Kevin O'Neill and Bill Feenstra, '"Honestly, I Would Stick with the Books": Young Adults' Ideas About a Videogame as a Source of Historical Knowledge', *Game Studies* 16, no. 2 (2016); Schulzke, 'Cold War'.

Critical thinking and the 'sensation machine'

Up until now, historians and game scholars have often uncritically praised games' ability to evoke historical empathy without interrogating what this means. It remains to be seen how well historical media can engage both the affective and cognitive dimensions of empathy. Is the sort of immersion and empathy evoked by interactive digital experiences actually conducive to a sophisticated level of historical and critical thinking? As indicated above, clear links between immersion, empathy, and engagement cannot always be drawn. There is no guarantee that a highly immersive experience that provokes strong empathy will automatically lead to historical understanding.

Historical film theory can be a useful reference point when discussing the historical value of video games. As a key theorist in this field, Robert Rosenstone has long advocated for the value of historical film. However, his critiques of the limitations of film are also instructive lessons on the potentially totalising nature of history on screen and the risks to critical historical thinking that immersive media may pose. According to Rosenstone, mainstream historical film dramas attempt to position themselves as unmediated windows onto the past. They utilize the 'seamless' Hollywood realist aesthetic to create the illusion that the audience is seeing something that really happened. They aim to draw the audience in and help them forget the artificiality of what they are seeing.[37] As such, these films are highly immersive. The sort of historical thinking encouraged by mainstream film is not really critical historical thinking at all, then, since their aesthetic 'serves to suppress rather than raise questions' about what happened in the past.[38]

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[37] Robert Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (Harlow, England: Longman/Pearson, 2006), 150.
[38] Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 11.

Rather than understanding that the film being viewed is merely one (inherently limited) construction of a historical past, the realist film positions itself as the *actual* past. Such a position discourages the audience from questioning aspects of its presentation, narrative, and referential truth-claims. They aim to immerse the viewer to the extent that distance, and thus critical thought, are destroyed.[39] Documentaries, meanwhile, frequently claim to give the viewer immediate access to the past, but often build themselves around a narrative of linear moral progression and tend towards nostalgia.[40]

Emotion itself is not necessarily antithetical to historical thinking. In fact, Rosenstone argues that we might 'accept emotion as part of reading history' and embrace the value of affective historical empathy.[41] This seems to fit with the conceptualisation of empathy as a dual-route process that invokes both affective *and* cognitive processes without being mutually exclusive. However, in overly immersive realist historical films, it may be that the necessary self/other differentiation is weakened or eliminated. The film, operating too strongly on the affective dimension of empathy alone, induces overidentification at the expense of intellectual engagement.

Film is not the only digital medium that has been criticised for prioritising immersive experience over historical thinking. Some museums, excited by the potentialities of interactive exhibitions, have encountered difficulty using immersion to foster critical engagement with the past. Brenda Trofanenko has reviewed the literature on museums and digital technologies and identified an overemphasis on experience over critical engagement.[42] Steve Poole has similarly

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[39] Rosenstone, *History on Film*, 15-16.
[40] Rosenstone, *History on Film*, 17.
[41] Rosenstone, *History on Film*, 69.
[42] Brenda Trofanenko, 'Playing into the Past: Reconsidering the Educational Promise of Public History Exhibits', in *Pastplay: Teaching and Learning History with Technology*, ed. Kevin Kee (University of Michigan Press: 2014), 258.

observed that viscerally immersive history experiences potentially collapse temporalities of the past and present and imply a historical continuity that may be inaccurate and/or problematic.[43] Martinko and Luke's study on historical thinking in young history museum visitors found that, although interactive objects provoked the most observable instances of historical thinking across Seixas' six dimensions, even interactive and highly immersive exhibits struggled to evoke critical thinking around historical cause/consequence and moral dimensions.[44] Encouraging critical thinking using immersive and experiential history exhibitions is evidently a problematic and difficult task.

The hyper-immersive qualities of interactive media may be an even greater danger to critical historical thinking in video games than in museums, especially in highly realistic virtual reality games. It is important not to underestimate the potentially seductive escapism of digital media and how powerfully it can overwhelm the consciousness of its users. In her important book *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (1997), Janet Murray anticipated the present debate over the value and danger of total immersion. She explored the potential of digital interactive media to operate similarly to the 'feelies' in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), or the 'televison parlors' of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953). These works depict digital entertainment as a 'dehumanising and addictive sensation machine' capable of pacifying viewers into total passivity with an overpowering onslaught of image and sound.[45] Murray also observed that audiences tend to engage in the 'active creation of belief'. She argued that 'because of our desire to experience immersion, we focus our attention on the enveloping world and we use our intelligence to reinforce rather than to question the reality of

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[43] Steve Poole, 'Ghosts in the Garden: locative gameplay and historical interpretation from below', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 24, no. 3 (2018): 302.
[44] Martinko and Luke, '"They Ate Your Laundry!"', 245.
[45] Murray, *Hamlet,* 18-24.

the experience'.[46] Jason Farman later echoed this idea, writing of the 'anxiety of the interfaceless interface' that threatens to collapse the distinction between the virtual and the real. Such anxieties have at times provoked fears of video games training players for real-life violence.[47]

The emotional and perceptual potency of virtual reality suggests that historians should tread with caution when using such experiences to foster public historical engagement. Marina Hassapopoulou warns that poorly conceptualised VR games could limit themselves to superficial forms of attempted immersion:

> Associating empathy with the illusory immersion into photo-realistically rendered sites of conflict and trauma could result in the irreversible establishment of VR conventions that reduce users to the status of tourists who 'typically remain distant to the sites they visit, where they are often defined as innocent outsiders, mere observers whose actions are believed to have no effect on what they see' (Sturken 2007, 10).

Even more questionable is the extent to which photorealistic visceral immersion can lead to genuine historical empathy, particularly for victims of trauma and violence. As an example, Hassapopoulou cites the 9/11 simulation docugame *08:46*.[48] At the end of the game, the player can choose to jump from an upper floor of the World Trade Centre as it crumbles. Hassapopoulou wonders:

> to what extent physical discomfort translates into that elusive sense of empathy with the victims of 9/11, and to what degree that discomfort remains limited to/by the viewser's immediate bodily sensations. This simulated jump arguably constitutes a forced attempt at producing a rather superficial and problematically universalizing sense of empathy that is grounded in physical and visceral sensations, rather than cultivating a more profound feeling of psychological immersion that is attached to the historicity of trauma.[49]

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[46] Murray, *Hamlet,* 110.
[47] Jason Farman, 'Hypermediating the Game Interface: The Alienation Effect in Violent Videogames and the Problem of Serious Play', *Communication Quarterly*, 58, no. 1 (2010): 100.
[48] A docugame is a serious and/or journalistic videogame that aims to document historical or current events interactively.
[49] NB: Hassapopoulou uses the term 'viewser', a portmanteau of 'viewer' and 'user', in reference to the way people use and interact with virtual reality devices.

Here, Hassapopoulou makes a crucial distinction between visceral bodily identification and the cognitive processes that lead to intellectual understanding.[50] She argues that 'measuring empathy by spontaneous and largely pre-reflective visceral reactions and equating those to psychological notions of empathy is highly problematic'. There is also a risk that this sort of dark tourism can distort empathy into 'relief, curiosity, morbid fascination' and even a 'solipsistic form of gratitude' that one did not actually have to experience the historical events being depicted.[51] These concerns speak to the danger of interactive media becoming totalising 'sensation machines' that primarily engage bodily and affective sensations at the expense of critical thinking and intellectual engagement.

Ultimately, it is unlikely that affective and visceral empathy alone automatically leads to historical understanding in games. On the level of pure instinctive affect, players may indeed feel empathy in the sense of 'feeling what someone else feels'. However, it is questionable whether this leads to the sort of empathy that provokes critical historical thought, or whether it remains a fleeting momentary sensation. Furthermore, Chris Kempshall and Adam Chapman have observed that it is impossible to feel what historical actors actually felt via interactive experiences. They thereby question the very possibility of historical empathy based in emotion-matching.[52] This is in keeping with warnings from scholars about the need to distinguish historical empathy from simply 'identifying' with a person from the past. Historical empathy cannot be reduced to embracing another's persona or 'emotion-matching'.[53] Interactive

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[50] Hassapopoulou, 'Playing with History', 385.
[51] Hassapopoulou, 'Playing with History', 372.
[52] Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice* (Taylor and Francis: 2016), 186; Chris Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), 72.
[53] Stuart Foster, 'Using Historical Empathy to Excite Students about the Study of History: Can You Empathize with Neville Chamberlain?', *The Social Studies* 90, no. 1 (1999): 19.

experiences could therefore be limited to provoking the sort of self-oriented empathy that Batson and Ahmad describe, where we 'insert ourselves into the other's situation and focus on how we would think and feel, becoming self-absorbed and never considering what this information may tell us about the thoughts and feelings of the other'.[54] Alison Landsberg calls this 'facile identification' rather than empathy.[55] This sort of 'faux-empathy', characterised by over-immersion and overidentification, is not conducive to historical understanding.

Games and critical play

Despite the concerns detailed above, Murray believes that video games can be more than just perceptually enveloping and intellectually anaesthetizing entertainment. Much like the more sophisticated 'holodeck' of *Star Trek*, digital media can be controlled and moderated to the point where it can be 'a safe space in which to confront disturbing feelings we would otherwise suppress; it allows us to recognise our most threatening fantasies without becoming paralysed by them'. For Murray, this prompts the question: could video games then be a way of exploring our most uncomfortable and disturbing histories without being consumed by them? Or is the 'reality' of what happened in the past too vivid to confront in this way?[56]

Belief in the totalising, overwhelming nature of digital media has been called a 'fallacy' by some authors. For example, Torill Elvira Mortensen has argued that players are always aware that they are engaging in play, and are never tricked into believing that what they are experiencing is reality.[57] According to Mortensen, there is always a sense of meta-awareness and

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[54] Batson and Ahmad, 'Using Empathy', 144.
[55] Landsberg, *Engaging the Past,* 20, 29.
[56] Murray, *Hamlet,* 25.
[57] Torill Elvira Mortensen, 'Keeping the Balance: Morals at the Dark Side', in *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments*, eds. Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderoth and Ashley M.L. Brown (Routledge, 2015), 158.

suspension of disbelief inherent in the act of play. Distance between the avatar and the player is always maintained, rather than the player believing that they actually are the avatar (although to some extent emotions can 'bleed' over). Robert Farrow and Ioanna Iacovides argue that, even in highly immersive VR experiences, 'digital embodiment differs so significantly from primordial embodiment that any idea of total immersion is simply fantasy'. They assert that the idea of a totally immersive digital experience is 'fundamentally fallacious', and we should not conflate a more immersive experience with a more satisfying, meaningful, or engaging one.[58]

However, asking what is 'real' is a complicated question that cannot be taken for granted, especially regarding the cyborgian relationship between humans and technological experience. Children may be especially susceptible to a 'blurring' of the virtual and the real, particularly those with neurodevelopmental disorders.[59] It is clear that there are many complex psychological, perceptual, and ontological phenomena at play when considering how 'real' the player believes these immersive experiences to be. It may be that virtual reality and 'metaverse' technology will eventually advance to the point where the real and the virtual become indistinguishable. However, the digital media of concern in this discussion is currently far from reaching that point.

There is a considerable body of literature in support of video games as devices for the encouragement of critical-historical thinking, emerging in opposition to concerns about the totalising perceptual power of games. Some academics, for example, have compared games to older interactive media in order to discuss the potential for play as a critical intellectual act with social and political resonance. Mary Flanagan's 2009 book, *Critical Play*, argues that games can

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[58] Robert Farrow and Ioanna Iacovides, 'Gaming and the limits of digital embodiment', *Philosophy and Technology* 27 (2014): 222, 231.

[59] Polyxeni Kaimara, Andreas Oikonomou and Ioannis Deliyannis, 'Could virtual reality applications pose real risks to children and adolescents? A systematic review of ethical issues and concerns', *Virtual Reality* 26 (2022): 717.

effectively subvert traditional design conventions and expectations in order to provoke critical thinking in the player.[60] She likens interactive digital games to the pen-and-paper games developed by Surrealist artists in the 1930s as spaces to explore and critique society. According to Flanagan, Surrealist games, such as the no-mans-land themed 'No More Play' designed by Alberto Giacometti in 1932, are 'systems for critical thinking … that explore the folly of human choice, incorporating friendly, childlike doll-play paradigms with war, imprisonment, and death'.[61] The practice of the Surrealists reveals the potential for games and play to be critical spaces, particularly in the realm of choice and consequence, which I will explore in detail in Chapter Three. For Flanagan, there is tremendous potential in the power of 'alternative', avant-garde and radical game design 'for artistic, political, and social critique or intervention'.[62] Gonzalo Frasca similarly takes inspiration from Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, an interactive mode of 'forum theatre' that aims to solve social problems through play, simulation, and audience participation.[63] Frasca proposes that by interacting with and modifying the rules of a simulation, players can engage in critical discussion about the ideological implications of the simulation's rules and how they may apply to real life. These examples show that, in defiance of those who may accuse interactive experiences as 'lacking potential for profound critical engagement', interactivity and play systems can and have been used to provoke critical thinking.[64]

The vast body of literature on games for classroom and educational use also supports the utility of games in encouraging critical thinking. This field of study stretches back as far as the

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[60] Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 62.
[61] Flanagan, Critical Play, 93.
[62] Flanagan, Critical Play, 2.
[63] Gonzalo Frasca, 'Videogames of the Oppressed: Videogames as a Means for Critical Thinking and Debate' (Dissertation, M.A., Georgia Institute of Technology, 2001), 80-87.
[64] Hassapopoulou, 'Playing with History', 380.

1960s, as scholars began studying the efficacy of using simulation games in the classroom.[65] A number of theoretical and practical books have since been published on the topic of using video games as pedagogical tools.[66] Kurt Squire is one academic who has extensively documented the use of video games for deep, sophisticated learning. Squire describes video games as 'experiential learning spaces … where learners have rich, embodied, collaborative, and cooperative interactions where they think with complex tools and resources in the service of complex problem solving'.[67] Scholars such as Yasmin B. Kafai, Quinn Burke, and Constance Steinkuehler have studied the pedagogical value of making games as a way of constructing new relationships with knowledge.[68] This is significant, as it establishes games as tools for complex, sophisticated learning involving critical thinking and active knowledge construction, rather than didactic tools that treat students as passive receptacles of knowledge.

Historical games scholar Jeremiah McCall has published extensively on how he uses video games to teach history in high-school classrooms in his work at Cincinnati Country Day School. He provides evidence of how video games can provoke critical historical thinking when correctly framed and mediated by a classroom teacher. McCall has found that students form compelling research questions equal to those posed by historians after playing simulations and being directed to consider the historical arguments embedded therein.[69] Some historians have

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[65] Some early examples of work in this field include Gene Baker, 'A Comparative Study Using Textbook and Simulation Approaches in Teaching Junior High American History' (dissertation) (Northwestern University ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 1966); Cleo H. Cherryholmes, 'Some Current Research On Effectiveness of Educational Simulations: Implications for Alternative Strategies', *American Behavioural Scientist* 10, no. 2. (1966): 4-7; Kalman J. Cohen and Eric Rhenman, 'The Role of Management Games in Education and Research', *Management Science* 7, no. 2 (1961): 101-194.
[66] For examples, see Richard E. Mayer, *Computer Games for Learning: an Evidence-Based Approach* (MIT Press, 2014).
[67] Kurt Squire, 'Video Game–Based Learning: An Emerging Paradigm for Instruction', *Performance Improvement Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2013): 110.
[68] Yasmin B. Kafai, Quinn Burke, and Constance Steinkuehler, *Connected Gaming: What Making Video Games Can Teach Us about Learning and Literacy* (Cambridge, London: MIT Press, 2016).
[69] Jeremiah McCall, 'Simulation Games and the Study of the Past: Classroom Guidelines', in *Pastplay*, ed. Kee, 247-248.

observed the potential for games to allow players to engage in the practices of professional historians. For example, Chapman describes how interactive games can allow players to write their own historical narrative, a process he calls narrative 'historying'.[70] 'Historying' is broadly defined as the act of transforming the past into written, aural, visual, digital, or even imagined forms – in our case, into play and action.[71] An example of 'historying' in games is the historical alternate-reality game (ARG) *Tecmuseh Lies Here*, described by Timothy Compeau and Robert MacDougall as a 'pervasive history game' that fosters 'critical and engaged playful historical thinking'. The process of playing this ARG, which involves players collecting evidence to piece together the story of Tecmuseh, uses game mechanics to teach historical skills. These skills include exploring and observing historical environments, selecting evidence, formulating hypotheses, finding and resolving errors in existing histories, and debating the meaning and significance of historical narratives. Different 'factions' in the game are used as devices to explore various interpretations and methods of historical thinking, including rigid 'just-the-facts' approaches, counterhegemonic cynicism, and popular conspiracy history.[72] Other augmented reality and interactive history experiences, including *Ripped Apart: A Civil War Mystery* and *1831: Riot!* have similarly emphasised constructivist processes of the 'evaluation and ordering of voices, perspectives and events' in order to engage the player in the practices of the professional historian.[73] The idea of games as tools for 'historying' will be covered in further detail in Chapter Two of this thesis.

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[70] Chapman, *Digital Games,* 163-192.
[71] Chapman, *Digital Games,* 22; Alun Munslow, 'Genre and history/historying', *Rethinking History* 19, no. 2 (2014): 170.
[72] Timothy Compeau and Robert MacDougall, 'Tecumseh Lies Here: Goals and Challenges for a Pervasive History Game in Progress', *Pastplay*, ed. Kee, 87, 94-96.
[73] Poole, 'Ghosts in the Garden', 306.

Academic literature has also explored the power of games to convey ideologically and politically critical narratives outside of the classroom. Ian Bogost's *Persuasive Games* (2007) includes examples of how critical procedural rhetoric is implemented in popular games. One example he gives is *The McDonald's Game*, as we have seen in the Introduction. This game presents an argument about the inherent destructiveness and greed of big fast-food corporations.[74] Other 'serious games', such Gonzalo Frasca's *September 12th* (2003), aim to communicate critical messages about topics including the War on Terror.[75] Although these are non-commercial examples, commercial games can engage in critique as well. *Bioshock* (2007), for example, can be read as a critical deconstruction of Ayn Rand's objectivist philosophy.[76] It is also important to acknowledge that procedural arguments in games are not necessarily uncritically absorbed by the player. Players can oppose or question the ideologies embedded in game systems. Games can also engage in self-reflexive critique of their genres, tropes, and forms.[77] Holger Pötzsch, for example, has examined how 'critical game design can invite a conscious unravelling of the generic frames and … ideological positions' encountered elsewhere in gaming. He highlights *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012) as an example of a game that uses its procedural and narrative rhetoric to deconstruct and challenge discourses of war that dominate the video game medium.[78] To some extent, it is necessary for players to become aware of, and consciously engage with, procedural rhetoric in order to understand and critique the arguments therein. Bogost therefore identifies the need for the general public to develop a procedural literacy that enables them to understand, break down, and critique the logic of coded ideologies

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[74] Bogost, *Persuasive Games,* 31.
[75] 'September 12th: a toy world', accessed April 11, 2022, https://www.gamesforchange.org/game/september-12th-a-toy-world/.
[76] Ryan Lizardi, 'Bioshock: Complex and Alternate Histories', *Game Studies* 14, no. 1 (2014).
[77] Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 284.
[78] Holger Pötzsch, 'Selective Realism: Filtering Experiences of War and Violence in First- and Third-Person Shooters', *Games and Culture* 12, no. 2 (2017): 156.

in interactive media. As a result, games could 'open spaces of critical contemplation' wherein the player can intellectually engage with and consider procedural arguments about the world – or, in our present case, about the past.[79]

Oscillation: a path to critical thinking in immersive media

How do we make the most of the critical potential of games and avoid the totalising 'sensation machine' effect? What is the key to encouraging critical thinking in historical games, as opposed to fleeting emotional identification? The lessons of other media may be instructive here. Landsberg's insightful book, *Engaging the Past* (2015), provides a detailed analysis of how critical historical thinking can be fostered in popular media. She covers film, TV shows, and websites, but does not include video games in her analysis. In this chapter, I will examine the application of Landsberg's theories to the video game medium. A key argument of Landsberg's work is that experiential historical media does not necessarily have to create the illusion of immediacy and unmediated access to the past.[80] Landsberg argues that 'affectively engaged modes of representation of the past can and do produce new forms of historical knowledge'. According to Landsberg, there is 'potential in an audiovisual text for a more complicated mode of address than most theorists allow'.[81]

Distancing is the crucial element that moves viewers from 'facile identification' to a deeper, more critically engaged form of empathy. For historical thinking to take place, Landsberg argues, one must be consciously aware that one is engaging in historical inquiry.[82] Self-reflexivity therefore emerges as a central part of critical historical thinking. Self-reflexive

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[79] Bogost, *Persuasive Games,* 64, 279.
[80] Landsberg, *Engaging the Past,* 10.
[81] Landsberg, *Engaging the Past,* 29.
[82] Landsberg, *Engaging the Past,* 28.

works use certain techniques to 'foster a cognitive or intellectual awareness that [the audience] is engaged in this kind of inquiry'.[83] Rather than full immersion that negates an awareness of the self being engaged in a mediated depiction, the distance between the self and the depiction is emphasised. Such emphasis mitigates any illusions of immediacy. Therefore, the viewer 'does not lose himself or herself in the story' and is able to think critically about it from some degree of cognitive and affective distance.[84] A similar approach to fostering critical thinking was theorised as early as 1936 in playwright Bertolt Brecht's essay on alienation. Brecht famously championed distancing and alienating stylistic features as a way of stopping the audience from 'simply identifying itself with the characters in the play'. Brecht's alienation instead aimed to facilitate socio-political critique of the action on the 'conscious plane'.[85] Audience interaction, direct address and breaking the fourth wall are a few of the techniques Brecht advocated for in order to foreground the mediated nature of the narrative and jolt the audience out of passive complacency. Applying this philosophy to digital historical media, Landsberg writes that media works can 'make visible the mediations that are part of the story' and 'take advantage of each medium's formal properties to orchestrate complicated modes of engagement with the past'.[86]

Landsberg describes formal techniques that can create this distancing effect in film, television, and the internet. Interruptions in the diegesis and hypermediation (calling attention to the mediated nature of the work) complicate the familiar conventions of Hollywood dramatic narrative that absorb viewers in the filmic experience.[87] Rosenstone gives the example of voiceover narration that asks questions or questions itself, rather than being an authoritative

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[83] Landsberg, *Engaging the Past,* 5.
[84] Landsberg, *Engaging the Past,* 34.
[85] John Willett, ed. and trans., *Brecht on Theatre* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 91.
[86] Landsberg, *Engaging the Past,* 22.
[87] Landsberg, *Engaging the Past,* 27-30.

'voice of God'.[88] The films that produce the most historical knowledge 'foreground mediation … produce epistemological uncertainty through the layering of different types of footage, and … in a range of ways prevent us from losing ourselves in the illusion'.[89] They reject the illusion of unmediated transparency, overidentification, and immediate access to the past. For example, when talking about website-based interactive virtual history exhibits, Landsberg describes sites that:

> refuse their visitors a kind of seamless point of identification with individual historical figures or specific perspectives. Instead of fostering the illusion that the user is 'actually there', the sites' artificiality and stylization call attention to their constructedness and thus have the effect of visually reminding users that the experience is virtual and not an actual experience of the past. This tension between actually experiencing the virtual space and understanding it as a mediation, as opposed to the real thing, instantiates a complicated mode of engagement.[90]

However, a work that solely seeks to alienate or shock is generally not enough to inspire deep historical reflection.[91] The affectively empathic elements of popular historical media are an equally important part of historical thinking. Landsberg advocates for a form of 'affective engagement' that is 'qualitatively different from identification, particularly the sort of "facile identification" that can result in uncritical passivity and even appropriation of another's traumatic experience'.[92] To achieve affective engagement, emotional connection must be paired with a 'break' or interruption. Landsberg describes this process as follows: first, there is an 'encounter' with the world of the historical subject that provokes an affective response. This makes the audience feel connected and invested in the historical subject on screen. The sensation

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[88] Rosenstone, *Visions*, 61.
[89] Rosenstone, *Visions,* 59.
[90] Landsberg, *Engaging the Past,* 148.
[91] Landsberg, *Engaging the Past,* 38.
[92] Landsberg, *Engaging the Past,* 22-27, 66.

of affective engagement with the represented history is then broken by an interrupting moment that forces a return to the present body. This return provokes an 'analytical or cognitive process and meaning making' about why and how the present body was affected.[93] Landsberg bases this idea on Deleuze's theory of *encounter*: there has to be a provocation in the form of an encounter with the unfamiliar in order to create new thought, since overfamiliarity leads to complacency. Cognitive work in the form of active analytical thinking must be done in order to make sense of the new experience, thereby generating thought. Provoking cognitive dissonance 'compels interpretation and meaning making' and thus 'catalyses historical thinking'.[94]

To summarise Landsberg's argument: historical media can draw us in with emotion, which makes us feel connected to the historical subject. It can then push us back out into our own selves, which makes us think about what we just felt and why. The term Landsberg uses for this is 'oscillation' – an oscillation 'between proximity and distance, alienation and intimacy'.[95] The precise amount or degree of effective oscillation is a subject for future studies that are beyond the scope of this thesis, but we can make some preliminary observations here. There cannot be so much distancing that the audience feels uncaring towards the historical subject or unable to engage with their affective world. However, there cannot be so much affective engagement that the audience overidentifies with the subject and thus remains unchallenged and uncritical.[96] Oscillating immersion and distancing in historical media echoes pedagogical guidelines on historical empathy set out by Endacott and Brooks. They assert that 'in order to display historical empathy, students must alternate between focusing on the other as they recognize what another person was likely to be feeling in a given situation and focusing on the

[93] Landsberg, *Engaging the Past,* 27.
[94] Landsberg, *Engaging the Past,* 121-140.
[95] Landsberg, *Engaging the Past,* 27.
[96] Landsberg, *Engaging the Past,* 35.

self as they are reminded of a similar experience in their own lives that caused a similar affective response'.[97] This focus on the self is not the facile identification of appropriating an emotional experience, but instead the recognition of 'shared humanity' that is nevertheless shaped by acknowledgement of historical distance.[98]

Moving between focusing on the other and focusing on the self is a process that can be triggered by the alternation of immersion and distancing, of identifying and then snapping back. This is a process through which interactive, experiential, and affective histories can produce historical knowledge. Works that achieve this oscillating effect foster a powerful 'empathicohistorical position … to care about and be interested in the past while acknowledging that it is never fully recoverable, that attempts at understanding it are necessarily partial'.[99] The idea of 'oscillation' therefore moves towards resolving the debate over the pedagogical and critical effectiveness of immersive historical media. This oscillation could assist in fostering historical understanding and consciousness in the public sphere.[100]

The critically distancing potential of digital media is especially important in public engagement with historical traumas. Overidentification with victims of trauma in museums and heritage sites can be problematic. One study found that visitors to Auschwitz who over-empathised with the victims experienced symptoms of secondary trauma after visiting the site. Over-empathy is defined here as taking the victims' experiences and emotions into oneself.[101] As discussed earlier, there are similar concerns over the ethics and critical value of vividly immersing the public in digital recreations of historical violence. Kempshall, for example,

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[97] Endacott and Brooks, 'Historical Empathy', 43.
[98] Lee and Shemilt, 'The concept', 42.
[99] Landsberg, *Engaging the Past,* 35.
[100] Landsberg, *Engaging the Past,* 16.
[101] Michał Bilewicz and Adrian Dominik Wojcik, 'Visiting Auschwitz: Evidence of Secondary Traumatization Among High School Students', *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 88, no. 3 (2018): 328-334.

questions whether the experience of shellshock in the First World War is something that could be suitable for close examination in an interactive, experiential work.[102] There are public and professional objections to digital games that engage with the Holocaust, which I examine in detail in Chapter Four. Landsberg has asserted that 'historical knowledge cannot be produced … if the representation of atrocity only works to encourage a sympathetic identification with the victim or, even worse, a kind of voyeuristic pleasure in another's suffering'.[103] Fear of a 'voyeuristic' treatment of historical trauma is likely a major reason why there are so few games that have dealt with extremely violent events such as the Holocaust. The ethical and psychological dangers of over-identification with the victims of such abuses, and the fact that such approaches may be counterproductive to historical thinking and understanding, have likely prevented advances in the interactive digital treatment of this subject matter.

Texts that deal with historical trauma must strike an especially careful balance between emotional involvement and intellectual engagement in order to foster audience understanding and empathy. In *Trauma Culture* (2005), E. Ann Kaplan argues that the 'witnessing' of trauma as a part of reconciliation and healing must differ from 'vicarious trauma, from voyeurism/sensationalism, and from melodramatic … Hollywood treatments of historical trauma'. According to Kaplan, texts that facilitate a witnessing position 'move the viewer emotionally but without sensationalizing or overwhelming her with feeling that makes understanding impossible'.[104] Kaplan's ideas align with the concept of 'oscillation', where emotion must be stopped short of being overwhelming in order to allow for the possibility of understanding. When media is carefully designed to achieve this effect, historical empathy might

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[102] Kempshall, *The First World War,* 75.
[103] Landsberg, *Engaging the Past*, 148.
[104] E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 22-23.

be achieved with victims of trauma, rather than 'facile identification'. Attention is paid to the historical context and the historical and intellectual questions it raises, rather than purely the suffering of the victim. Furthermore, as established earlier, the distance between the self and the other is crucial for historical empathy and even more important when engaging in representations of trauma, violence and extreme suffering. Creating some distance allows audiences to become 'responsive to the traumatic experience of others' without appropriating their experience, without fostering the 'self-oriented' empathy that is antithetical to historical understanding.

Landsberg cites an example of empathic unsettlement in the official Anne Frank House website's virtual experience *The Secret Annex Online*. This website allows the viewer to explore the house's annex as a visitor being spoken to by Anne, rather than '[moving] through the annex in some simplistic or straightforward way *as* Anne'.[105] It is thus able to place the audience in the 'witnessing' position Kaplan describes. I do not agree that virtually controlling Anne would necessarily entail 'facile identification' with her. Later in this chapter, I will argue that the conventions and interfaces of digital media complicate the experience of virtually inhabiting a character. There is nothing 'simplistic' or 'straightforward' about the relationship between the user and the digital avatar. However, I concur with Landsberg's point that *The Secret Annex Online* positions the viewer as a visitor to the events unfolding, rather than attempting to collapse the boundaries between past and present and making the user feel as if they are actually there. A similar approach is taken in the *Chernobyl VR Project* (2016) Hassapopoulou discusses, in which the user inhabits an uncertain ontological position in a fragmentary, layered, and conspicuously mediated recreation of the Chernobyl environment.[106] A 'reporter' conceit is similarly used in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's online *Witnessing History: Kristallnacht*

[105] Landsberg, *Engaging the Past,* 176.
[106] Hassapopoulou, 'Playing with History', 374.

exhibition. These 'witness' positions emphasise the 'fundamentally different nature of [the viewer's] experience vis-à-vis the atrocity from that of a person who lived through Kristallnacht', or any other experience of victims of historical trauma.[107] Such an approach is therefore able to reinforce the recognition of the difference between the self and other that is necessary for historical empathy and critical historical thinking. Furthermore, interactive experiences that position the user as a reporter, investigator, or third-party 'witness' to the event have potential to engage audiences in processes of 'historying', a concept I will return to in Chapter Two.

Alienating media: does it have mass popular appeal?

Returning to film theory as an instructive precedent, it is important to look more closely at the sorts of films that are said to inspire the critical distancing that produces historical knowledge. Rosenstone identifies postmodern and experimental film as providing the necessary ruptures in the illusion of unmediation required to distance the viewer. Much like Landsberg's descriptions of critically engaged interactive history websites, Rosenstone describes postmodern films as:

> refusing the pretence that the screen can be an unmediated window onto the past, foregrounds itself as a construction … such works do not, like the dramatic feature or the documentary, attempt to recreate the past realistically. Instead they point to it and play with it, raising questions about the very evidence on which our knowledge of the past depends, creatively interacting with its traces.[108]

Like Landsberg, Rosenstone alludes to the philosophy of Brechtian alienation and its ability to provoke critical and historically conscious thinking. The aim of this Brechtian approach is to jolt

[107] Landsberg, *Engaging the Past,* 176.
[108] Rosenstone, *Visions*, 12.

the audience out of their comfortable passivity through 'creating disturbing film forms and utilizing a new film language that will make historical issues vital, urgent, full of contemporary meaning'. Such an approach contrasts with what Rosenstone describes as 'Hollywood-style films that will comfort the audience with a nice emotional release'.[109] Rosenstone has praised avant-garde and experimental history films that use Brechtian techniques of alienation and anti-realism to communicate a sophisticated historical epistemology.[110] He cites filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948) and Jean Luc-Godard (1930-2022), who made movies that 'refuse to provide a satisfying, linear story with a good emotional release at the end'.[111] Rosenstone also describes several films as key examples. *Sans Soleil* (1983) is a documentary meditation on human memory that presents the past as a series of 'disconnected, synchronous, and erasable events'. *The Nasty Girl* (1990) uses Brechtian anti-realist and alienation effects to explore the story of a village hiding its Nazi past.[112] These filmmakers' non-realist aesthetics, Rosenstone argues, destroy the illusion of the film as a direct view onto a past reality.[113] Similarly, Roberto Rossellini (1906-1977) attempted 'to become a historian by refusing to utilise the practices of dramatic film' and 'de-dramatised' films to create critical distance'.[114] *Walker* (1987), which Rosenstone calls a 'dramatic film as (postmodern) history', uses distancing techniques such as anachronism, absurdity, and playing with fixed temporality to subvert the conventions of mainstream historical films. These techniques call attention to each film's artificiality and thereby draw attention to the act of reconstruction of the past, catalysing metahistorical thinking in the audience.[115] By breaking with Hollywood realist conventions, these films create 'complex,

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[109] Rosenstone, *Visions*, 183-184.
[110] Rosenstone, *Visions*, 184; Rosenstone, *History on Film*, 114, 139.
[111] Rosenstone, *Visions*, 118; Rosenstone, *History on Film*, 14.
[112] Rosenstone, *Visions*, 63, 191.
[113] Rosenstone, *History on Film*, 14
[114] Rosenstone, *History on Film*, 139, 114-115.
[115] Rosenstone, *Visions*, 132-193.

interrogative, and self-conscious history' that contests seamless stories of a 'unitary, closed, and completed past'**.** By exploring the past in a new, unfamiliar way that subverts realistic conventions, they cause the audience to rethink conventional narratives and approaches to history.[116]

However, the same features that make these films conducive to critical thinking are also likely to make them unsuitable for reaching a broad popular audience. Rosenstone himself acknowledges that films in this style are often dull or unappealing to the average consumer who is used to comforting and easy Hollywood realist narratives and conventions. For example, he admits that the Rossellini films that refuse dramatic conventions in favour of history, including *The Rise of Louis XIV* (1966) and *The Age of the Medici* (1973) are less engaging for most modern audiences. The actors in these films essentially 'deliver lectures to each other' and, as a result, to quote Rosenstone, 'snoozing is a more likely reaction to these works than thinking'.[117] Rosenstone's assessment may not ring true with all viewers, but it would be difficult to argue that these films are not significantly more emotionally reserved than the average Hollywood film. Meanwhile, avant-garde experimental films rarely hold popular appeal or perform successfully at the box office. Although Dziga Vertov (1896-1954) and Eisenstein aimed to create cinema of the masses, very few mass media consumers would sit down on a Friday night to watch a film by either of these directors today, suggesting a new approach is needed. These films could be said to lack the affective engagement that Landsberg identifies as key to fostering historical consciousness in the public sphere. There is not enough 'oscillation' between immersion and cognition, since the films remain in their alienating mode. One half of the

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[116] Rosenstone, *History on Film*, 18, 47, 118.
[117] Rosenstone, *History on Film*, 114-115.

equation is therefore missing. Perhaps their stylistic features are simply too alien to a contemporary mass audience to effectively foster empathicohistorical understanding.

There is a fundamental problem, then, with historical film: the popular film aesthetic can be antithetical to critical historical thinking, but the postmodern film aesthetic is often alienating and unpopular to a broad audience. Avant-garde films are not popular, so they cannot effectively be used to communicate history to a mass audience.[118] This poses a dilemma to those who are trying to create popular historical media that genuinely engages a broad public audience in historical arguments.

Video games: mass appeal with built-in distancing tools

I suggest that commercial video games possess built-in distancing mechanisms that can be utilised by historians to create an engaging, popular medium for critical historical thinking. Due to the hypermediated, interactive, and challenge-based nature of most games, they inherently operate on the cognitive level in addition to the affective level. They therefore possess the two-pronged approach suggested to be vital to historical empathy and understanding. As Hassapopoulou has argued, the 'ludic and interactive qualities' of commercial video games 'leave room for critical reflection not only content-wise but also with regards to conventions and expectations associated with their medium'.[119] These conventions and expectations of the medium are what I will now examine in further detail. There are a number of ways in which games are able to use the conventions of their medium to facilitate the 'snapping back to the present' Landsberg describes.

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[118] Rosenstone, *History on Film*, 237.
[119] Hassapopoulou, 'Playing with History', 384.

To explain one of the ways of 'snapping back', I will turn to the theories of game studies scholar Jesper Juul. It is significant that Juul's landmark book is called *Half-Real* (2005). According to Juul, rather than being fully realist immersions into the past, games are 'half-real'. They are made up of 'real rules and fictional worlds'.[120] The rules are real in the sense that they structure the player's actual affordances for action and interaction with the work; they determine what the player can or cannot do. Meanwhile, the narrative and representational features of the game – characters, plot, world-building, and so forth – are fictional. Historical events are not fictional, but we can use the term 'fictive' when referring to historical stories in the sense that Hayden Write describes history as 'fictive', that is, constructed with literary techniques.

Furthermore, Juul explains that the fictional worlds created in games are 'incoherent worlds'. All fictional worlds are 'incomplete' in the sense that many aspects of a fictional world must be imagined by the audience. Marie-Laure Ryan's 'principle of minimal departure' asserts that people fill in these blanks with information from the real world and familiar genre conventions.[121] However, in almost all video games, there are non-realist aspects of their formal construction (their rules, interfaces, and interactive mechanics) that cannot be explained with reference to the fictional world of the game. In an incoherent game world, there are aspects of the game that 'contradict itself' or 'prevent the player from imagining a complete fictional world'. For example, a person playing *Super Mario Bros.* may ask why Mario has three lives. It is difficult to imagine a logical reason for Mario's three lives that makes sense within the fiction of the game world. The fictional world of the Mushroom Kingdom that Mario inhabits gives no indication of how or why he can 'die' and be 'respawned' three times before a 'game over'.

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[120] Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 1.

[121] Marie-Laure Ryan, 'Fiction, Non-Factuals, and the Principle of Minimal Departure', *Poetics* 9, no. 4 (1980): 408.

Players must explain this by referring to the game *rules*. Therefore, according to Juul, an incoherent world is created when 'there are many events in the fictional world that we cannot explain without discussing the game rules'. Other examples include arcade games with 'ontologically separate worlds' where one level is replaced with another, games with broken or internally inconsistent time, and round-based games.[122]

The incoherence of the game world, and the tension between gameplay and rules, prevent the video game from being a realist view onto the past. Rather than mimetic reconstructions of reality, games always have elements that disrupt the seamlessness of the experience. There is always a 'gap' between the gameplay and the rules, and a 'gap' between the player and the game.[123] Juul argues that as a result, the concept of 'immersion' in games is misleading. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman have discussed the *immersive fallacy* in game studies. They argue that the player is never tricked into thinking that what they are experiencing in the game is really happening.[124] The understanding of games as incoherent worlds is at odds with the (mis)understanding of video games as fully immersive realist experiences that eliminate distance between the user and the medium. A game is rarely a 'seamless' experience in the same way a Hollywood dramatic film might be edited and constructed to offer a 'seamless' experience. A game cannot present itself as an unmediated window onto the past if there are frequent ruptures in the diegesis that disrupt the 'seamless' experience of the game world. Although a player may be fully engaged by the act of play, a game is not indistinguishable from the 'real world' in the way Janet Murray describes a hyper-immersive 'holodeck' style of entertainment.

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[122] Juul, *Half-Real,* 122-190.
[123] Mortensen, 'Keeping the Balance', 162.
[124] Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play – Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 443.

Formal features of videogames often contribute to their distancing function. Almost all videogames are hypermediated experiences accessed through complex and often very visible interfaces. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin contrast the immediacy of 'interfaceless' experiences, in which a user interacts as naturalistically as possible, with 'hypermediated' works that foreground their own status as mediated experiences.[125] Although some videogames, particularly VR experiences, aim to become as 'interfaceless' as possible, most games fall into the latter category of obviously hypermediated constructions. This effect is created by the formal properties of what Juul calls the 'rules' layer of the game. For example, most commercial games contain heads-up-displays (HUDs) overlaid onto the gameplay world in order to facilitate player interaction with the rules. These can consist of health bars, mini-maps, arrows indicating the direction of the next goal, text indicating the current location, images of equipped items and weapons, and more. Many games also 'teach' the player how to play the game through contextual button prompts that appear on screen when cued by gameplay. Such prompts are a frequent reminder that the player is interfacing with the game through an abstracted set of controller or keyboard button presses, rather than a naturalistic, unmediated interaction.

Furthermore, games almost always have menu screens with which the player regularly interacts throughout the process of gameplay. In some games, these menus involve a variety of complex screens that allow the player to access character, inventory, and skill customization, as well as maps and goals. In others, they may simply be a menu that allows the player to save, change options, or quit. In either case, the game menu is an extradiegetic feature that breaks immersion in the game world and confronts the player with the evidence that they are interfacing with a mediated, constructed ludic representation. Authors such as Christopher Hanson and

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[125] J. David Bolter and Richard A. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 31-34.

Samuel Tobin have described how pause menus can disrupt the temporal and immersive flow of gameplay, giving players a moment to withdraw from the game space.[126] There are many other ways video games disrupt immediacy and immersion. For example, abstracted and stylised visual art direction, a common design choice particularly in indie games, can contribute to the distancing effect. Such formal elements of the medium work to draw the player out of the immersive experience, creating distance between them and the avatar they are controlling and emphasizing the mediated nature of the experience. In this way, games can be suitable for creating the 'oscillation' effect between engagement and distance that Landsberg theorises to be a precondition for historical thinking.

Jason Farman supports this idea with his article on hypermediation and alienation as tools for critical thinking regarding video game violence. His argument somewhat assuages the fear of virtual violence spilling over into real life as a result of collapsing the virtual and the real. Farman 'argues for a re-examination of popular entertainment games — even the most violent — as tools for social critique through the employment of hypermediation and Bertolt Brecht's "alienation effect" to foster critical distance'. Like Landsberg and Rosenstone, Farman draws on Brecht's efforts to 'combat the sense of immersion in the performance space to utilize a "hypermediate" space for social change'. *GTA: San Andreas* (2004), for example, is a simulacrum of gang life in California and was famously criticised for supposedly inspiring real-life violence. Farman argues, however, that the game interface can be structured and manipulated in such a way that provokes Brechtian 'distanciation' and allows players to 'experience the game as a hypermediated space that satirizes the violence and the media that such violence alludes to'.

[126] Christopher Hanson, *Game Time: Understanding Temporality in Video Games* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 58; Samuel Tobin, 'Time and space in play: Saving and pausing with the Nintendo DS', *Games and Culture* 7, no. 2 (2012): 136.

One of the ways this is achieved is by customising the protagonist's appearance to look outlandish and nonsensical in the context of the game, adding mocking and satirical resonance that allows the player to 'play' with the standard representations of the game.[127]

Fourth-wall-breaking was another technique Brecht used to distance and alienate his audience members. Addressing the audience directly or inducing audience participation breaks the illusion of immersion into an alternate reality by acknowledging the distance between the fictional world and the audience.[128] Games can be said to break the fourth wall inherently through player interaction. Hassapopoulou argues that interactivity is reflexive and provokes critical self-reflection about complicity.[129] As players interact with a game, they must constantly reflect on their own actions: whether they are making effective decisions, how well they understand the affordances of the game world, and so on. Many games also break the fourth wall through their formal 'rule-based' features, as described above. An instruction on how to play the game, such as text appearing on screen telling the player to 'press X to jump', is an address directly to the user rather than the controlled protagonist in the game world. The fourth wall is therefore broken as the player is reminded that they are interacting through an abstracted interface. Sometimes diegetic characters will address the player directly in their dialogue with such instructions, an occurrence in which game objects break from the diegesis and create incoherence in the game world. There is no diegetic plot-based reason a character would suddenly tell another character to 'press X to jump'. The player must therefore register this as an incoherent element of the virtual world, reminding them that they are playing a game.

[127] Farman, 'Hypermediating the Game Interface', 96–109.
[128] Murray, *Hamlet,* 100.
[129] Hassapopoulou, 'Playing with History', 385.

There are also games that become deliberately self-reflexive and break the fourth wall in their narrative to achieve various effects. Horror games *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* (2002) and *Doki Doki Literature Club* (2017) do this in order to scare the player. Fourth-wall breaks in these games disorient and unsettle the player by transgressing the safe 'magic circle' zone that demarcates and contains game actions within the game world. *The Stanley Parable* (2013) and *The Beginner's Guide* (2015) both address the player directly in order to deconstruct relationships between the medium, the player, and the author. The game *Pathologic* (2005) contains an ending where the player can interact with the lead developer of the game, who reflects on the game's development process. Fourth-wall-breaking in historical games could remind the user that they are engaging in a representation of the past, rather than having immediate access to 'what it was really like'. This would facilitate the 'snapping back' to one's own body that Landsberg describes. Virtual experiences that acknowledge the user's present-ness, instead of allowing them to identify fully with the character they are portraying, can highlight the distance between the present and the past. This opens potential for complicated, sophisticated engagement with the relationship between past and present and between historians and history.

To illustrate this potential, I will return to Landsberg's example of controlling Anne Frank in the attic and imagine a hypothetical game design that could complicate the relationship between Anne and the user. As mentioned above, Landsberg praises the player's 'visitor' position as a method of distanciation, as opposed to a 'simplistic and straightforward movement through the annex *as* Anne'.[130] However, the academic field has not reached consensus about the exact nature of the relationship between the player and the controlled digital avatar. One thing is

[130] Landsberg, *Engaging the Past,* 176.

clear: the relationship is anything but 'simplistic and straightforward'.[131] It is unlikely that even the most naturalistic and sophisticated VR exhibitions collapse the boundaries between the digital and real to the extent that they can make a player truly believe they are the avatar they are controlling. Authors such as Jamie Banks and Nicholas Bowman have conceptualized the 'avatar-as-social-other' as one of many ways of relating to the digital avatar.[132] This mode is particularly relevant to historians wanting to emphasise the difference and distance between the contemporary audience and the past. Luca Papale has criticized the tendency to assume 'identification' as the primary way players relate to an avatar. Instead, Papale conceptualises the relationship between the player and the avatar as complex and dynamically shifting, spanning identification, empathy, sympathy, and even detachment.[133] Players may even feel animosity, hatred, or disgust towards their avatar. Some examples of games that evoke such emotions towards the player character include *Spec Ops: The Line* and *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* (1995), the latter of which I discuss in Chapter Five. The oscillation between different forms of player-avatar relationship Papale describes is compatible with the immersion-distance oscillation I describe here.

Firstly, the player could control Anne in the third-person rather than 'seeing through her eyes' in first-person. Papale highlights the third-person view as a way of triggering empathy, since the player is cognizant of the corporeality of the avatar and encouraged to view them as a distinct 'other'.[134] Shifting between interactive and non-interactive segments of gameplay can also help distance the player. Doing so could firstly encourage the player to perceive Anne as a

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[131] Landsberg, *Engaging the Past,* 176.
[132] Jamie Banks and Nicholas Bowman, 'Avatars are (sometimes) people too: Linguistic indicators of parasocial and social ties in player–avatar relationships', *New Media & Society* 18, no. 7 (2016): 1257–1276.
[133] Luca Papale, 'Beyond Identification: Defining the Relationships between Player and Avatar', *Journal of Games Criticism* 1, no. 2 (2014): 1-12.
[134] Papale, 'Beyond Identification', 6.

separate entity. Secondly, it could alienate the player from Anne's actions. The non-interactive Anne may undertake actions that the player did not or would not choose to do, thus lessening the feeling of agency and immersion within the space. However, there are also more creative and imaginative ways to distance Anne from the player. Playing with temporality is one possible idea. The diegesis could shift back and forward between Anne's life in the attic and a later or contemporary setting, perhaps something to do with the publication and reception of her diary. The game would then foreground the primary source through which we 'know' Anne, and complicate the idea of having direct access to her experience. To emphasise the documentary evidence that mediates our knowledge of the past, fragments from the diary could appear on screen when triggered by various events or interactions. This would not be done in an 'archive reel' manner that is often seen as a technique for claiming (or feigning) 'authenticity'. Rather, it would be done in a way that emphasises the incompleteness of our knowledge about Anne and our distance from her. Any sort of text, image, or sound that interrupts the diegesis in this way could pull the player away from thinking that they are 'really' Anne and sharing her experience. Fourth-wall-breaking, where the text, a narrator, or even Anne herself address the player directly, can further establish the distinction between the player and the digital avatar and therefore Anne as a historical figure. Imagine, for example, a dynamic fourth-wall-breaking avatar that comments on the movements of the player in real-time and compares the thinking process of the player as a contemporary actor to that of someone living through the period in question. What sets these proposed features apart from those that could be used in the postmodern films Rosenstone describes is that they are all rather conventional things one would often see in a mainstream video game. The existence of these features would not make the work off-putting or

inaccessible to a mass audience, and yet they could effectively be used to create critical distance and draw attention to the historical 'otherness' of the subject of play.

Perhaps the most explicit form of diegetic rupture is in-game death. Death, and the subsequent restarting of the game experience that follows, immediately removes the player from the progression of the game world and reminds them that they are interacting with a constructed, mediated depiction of an event. In-game death is almost always followed by a dying animation and cut to black, often accompanied by 'game over' and/or 'continue' screens, and the player may be returned to the starting menu. Much like the other formal interface features described above, these extradiegetic features break the immersive realism of a game. They 'snap' the player back out of the fiction and into the action of playing the game as their embodied self. Theorists writing on the educational potential of gaming have already described in detail the way failure and death can be used as tools for learning. For example, Kurt Squire has written about the instructive nature of failure states in games. He argues that 'seductive failure states' can 'entice learners into making mistakes that are tied to their misconceptions about a domain'.[135] For example, a game aiming to teach road rules to young drivers could design a 'trick' scenario that leads players into breaking a road rule, thereby strengthening their understanding of the implementation of the rule in question. Emily Flynn-Jones has also discussed how death-as-failure can be part of learning, leading the player towards success in incremental steps as their knowledge and repertoire increases.[136] Shuen-shing Lee has described how unwinnable games provoke thinking through loss, and Ian Bogost has described this effect as a 'rhetoric of failure'

[135] Kurt Squire, 'Video Game–Based Learning: An Emerging Paradigm for Instruction', *Performance Improvement Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2013): 116.
[136] Emily Flynn-Jones, 'Don't Forget to Die: A Software Update is Available for the Death Drive', in *The Dark Side of Play*, eds. Mortensen et. al., 46-60.

that can present procedural arguments.[137] The nature of unwinnable games and their potential for communicating historical arguments will be discussed in Chapter Five.

In-game death can potentially be another tool for critical reflection and the production of historical knowledge. When a player dies or otherwise fails in a game, they are forced to reflect on why this has happened and what they might be able to do differently to avoid a failure state next time. Much like Landsberg's ideal historical fiction, the player is 'jolted' out of the past and back into their present body and consciousness. If the choices and challenges of a game are those belonging to a historical person, the mechanics of failure can force the player to critically analyse the choices, limitations, and consequences historically available to that subject. I will discuss the particulars of how players are faced with historical choices and consequences in games in Chapter Three. For now, what matters is that death and failure cause a rupture between the player and the game world that disrupts immersion and returns the player to a state of critical reflection on the past.

The volitional aspect of eliciting empathy must be acknowledged here. Juul and Matthew Kirschenbaum point out that players can frequently shift their attention from the game fiction (in this case, the historical content) to the game rules, especially with experience and prolonged exposure.[138] Players must make a cognitive choice to engage with the game fiction, much as experiencing empathy requires cognitive action. Although scholars affirm that fiction is not irrelevant or independent of the rules, it is possible that players may 'absorb the semiotic field' of the game to the point where 'historical particulars are to some extent supplanted by the more

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[137] Bogost, *Persuasive Games,* 85; Shuen-shing Lee, '"I Lose, Therefore I Think": A Search for Contemplation amid Wars of Push-Button Glare', *Game Studies* 3, no. 2 (2003).

[138] Juul, *Half-Real,* 139; Matthew Kirschenbaum, 'Contests for Meaning: Playing King Philip's War in the Twenty-First Century', in *Pastplay,* ed. Kee, 208.

abstract strategy and decision making'.[139] This is not a consensus view. On the other side of the debate, Hassapopoulou has asserted that 'players cannot fully bypass ethical and psychological considerations for the sake of fulfilling gaming objectives and mastering its controls'. Rather than gameplay becoming habitual and this preventing critical reflection, Hassapopoulou suggests that historical images can gain new resonance 'that can only be achieved through the immediacy of gameplay and virtual immersion'.[140] Following the arguments I have established here, the immediacy and immersion of virtual docugames may amplify the resonance of these historical images if they are paired with the mechanics of critical reflection and distance. It remains to be seen to what extent players can 'turn off' their attention to the fiction in favour of the rules, and this is an important topic for further investigation. There are already studies supporting the idea that immersion and empathy cannot be forced by the game design if the user does not choose to engage on such a level. However, it seems highly possible that with effectively implemented designs of 'oscillation', the player's attention can be encouraged to move from the rules to the fiction, from cognition to emotion, and vice-versa.

Case studies: oscillation in action

Thus far, I have outlined some ways that games can achieve an 'oscillation' effect to increase the chances of promoting critical historical thinking. To what extent do existing games strike this balance between immersion and critical distance in practice? Can we learn from games already available to guide future design and development of critically engaged historical games?

Strategy and simulation games have been studied extensively in the field of historical gaming and are generally considered adept at involving the player in historical thinking. This

[139] Kirschenbaum, 'Contents for Meaning', 208.
[140] Hassapopoulou, 'Playing with History', 387.

category is largely made up of the genres of real-time and turn-based strategy, grand strategy, city-building, tactical wargames and management simulations. Historical games abound in these genres, including games like the much-studied *Civilization* series (1991-), *Total War* (2000-), *Europa Universalis* (2000-), *Hearts of Iron* (2002-), *Age of Empires* (1997-), *Company of Heroes* (2006-), and many more popular historical gaming franchises. Being able to 'control history' is seen as a marketable selling point for these games.[141] Chapman has categorised these games as 'conceptual simulations'. They tend to be made up of abstract audiovisual representations (rather than photorealistic graphics), and they allow the player to control and interact with people, places, objects, and systems on a grand scale. Rather than controlling a specific individual and 'seeing through their eyes', the player's agency is located almost outside of the diegesis. Their affordances are closer to those of a general, king, god, or other ontologically impossible position with near-omnipotent ability to influence the game world.

Chapman describes these games as placing the player on the 'diegetic level of the historian', allowing them access to broad macro-phenomena and sweeping views of these historical periods from 'above'.[142] He argues that these games can communicate historical arguments on a level closer to that of written text than film, engaging players on the level of scholarly historical discourse. Chapman describes their narrative style as *open-ontological,* meaning they have a weak framing narrative with significant emphasis on player agency.[143] Plotlines are emergent rather than fixed, as they generate from player actions within the 'sandbox' of the game. These games contain many of the distancing extradiegetic features described above. There is a proliferation of menus and extradiegetic on-screen information,

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[141] Watchmojo.com, 'Top 10 Strategy Games Where You Control History', Youtube Video, 10:23, November 3, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y84jMhBkYTs.
[142] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 199.
[143] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 201-205.

nonrealistic time (in-game time often progresses in turns or is otherwise abstracted), and direct player address. There is less emphasis on emotion and narrative and a greater emphasis on challenge, strategy, and systems, therefore engaging the player on a more cognitive rather than affective dimension.

Since these games have already been studied and written about elsewhere in depth, I will not dwell on them in detail in this thesis, but it is worth examining some examples of how these games operate on a critical cognitive level. Tom Apperley's analysis of *Europa Universalis II* (2001) is a useful case study. He argues that, although the game attempts to simulate a dominant narrative of history, it allows multiple opportunities for players to challenge and contest the game's presented historical arguments. Because the various systems and mechanics in the game force the player to understand its historical arguments on an algorithmic level, the player can then engage in ways to challenge, modify, and reframe these arguments. This can be done within the game itself through counterfactual play, and in paratextual activities such as forum discussions and modding.[144] Apperley cites player discussions on how the code could be modified so that the Aztecs can repel the Spanish invasion. Players theorise changes that could be made to sizes of armies and economic infrastructure that would allow this circumstance to play out as historically authentically as possible. These debates are evidence of the critical counterfactual thinking that can be provoked in players engaging intellectually with the procedural rhetoric of the game's code. An important element in Apperley's argument is that players do not necessarily uncritically accept the ideologies and arguments in games. To consider the example of the nation-building *Civilization* series, academics have levelled various criticisms against it. For example, the game overemphasises Western models of civilizational progress,

[144] Tom Apperley, 'Modding the Historians' Code: Historical Verisimilitude and the Counterfactual Imagination', in *Playing with the Past*, eds. Kapell and Elliott, 185-198.

obscures the violence and suffering of colonialism, and places undue focus on military success.[145] However, the player is given the opportunity to contest, question, and challenge these ideological assumptions, since the game places the player on the diegetic level of the historian. The player can therefore be exposed to the mechanisms and systems that make up the game's procedural historical arguments.

These simulation games rarely work on the affective level. They do not emphasise personal narratives, emotion, or individual empathy. Game designer Warren Spector has observed that precisely due to the weak framing narrative of these open-ontological-style games, they can '[end] up with a relative lack of direction and emotional resonance'.[146] Ultimately, they can become more like puzzles or mathematical models to tweak and master instead of representations of historical experience. It is difficult to know whether players of *Europa Universalis II* are empathizing with the challenges faced by the Aztecs, or whether they are treating the conflict purely as a ludic and mathematical problem to be solved with the correct algorithm. This echoes Kirschenbaum's concerns that players might 'absorb the semiotic field' of the game to the extent that the 'historical particulars are supplanted', or Galloway's insistence that historical video games have more to do with code than history.[147] Far from *pathos* being entirely antithetical to critical thinking, as Brecht suggests, it is likely that some element of *pathos*, used judiciously, is necessary to engage the dual dimensions of historical empathy. Affective engagement with a historical narrative is a potential way that the historical particulars can be reintroduced to an overly impersonal or algorithmic experience, ensuring a historical

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[145] Apperley, 'Modding the Historian's Code', 185-198.
[146] Tom McNamara, 'GDC 2004: Warren Spector Talks Game Narrative', *IGN*, March 26, 2004, http://uk.xbox.ign.com/articles/502/502409p1.html, cited in Chapman, *Digital Games*, 211.
[147] Galloway, *Gaming*, 95–103; Kirschenbaum, 'Contests for Meaning', 198-213.

pedagogy where the experiences of individuals are not swallowed up by structural and macro-analyses of history.

Action-adventure games and critical distance: the success and failure of Assassin's Creed

I will now turn my attention to genres other than simulation, such as adventure, action, and role-playing games. These games are known for being immersive, placing the player 'in the shoes' of historical figures and allowing them to inhabit the lived experience of a soldier landing on Omaha Beach or a warrior in feudal Japan. What sort of oscillation between immersion and critical distance is possible in these games, where feeling like you are 'really there' is a selling point?

As a case study, I will discuss one of the most famous action-adventure game franchises trading on history as its drawcard: the *Assassin's Creed* series. Beginning in 2007, spanning twelve main games and a number of spin-offs, the *Assassin's Creed* franchise markets itself as a way to 'play your way through history'.[148] The series traverses settings including the Italian Renaissance, Ancient Greece, the French Revolution, and Victorian-era London. These settings are recreated in meticulous and vivid detail, with stunning open-world historical cities and landscapes that the player can explore at will. The ability to become immersed in these historical simulacra is arguably the defining feature of the franchise, and the game is very conscious of its historical appeal. Each game includes encyclopaedic information on its historical settings and characters, sometimes even appearing in real-time over the gameplay. Later entries include a 'Discovery Tour' mode that removes the combat, missions, and other formal game-like elements to allow the player to immerse themselves even further in the historical recreations without being

[148] 'Assassin's Creed', *Ubisoft*, accessed April 4, 2022, https://www.ubisoft.com/en-au/game/assassins-creed.

drawn out or distracted by the gameplay. This mode also incorporates guided history tours by historians and has been made available as a standalone experience for classroom and educational use.

Despite these lavish historical settings and an explicit intention towards historical education, scholars have questioned the usefulness of *Assassin's Creed* as a tool for historical engagement or education. McCall, for example, has observed that these settings are ultimately 'simply a backdrop for the action' of the game. The procedural and formal features of the game consist of typical action gameplay features: the player must complete objectives, fight enemies, use stealth to infiltrate locations, and ultimately, of course, assassinate the (historical or fictional) target. Unlike strategy simulation games, these procedural systems do not model any historical systems, nor do they offer explanations of cause and effect or defensible historical arguments.[149] Furthermore, the historical narratives of each game are ultimately subsumed by the overall 'framing narrative' of an ongoing centuries-long war between two shadowy rival organisations, the Assassins and the Templars, laced with conspiratorial, mythological, and apocalyptic themes. This framing narrative arguably undermines the games' usefulness as a representation of history when conflicts such as the American Revolutionary War and the Crusades are reframed as simply another instance of the Assassin-versus-Templar power struggle. By most measures of critical thinking and historical consciousness, *Assassin's Creed* stays on the surface, delivering beautiful immersive worlds and large amounts of factual detail but little in the way of interpretation or argument.

Despite these weaknesses, there are some features of *Assassin's Creed's* design and framing that hold significant potential for helping to strike a balance between critical distance

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[149] Jeremiah McCall, *Gaming the Past: Using Video Games to Teach Secondary History* (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), 28.

and immersion. As mentioned earlier, one of the major marketing themes of the franchise, and a frequent object of critical praise, is the immersive quality of the historical environments. A search for 'immersion' in the *Assassin's Creed* subreddit (r/assassinscreed), for example, retrieves over 230 threads and many more comments.[150] Immersion is so often discussed on the subreddit that it has become a 'running joke' for users, with one post satirically recommending that users 'take a shot every time the word "immersion" is used on here'.[151] Online forum discussions between fans debate which of the games is the most realistic and immersive, with the most vivid and memorable simulated historical moments singled out for praise. One user fondly recounts their favourite immersive moment: 'AC2: In Florence, standing in the piazza with the Campanile and the incredible dome of the Santa Maria del Fiore – seeing all the beautiful coloured marble and the figures adorning the facade.'[152]

However, in the world of the game (and for the player), these immersive historical worlds are only accessible through a conspicuously foregrounded and decidedly 'immersion-breaking' futuristic framing mechanism. In the game's framing narrative, a hi-tech virtual reality machine called the Animus has been engineered with the ability to relive the memories of an individual's ancestors, also known as their 'genetic memories'. The rival present-day organisations of the Assassins and Templars use the Animus to dive into the experiences of Assassins from the past and discover esoteric knowledge of ancient artefacts to aid in their ongoing war. Each game in the Assassin's Creed franchise takes place both within and outside the memories of a specific historical Assassin. Each game thus has two player-controlled protagonists: the modern-day

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[150] r/assassinscreed, https://www.reddit.com/r/assassinscreed/, accessed 14 October 2022.
[151] u/Briankelly130, 'Take a shot', *Reddit,* November 14, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/assassinscreed/comments/9wztte/take_a_shot_everytime_the_word_immersion_is_used/.
[152] u/ WhiteWolfWhispers, 'Unity: Climbing along', *Reddit*, February 7, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/assassinscreed/comments/ezqltn/which_ac_game_gave_u_most_realistic_and/.

individual using the Animus, and the historical Assassin whose memories they are interacting with. The most important thing about this framing mechanism is that the player is never considered to be 'really there' in the world of past. They are always interacting with the past as a virtual reality reconstruction through a heavily foregrounded mediating technology. *Assassin's Creed* is a historical simulation within a simulation, with all the entailing metafictional and metahistorical implications.

Online discussion of the game reveals how the framing narrative and Animus mechanism work to distance and draw the player out of the immersive historical experience. Out of the posts mentioning 'immersion' in the *Assassin's Creed* subreddit, around 10% of the threads were created specifically to criticize the immersion-breaking formal features or modern storyline.[153] Immersion-breaking is a common enough topic on the subreddit that it has spawned several satirical threads parodying how often other users complain about it.[154] The breaks in the diegesis appear to be a point of frustration for many players. Murray's 'active creation of belief' may be seen in action here. Players want to feel as if they are 'actually there' and consciously try to immerse themselves in the historical setting and period. However, the modern framing narrative continually breaks the immersion and frustrates their attempts. The 'modern world' storyline has thus continually been one of the least popular aspects of the franchise.[155] One Reddit post, for example, complains that the series is 'not immersive' due to its 'tech mumbo-jumbo' and the way it intrudes into the historical gameplay. The poster references the requirement 'to climb to

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[153] This number was calculated based on posts that specifically criticize the modern storyline or the existence of the HUD/extradiegetic features, and excluded posts criticizing unsatisfying game mechanics or 'unrealistic' game elements, a frequent topic of immersion-related discussions on the subreddit.
[154] u/wvwildman, 'MY IMMERSION!!!!!', *Reddit*, November 16, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/assassinscreed/comments/7d6cpd/my_immersion/.
[155] Rob Dolan, 'Assassin's Creed: It's Time to End the Modern Day Storyline', *Gamerant*, April 15, 2020, https://gamerant.com/assassins-creed-ragnarok-modern-day-story-end/; Ben Kuchera, 'It's time to take the Animus out of Assassin's Creed', *Polygon*, October 3, 2018, https://www.polygon.com/2018/10/2/17926100/assassins-creed-odyssey-animus.

every tower to load my google maps and occasionally take off the "VR headset" that my in-game character is wearing'. A commenter on the post concurs that the best games of the series have the 'least modern world crap'.[156] Another similar thread contains several comments agreeing that the modern-day storyline is 'killing [the] immersion' in the game.[157]

Interestingly, however, the subreddit contains quite a few players who feel the opposite way and instead enjoy the modern-day storyline. In one popular thread, the original poster proclaimed: 'Loving Valhalla. But the modern day aspect of the games is, at this point, really immersion breaking, pointless and overall one of the worst gameplay ideas ever. They should get rid of it somehow, what are your thoughts?' This thread attracted over 300 comments from users discussing the original poster's stance, a testament to the divided opinions of fans on this topic and their eagerness to discuss it. Comments on the post are roughly even between those who appreciate and those who dislike the modern storyline.[158] Those in favour of the modern-day story feel that the simulation-within-a-simulation makes it paradoxically feel more realistic, since in 'real life' they cannot actually transport themselves into historical settings. Instead, they know they might be able to explore the past through virtual reality and reconstructed simulations. They therefore identify more strongly with the modern-day protagonist and recognize the distance between themselves and the historical figures they control.[159] The comments from these users highlight how the framing narrative of the Animus draws attention to the inaccessibility of the past and the mediated, constructed nature of all historical media.

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[156] u/csdead, 'Assassins Creed games are not immersive', *Reddit,* December 29, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/unpopularopinion/comments/aakb6i/assassins_creed_games_are_not_immersive/.
[157] u/[deleted], 'The "Modern Day" story that's shoehorned into each game is just killing the fun', *Reddit*, June 21, 2018, 'https://www.reddit.com/r/assassinscreed/comments/8sor99/the_modern_day_story_thats_shoehorned_into_each/
[158] u/Summer1Man, 'Loving Valhalla', *Reddit*, November 12, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/assassinscreed/comments/jsfpsb/loving_valhalla_but_the_modern_day_aspect_of_the/.
[159] u/Aftermath1231, 'Immersion is how real', *Reddit*, July 30, 2015, https://www.reddit.com/r/assassinscreed/comments/3f36lh/can_we_talk_ac_immersion/.

Fan and forum discussions have also highlighted how the HUD and visual elements of the Animus device intrude on the historical world and break their immersion. While playing through the historical portions of the game, the mediating presence of the Animus is constantly foregrounded through visual effects and design elements, especially in the earlier games in the series. A distinctive bright blue-white 'glitch' effect signals the constant workings of the Animus in the game diegesis. When the player character moves into a new area, for example, the environment 'loads' with the blue glitch animation, highlighting its digitally constructed nature. Elements in the game such as quest targets, significant locations, and interactive items are all coded with the same glitch effect. Intrusive sound effects signify the beginning and end point of time-sensitive missions. Whereas these formal HUD elements of games are typically accepted as part of the semiotic field of a regular game experience, in Assassin's Creed these extradiegetic features become diegetic thanks to the game's Animus conceit. They are used to highlight the fact that the historical events happening are recreations experienced through a simulation, not 'real events' as they actually were. They thus emphasise the distance between the player and the game, and between the player and the historical events represented.

As with the modern-day storyline, these intrusive formal elements attract criticism for disrupting the immersive historical experience. One post on a game forum describes the formal features as responsible for the game's 'immersion problem': 'There is nothing more frustrating in Origins for me, than wandering around the gorgeously created environments, than [sic] to see yellow markers above enemies [sic] heads, bird pop ups on screen, enemy outlines and transparent stealth notifications.' Users responding to this thread describe how they wish they could turn off the extradiegetic 'gunk' in order to further the illusion of immersion.[160] Players

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[160] 'Assassin's Creed has an immersion problem', *Resetera*, August 26, 2018, https://www.resetera.com/threads/assassin%E2%80%99s-creed-has-an-immersion-problem.64413/.

also give each other tips on how to make the game feel more immersive, a topic featured in roughly 18% of the threads on r/assassinscreed retrieved by a search for 'immersion'. Suggested strategies including turning off the HUD, tweaking the camera settings, dressing their characters in the most historically accurate clothing available, and changing the language to that of the game's respective location (for example, playing the Italian Renaissance-set games in Italian). A lengthy post on Steam also suggests ways to make the game more realistic and immersive, including selecting more 'realistic' weapons and abilities, pretending to 'sleep', and playing with no-HUD options.[161] In a critical opinion piece posted to gaming news website dualshockers.com, the author recognizes that the game is deliberately 'widening the eternal boundary between player and game' with its formal features. The author writes that the player is regularly accosted by an intrusive interface, which is evidence that the game 'loves reminding you of the construct it has placed you in'.[162] Other threads use language such as 'immersion breaking', being 'pulled out of the experience' and 'getting yanked out of my adventures'.[163]

It is worth considering why these formal features receive such negative feedback from players and critics in light of the fact that they are evidently effective at creating the distance necessary for historical thinking and reflection. One possibility is that it is due to expectations set up by game marketing and some level of confusion about the game's goal. Players do not want to be reminded that they are engaging in a mediated representation, because the promise and appeal of the game is that it will make them feel as if they are really experiencing the past. The fact that the storyline makes no deliberate meta-commentary on history or historical thinking may

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[161] Horsedancingwithcrow, 'Ways to make the game more immersive', *Steam*, April 22, 2020, https://steamcommunity.com/app/582160/discussions/0/2259061617873128677/.
[162] Justin Hutchinson, 'BabyGamer: Assassin's Creed II and the Nature of Immersion', *Dualshockers*, accessed April 04, 2022, https://www.dualshockers.com/babygamer-assassins-creed-ii-and-the-nature-of-immersion/.
[163] u/TheVangu4rd, 'Can we talk AC '"immersion?"', *Reddit*, July 30, 2015, https://www.reddit.com/r/assassinscreed/comments/3f36lh/can_we_talk_ac_immersion/.

contribute to this negative response. The player is pulled out of the experience but does not really understand why. It is possible that if the complex relationship between the player, the game, the Animus, and the historical simulation were foregrounded narratively, the player may appreciate the oscillation more. As the series currently stands, players do not see the 'point' of the modern storyline, and thus the oscillation between the historical actor and the modern self is not utilised to its fullest extent. This is supported by comments on the r/assassinscreed subreddit in which users argue the backlash against the modern storyline is due to its poor implementation and bad writing, not the existence of a modern setting itself. For example, most comments on a 2022 announcement that the next franchise instalment will remove the modern-day storyline express disappointment that the game writers did not try harder to improve the story's execution.[164]

It is clear that, although *Assassin's Creed* aims to immerse players in historical settings, many elements of the game deliberately undermine the immersive experience. One Reddit comment encapsulates the metahistorical and distanced nature of the franchise well. Responding to criticism about the game's non-immersive modern-day storyline, the user writes: 'Nobody denies that the historical part of AC is always the 'meat' of the game, but the *story* has always been about someone in the present playing/watching said story.' This user thus identifies the uniquely metahistorical nature of the franchise: it is not about the past, but about how people in the present interact with the past. However, the series writers fail to capitalize on the immense potential for encouraging historical thinking and a critical historical consciousness. The modern-day storyline has been clumsy and poorly executed for many installations, and has been called 'confusing', 'messy', and 'outlandish' by critics.[165] It has long since deviated from any sort of

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[164] u/shancake1, 'Assassin's Creed Mirage Will Have No Modern Day Segments', *Reddit*, September 11, 2022, https://www.reddit.com/r/assassinscreed/comments/xb17xk/assassins_creed_mirage_will_have_no_modern_day/.
[165] Gene Park, 'How 'Assassin's Creed Valhalla' makes sense of stories about Vikings, pirates and George Washington', *The Washington Post*, January 1, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-

political or ideological statement that could have been made about the war between the Assassins and the Templars. The story has instead focused on mythological and fantasy themes based around end-of-days prophecies and an ancient godlike precursor race. One could consider it a shame that the franchise has created such a unique and original metahistorical device for exploring the nature of historical representation, memory, and simulation, and yet has not utilised it to say anything especially meaningful or reflective about the histories it engages with. Nevertheless, the series is an instructive example of an adventure game that need not be overly immersive or strive for the illusion of unmediated access to the past and what it was 'really like'. In avoiding such pitfalls, it draws attention to its constructed and mediated nature as a historical representation. It can cause players to reflect on the relationship between the present and the past. The game therefore makes a significant step towards achieving what Rosenstone insists is essential for critical historical engagement: his assertion that 'only if the reconstruction of the past itself is made the object of inquiry can the past be seen in a critical light'.[166] Despite its narrative failings, *Assassin's Creed* is able to foreground the reconstruction of the past through its formal features.

Conclusion

Video games cannot be a truly immersive and unmediated 'window' onto the past. Nor can they enable the player to experience the same emotions that historical actors experienced. But this is an advantage, not a failing. Sophisticated historical knowledge, empathy, and understanding cannot be produced by works that merely create an illusion of unmediated access to the past.

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games/reviews/assassins-creed-valhalla-lore/; Zack Zwiezen, 'Let's Recap The Messy Modern-Day Storyline Of Assassin's Creed', *Kotaku*, November 10, 2020, https://www.kotaku.com.au/2020/11/lets-recap-the-messy-modern-day-storyline-of-assassins-creed/.

[166] Rosenstone, *Visions*, 192.

Historical understanding also cannot be produced by merely emotion-matching or overidentifying with the experiences of past actors. As outlined above, historical empathy requires a two-pronged approach that engages affect and cognition, and recognizes similarity and difference. Landsberg's theory of oscillation provides a useful and promising model for how digital media can best promote this dual-dimensional conceptualization of historical empathy.

Due to the 'half-real' status of games, they are not solely narrative objects or solely procedural objects, but instead consist of both. They include narrative history, largely operating on the affective level, and ludic history, largely operating on the cognitive level (though there is overlap). Video games are thus able to engage players with historical experiences on both the cognitive and affective level simultaneously. By highlighting the distance between the player and the virtual world, games can also facilitate the acknowledgment of the present-ness of the self that is key to historical understanding. Games that utilize the formal properties of their medium to emphasise the distance between the player and the game, such as those detailed in *Assassin's Creed,* can highlight the constructed and mediated nature of all historical experience while still maintaining mass popular appeal.

CHAPTER TWO

EPISTEMOLOGIES AND LUDOHISTORIOGRAPHIES

Chapter Outline

This chapter investigates how the dynamic, multivalent, and interactive aspects of video games can engage with deconstructionist historical epistemologies and give players access to historical practice. Here, I build my analysis upon the work done by historical theorists in deconstructing ideas of historical truth, fact, hegemonic perspectives, and linear narratives. I argue that games can effectively subvert master narratives and hegemonic perspectives due to their complex, dynamic, non-linear forms. Games with 'multiform stories' can contain multiple differing and potentially conflicting narratives simultaneously without needing to resolve into a single ending or explanation. They can thereby engage with an open-ended and multivalent historical epistemology. Interactive story structures can allow players to interrogate ideas of fixity, truth, and evidence, introducing players to some of the tools and concepts of professional historians.

In this chapter, I look at a series of case studies. The first is *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* (2019), an interactive counterfactual narrative that allows players to experiment with chains of historical causation. The second is *Paradise Killer* (2020), an investigation-based game that subverts ideas of a single discoverable truth through its open, non-linear story structure and lack of a win/fail state. I then analyse a 'ludohistoriographical game' titled *Detritus: A History Book* (2019), a short text-based interactive game that dramatizes the process of constructing historical narratives. Finally, I discuss *Time Historians* (2019), a game that seeks to engage deconstructionist historical epistemologies by exploring ideas of fact and consensus. I propose that these games allow players to engage in the processes of 'historying' for themselves.

Bridging ludic and academic histories

Striking a balance between critical distance and immersion is only one of the challenges facing historical media. Another challenge lies in the way that works of historical fiction tend to reinforce the outdated notion of a hegemonic 'Grand Narrative' of history. Robert Rosenstone has written that the 'most disturbing thing' about filmic history is its tendency to 'compress the past into a closed world by telling a single, linear story with essentially a single interpretation'. There are several epistemological problems with this strategy. According to Rosenstone, it 'denies historical alternatives, does away with complexities of motivation or causation, and banishes all subtlety from the world of history'.[1] Rosenstone posits postmodernist film as a way of overcoming this linearity, much like he does for overcoming the illusion of unmediation, as discussed in the previous chapter. I suggest that videogames can similarly overcome the overly singular histories that emerge in many works of popular historical media. This chapter will address how ludic history is particularly suited to deconstructionist and postmodernist historical epistemologies that emphasise the multiplicity of historical narratives, perspectives, and the nature of historical knowledge itself. I aim to investigate how games can explore these themes which are generally the domain of the professional historian or theorist of historical philosophy.

Due to their interactive, flexible, and open nature, games are an ideal medium for exploring the slipperiness of history as a practice and as a way of knowing the past. Rather than impressing upon audiences a single story or deterministic narrative of history, games have the potential to explore the multiple perspectives, interpretations, and complexities of contemporary approaches to history. In games, multiple stories do not have to resolve into a single coherent

[1] Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 22.

narrative. Games can encourage players to compare, interrogate, and evaluate competing histories. Allowing players to explore the multiplicities of the past could be a way of encouraging sophisticated, critical historical thinking in a mass audience. By exposing audiences to the idea that an account that seems truthful may not be the only truth, historical practitioners can encourage a critical, evaluative, and sceptical approach to historical narratives. In this way, games might become one method of bringing popular history discourses and practices closer to those of scholarly history.

I do not argue that conventional linear narratives are incapable of showing the ambiguity and complexity of historical facts and interpretations. Interactive stories are simply another new and engaging method of exploring these themes, with the advantage that the player can play with alternative options at their own pace and volition. I do not intend to set different forms of historical communication against each other or argue one form is objectively 'better' than another. My goal is to investigate potential affinities between interactive digital media and specific historical philosophies. In order to demonstrate these affinities, I first outline some postmodernist and deconstructionist ideas that interrogate ideas of objectivity, truth, and unifying narratives. These theories are often presented in a polemical format and can appear to set up binary oppositions between what might be called 'traditional' history and postmodern philosophy. In discussing these ideas, I do not aim to endorse polemicism or make any statements about the practice of academic historians. I only wish to compare two types of historical philosophy on a theoretical level: a postmodernist and deconstructionist paradigm, and what some theorists might call a 'traditional' or 'normative' historical paradigm. After establishing some key features of the deconstructionist paradigm, I discuss a series of video game case studies to evaluate how well they communicate this style of historical thinking. I

suggest that historical media designed with some of these philosophical and epistemological approaches in mind can engage broader audiences with sophisticated scholarly thinking skills. I acknowledge some readers may not be convinced by ideas relating to the end of Grand Narratives, the uncertain ontology of 'truth', and the slipperiness of facts. However, I hope that for such readers, this chapter nonetheless demonstrates that historical games can be conducive to many types of historical thinking and practice. The chapter focuses on some approaches which have not commonly been considered the domain of popular entertainment media up until now.

The end of the Great Story: postmodern approaches to history

The idea of a single 'grand narrative' of history has been challenged by the postmodern and literary turn in the humanities. Jean-François Lyotard's 1979 work *The Postmodern Condition* espoused an 'incredulity towards metanarratives' in the humanities and social sciences and challenged the notion of totalizing narratives explaining history.[2] Historians and theorists have built on these ideas to interrogate the fictive and emplotted nature of historical narratives, and the impossibility of knowing the past 'as it really was'. These discussions especially proliferated in the 1990s as historians grappled with a perceived historiographical fragmentation. Frequently, these discourses became polemical or defensive, as historians wrote of 'objectivity in crisis' and existential threats to the discipline (although these supposed 'crises' may arguably have been more imagined than actual).[3]

Central themes of this debate included the constructed nature of historical narratives and the lack of a coherent objective past. Robert Berkhofer argued that, after the postmodern turn in

[2] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), xxiv.
[3] Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

history, ‘no longer can any single master interpretive code be privileged over another as if one were somehow more correspondent to the (a?) “real” past than another’.[4] The recognition of the constructed nature of historical narratives, as theorized by scholars such as Alan Munslow and Hayden White, was summarised neatly by Frank Ankersmit and Hans Kellner in *A New Philosophy of History* (1995): ‘Historical events, unlike fictional plots with their tailor-made events, do not in themselves take the form of an “untold story” with a fixed beginning-middle-end structure waiting to be transcribed. It is up to the historians themselves, therefore, to devise beginnings and ends’.[5] An understanding of history as fictive was often situated alongside questions about the overall coherence of history, or whether there can exist conceptually a single universal human history. Alan Megill outlined four major theoretical approaches towards this question. The first three attitudes are (1) that there is a single coherent history that can be told now, (2) that there is a single coherent history that can be told after further research, and (3) that there is a single coherent history but it can never be satisfactorily told. The fourth attitude, however, casts doubt on the presumption of coherence underpinning the first three attitudes, and asserts that ‘a responsible historiography will call the assumption of a single History into question’.[6]

It is important to acknowledge that this latter historical epistemology goes beyond the acknowledgement of multiple interpretations of a ‘Great Past’ and instead engages with the uncertain ontology of historical fact itself. Berkhofer highlights the distinction between these two conceptual approaches, stating that the assumption of coherence means ‘a plurality of

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[4] Robert F. Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 72.
[5] Frank R. Ankersmit and Hans Kellner, eds., *A New Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 128.
[6] Allan Megill, ‘“Grand Narrative”’ And The Discipline of History’, in *A New Philosophy*, eds. Ankersmit and Kellner, 151-163.

interpretations in practice never implies a plurality of (hi)stories, let alone a plurality of pasts'. The idea that 'multiple Great Stories and Great Pasts are inconceivable' assumes that historical facts are fixed and reliable, already existing in the world and waiting to be discovered and interpreted by the historian. This attitude, however, according to Berkhofer, obscures the process of how sources become 'evidence' during the process of historical inquiry. Rather than deifying 'the facts', Berkhofer asserts that they are insufficient in themselves as the basis for historical knowledge: 'the problem with historical facts, as with histories themselves, is that they are constructions and interpretations of the past. Evidence is not fact until given meaning in accordance with some framework or perspective.' The concept of a 'fact' itself therefore emerges as 'slippery and vague' alongside the understanding that 'narratives create their facts as much as facts create the narrative'. Ultimately, Berkhofer calls for an acknowledgement that historical interpretations cannot be 'tested against some coercive, singular structure of facts'. He instead argues that 'no set of facts can go unstructured or unorganised according to some mode of representation'.[7] Although professional historians such as Berkhofer are aware of the ontological slipperiness of facts, such a concept rarely extends into popular historical media. Later in this chapter, I will discuss three games that play with the concept of 'fact': *Paradise Killer, Detritus,* and *Time Historians.*

The idea of a single best or correct history has also been destabilised by the increasing diversification of the discipline into multiculturalism and counter-hegemonic narratives. This includes the incorporation of previously excluded people and objects of study into the historical discipline. The proliferation of feminist, postcolonialist, and LGBTQI+ histories in the latter half of the twentieth century can be considered part of this phenomenon. Berkhofer argues that

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[7] Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story,* 50-71.

multiculturalism 'challenges the whole idea of a single best or right Great Story'. He has subsequently advocated for a 'new way of narrativizing the past', suggesting that future histories might 'forgo customary closure through holism, continuity and consistency of authorship' in order to achieve greater polyvocality and multiculturalism.[8] Embracing such a philosophy leads to a historical practice that allows multiple conflicting perspectives to sit beside each other, rather than trying to reconcile them into a single story as part of a single grand unifying historical project. As this chapter will argue, achieving this effect is another potential epistemological strength of digital and ludic histories. Games could help channel the increasing polyvocality and multiculturalism of scholarly histories into an accessible popular medium.

One might argue that the plurality, diversity, and vastness of historiography makes critiquing the single historian's claim to authority an irrelevant task. This is true within the discipline of history itself because professional historians are trained to approach the ocean of interpretations with a critical, sceptical, and evaluative eye. The academic discipline has long since moved on from Rankean history, and few historians now claim to tell authoritative accounts of the past. However, my concern in this thesis is not with how historians receive historical texts, but how the general public and non-specialist audiences engage with historical concepts and thinking skills. Popular works of history and historical fiction including documentaries, films, and video games often advance a single authoritative view of the past or claim to show history 'as it really happened'. Non-specialist audiences are generally not trained to evaluate competing accounts of the past or approach historical truth-claims with a critical eye. I suggest that works encouraging a critical approach to competing narratives could seed this historical thinking skill in the audiences of popular historical media.

[8] Robert F. Berkhofer, 'A Point of View on Viewpoints in Historical Practice', in *A New Philosophy,* eds. Ankersmit and Kellner, 191.

The recognition of the multiplicity of history is one way that public historical work can move away from teleological views of the past. Historical determinism has dominated much of Western thought, from Christian theology through to Enlightenment ideals of scientific materialism, and the totalising philosophical accounts of human history developed by Hegel and Marx.[9] Viewing history through the lens of a coherent and unified grand narrative or ideological paradigm 'imposes a notion of teleological inevitability that fails to acknowledge past contingencies'.[10] The teleological assumption inherent in such a historical philosophy is that 'the present was always the end-point (and implicitly the only possible end-point) of the historian's chosen narrative'. However, as Niall Ferguson argues, history written this way 'might as well be written backwards'.[11] Alternative possibilities are closed off, the plurality of human choice and action is obscured, and the complex and unpredictable contingencies of the past are 'homogenized into a singularity in hindsight'.[12] An ongoing challenge for historians, therefore, is to construct history so that the way things happened is not implied to have been the *only* possible way that they could have happened. Such a challenge has rarely been taken up by those adapting historical works into popular media forms. This is especially true of the film and video game industries, where historians are more likely to be consulted for fact-checking or visual references rather than fundamental questions about interpretation and multivocality. In this chapter, I will focus on how the multiplicitous narratives and counterfactual simulativeness of digital games can mitigate the linear, singular, and teleological tendencies of much popular historical media.

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[9] Niall Ferguson, *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (London: Picador, 1997), 20-43.
[10] Tom Apperley, 'Modding the Historians' Code: Historical Verisimilitude and the Counterfactual Imagination', in *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, eds. Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B.R. Elliott (New York, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 189-90.
[11] Ferguson, *Virtual History,* 67.
[12] Apperley, 'Modding the Historian's Code', 189.

Games and historical epistemologies

The multiplicity inherent in ludic history has been alluded to by a number of theorists, but rarely discussed in depth or analysed in practice. Awareness of the fundamentally different nature of interactive digital storytelling can be traced back to analysis of early hypertext narrative and the nascent era of game studies. In *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997)*,* Janet Murray discusses games' encyclopaedic ability to contain vast amounts of information digitally. This capability enables games to 'tell stories from multiple vantage points and to offer intersecting stories that form a dense and wide-spreading web'.[13] She calls games with multiple narratives 'multiform stories'. Multiform stories, according to Murray, 'allow us to hold in our minds at the same time multiple contradictory alternatives'. These multiple stories can contradict each other in terms of perspective, interpretation, or even claims to historical truth. In some cases, these stories can be played in any order, allowing the player to arrange and re-arrange them in their attempts to piece together the narrative. Referencing the Akira Kurosawa film *Rashomon* (1950) and Milorad Pavic's novel *Dictionary of the Khazars* (1988), Murray observes that, in multiform games, 'the fragmentation of the story structure represents patterns of historical fragmentation, and the patterns of reading echo the characters' efforts to reconstruct the past in order to restore a lost coherence'.[14] For Murray, a potential disadvantage of this storytelling format is the possibility for audiences to be left 'wondering which of the several endpoints is *the* end and how they can know if they have seen everything there is to see'.[15] However, this may be an advantage for historians wishing to highlight the complexity and slipperiness of history. We know that there is no such thing as 'the (finite) end' of history, and we are aware that we can never comprehend

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[13] Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 87.
[14] Murray, *Hamlet*, 30-38.
[15] Murray, *Hamlet*, 87.

everything there is to comprehend. The connection to the postmodern historical epistemologies discussed in the previous section is evident here. Multiform narratives, by their very nature, can emphasise and examine these aspects of historical thinking.

As the field of game studies has developed, ideas of multiplicity in historical representation have been applied to historical video games. In 2005, William Uricchio discussed this topic in his influential book chapter in the *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*. Although some of his observations may seem dated or polemical, they are important as a landmark in the early game studies landscape. Uricchio argued that in historical games, 'history in the Rankean sense … is subverted' in favour of 'an insistence on history as a multivalent process subject to many different possibilities, interpretations, and outcomes'. Due to the flexible and interactive nature of games, they 'subvert the project of consolidation and certainty' of Rankean historical philosophy'. Uricchio argued that the ability to interact with digital historical works challenges notions of 'fact' and 'fixity', instead exploring the 'historically inconsistent and ludic'.[16] Although historians have long abandoned Rankean history in professional work, Uricchio's chapter was one of the first instances acknowledging how such an approach was achievable in digital games.

Since Uricchio's work, other historical games studies scholars have built on the connections between historical games and poststructuralist, postmodernist, and multiplicitous historical epistemologies. For example, Thomas Apperley argues that games can present postmodernist, anti-teleological histories that emphasise historical contingencies.[17] Harrison Gish argues that games communicate poststructuralist histories that 'call fixed determinist narratives

[16] William Uricchio, 'Simulation, History, and Computer Games', in *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*, eds. Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 327-333.
[17] Apperley, 'Modding the Historian's Code', 189.

into question'.[18] McCall states that history-as-master-narrative is undermined by the 'open-ended flexibility of simulation games'.[19] Kevin Schut observes that a player of a historical game can 'redo' and change the ludic historical narrative. The act of play therefore creates possibilities for non-linear and dynamic versions of history.[20] This is not to say that games are better at history than books or films, but simply that they have traits that lend themselves to communicating certain historical epistemologies and approaches. Some scholars have begun to experiment with game design based on these scholarly historical epistemologies. In her thesis on historiographical game design, Jessica Tompkins bases her game development process on the principle that 'historiographic game design acknowledges the multiplicities of history and embraces multiple interpretations based on player decisions and outcomes'.[21]

Adam Chapman's book *Digital Games as History* (2016), an important text discussed earlier in this thesis, further develops and articulates theories of ludic historical epistemology. Chapman writes that although digital games are not completely open devices, the act of 'playful doing' in games produces an inherent narrative multiplicity where different courses of gameplay action and play styles create different narratives.[22] In some reconstructionist-style games with deterministic story structures and strong linear framing narratives, there can be a problematic emphasis on a 'conservative teleological grand narrative of history' that erases historical contingencies. Such games tend to espouse the single, closed historical world that denies

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[18] Harrison Gish, 'Playing the Second World War: *Call of Duty* and the telling of history', *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture* 4, no. 2 (2010): 167-180.
[19] Jeremiah McCall, 'Teaching History With Digital Historical Games: An Introduction to the Field and Best Practices', *Simulation and Gaming* 47, no. 4 (2016): 527.
[20] Kevin Schut, 'Strategic simulations and our past: The bias of computer games in the presentation of history', *Games and Culture* 2, no. 3 (2007): 213-235.
[21] Jessica E. Tompkins, 'Playing at history: "Resurrection Man" and historiographic game design' (Dissertation, M.A., University of South Carolina: ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2014), 27.
[22] Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice* (Taylor and Francis: 2016), 33.

alternative possibilities decried by Rosenstone in conventional historical film. However, games with more open story structures allow players some freedom in arranging the story elements and choosing the emplotment genre. According to Chapman, these games can have 'varying (for example *L.A. Noire, Red Dead Redemption*) and even competing (for example *Fallout, Jade Empire, Choice of Broadsides*) framing narratives that run against interpretations of historical processes as linear'.[23] They can therefore engage with constructionist and deconstructionist historical epistemologies.

Open-ontological strategy and simulation games often have multiple or very weak gameplay goals, leaving room for the player to experiment with the ludonarrative and introduce their own historical goals. Such player-created goals can be described as extratelic, meaning they are not inherent or already programmed into the game. Some games, such as *Civilization* (1991-), *Making History* (2007-), and *Total War* (2000-) allow the player to ignore historical goals by continuing to play past the point of the narrative's predetermined end point. Chapman argues this can deny the 'climactic catharsis' that Brecht argued made audiences 'complacent and less critical', and instead gives them the ability to function 'as an experimental historical narrative playground'. Chapman therefore states that, in historical games, 'removing endings can be seen to position history as an open-ended process, denying the teleological pressure that narrative closure exerts over the past, making emplotment an uncertain and potentially unfinished player led process that denies a final genre, and thus ultimate meaning, for the past'.[24] I will later discuss the game *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* as a case study that embodies Chapman's arguments about the anti-teleological nature of multiple end points in historical gaming.

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[23] Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, 150.
[24] Chapman, *Digital Games,* 206-217.

Digital ludic histories that allow for multiplicity and flexibility can destabilise the coherency and hegemony of the historical master narrative. In the article ‘Playing with History: Collective Memory, National Trauma, and Dark Tourism in Virtual Reality Docugames’ (2018), Marina Hassapopoulou investigates the historically complex and multiplicitous representation of a site of national trauma in the *Chernobyl VR Project* (2016). Her observations on the layered and malleable nature of the game’s exploration of the Chernobyl disaster are worth repeating here, as they provide an example of the sort of complex critical epistemology that interactive histories can produce. *Chernobyl VR Project* presents what Hassapopoulou calls a ‘composite esthetic’ made up of many overlaid and shifting representations including archival images, 360-degree imagery, augmented reality, animation, and more. These shifting modalities and temporalities are ‘conspicuously fragmentary’, and as a result, ‘are in a state of perpetual spatiotemporal ambiguity that complicates their ontology as mere representations of the real’. The ‘uncertain ontology’ of the images in the game reflects both the lack of first-hand documentation of the Chernobyl disaster and the difficulty of communicating historical trauma. Users navigating the interactive layered representations become aware that they are in a slippery, complex, incomplete attempt to grasp the Chernobyl disaster, rather than falling into illusions of totality or definitive mastery. As a result, the game ‘becomes more of a reflexive, inconclusive interrogation of historiographical processes than a deterministic historical account’.[25] This supports Hassapopoulou’s, and my own, assertion that interactive docugames can ‘create malleable histories that affectively challenge monolithic understandings of the past’ through ‘experimental, visceral, and multimodal’ history.[26]

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[25] Marina Hassapopoulou, ‘Playing with History: Collective Memory, National Trauma, and Dark Tourism in Virtual Reality Docugames’, *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 16, no. 4 (2018): 377-378

[26] Hassapopoulou, ‘Playing with History’, 365.

The problem of code: flexible or fixed?

Although there is a consensus that ludic history is inherently open-ended and multiplicitous, there are some theorists who believe that this is not the case. It is critical to address these arguments in order to understand fully the epistemological implications of history constructed with computer code. There have been suggestions that the algorithmic and procedural nature of games makes history overly rigid, simplified, and systematized. For example, although Schut is optimistic about the value of historical games and their ability to portray the 'indeterminacy of history', he also criticizes the advancement of an overly systematic history as a major weakness of historical games. Because elements of a video game must be constructed in code (which is fixed, precise, and computational), people and units in historical games tend to be limited to 'highly defined' specific roles. In real life, people are complex and may adopt a variety of shifting roles and identities, but in games like *Total War* and *Civilization*, they tend to be known by simplified parameters only: infantry, cavalry, the great leader, and so on. These units behave in specific, predetermined ways constrained by the boundaries of their code. Time and causality are also represented as systematic. The progression of time is abstracted and rule-bound, and historical development is presented as 'incremental and sequential'. Schut also points out that it is difficult to represent unpredictable events of chance in mathematical code. As an example, he explains that 'few could have predicted … that a lightning storm would have been responsible for Martin Luther becoming a monk'. Consequently, it would be impossible to model this occurrence systematically in a historical simulation.[27] Schut's concerns about highly rigid, fixed, and simplified representations of history appear to contradict notions of the slipperiness and flexibility of ludic history.

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[27] Schut, 'Strategic simulations', 225-6.

However, Schut's arguments are focused on the single specific genre of grand strategy games, and his analysis treats games as though they only consist of rules. However, as outlined by Jesper Juul and elaborated on in Chapter One, games are made up of both rules and fiction. They are 'half-real'. Players do not derive a game's meaning solely from its procedural rhetoric, as Schut's argument might imply. Players also derive meaning from the combination of narrative, mechanics, sound design, genre conventions, paratextual materials such as game manuals and guidebooks, and so on. Juul argues that although game algorithms and rules must be definite and exact, 'game fiction is ambiguous, optional, and imagined by the player in uncontrollable and unpredictable ways'.[28] In other words, game fiction and game code are often experienced and interpreted differently. There are ways to make the historical narrative suitably contingent, anti-teleological and unpredictable even if the code does not lend itself to this task. To provide an example using Schut's hypothetical Martin Luther scenario: we can see that it may, admittedly, be difficult (but likely not impossible) to design an algorithm that leads a lightning storm to cause Martin Luther to become a monk. However, it is easy to represent such singular and unique events in framing narratives, game cutscenes and game fiction. Particularly when examining less rule-driven genres such as action-adventure games, there is often much more focus on framing narrative and complex character development. The interplay of rules and fiction allow for multiplicities of meaning to emerge from layered tensions between and within the procedural rhetoric and narrative devices of games.

Multiple, nuanced, and even competing meanings can arise from a single game representation depending on which fictional layer(s) are being assessed. Emil Lundedal Hammar's detailed analysis of the depiction of slavery in *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry* (2013)

[28] Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 62, 162

provides a relevant example. Hammar argues that, on one level of interpretation, the game is a powerfully cathartic counter-hegemonic gameplay experience for Black audiences due to its slave-freeing mechanic and its Black protagonist. On another level, the player's lack of narrative agency to dismantle the slave trade can be read as a perpetuation of hegemonic historical narratives. Simultaneously, it could be read as a procedural argument about the tenacity of the structures of slavery and oppression. Violence is the only player affordance for combating slavery, mechanically erasing other avenues of action such a diplomacy and empathy. This design choice could also make an argument about the limitations of individual acts of resistance in oppressive structures. At the same time, the procedural function of the slave units potentially trivialises the traumatic history of slavery, namely in the way the game 'instrumentalises and quantifies the liberation of slaves as a resource to upgrade protagonist Adéwalé's mechanical abilities'.[29] These are only a small selection of the varied and conflicting ideas posed by *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry* in Hammar's analysis. The multiple ludohistorical meanings within the game could potentially indicate confusion in the design and goals of the *Assassin's Creed* development team. However, it also demonstrates the complex ways in which games can allow competing interpretations and histories to sit side by side, and how the input of the player can further introduce unpredictable meanings and interpretations to the ludic historical text.

Alexander Galloway's critiques of the systemic nature of ludic history are directed towards the nature of the medium itself, raising fundamental questions about the suitability of code-as-history. Galloway has argued that the coded algorithmic structure of ludic history represents an 'absence of history altogether', rather than a way to represent it. To Galloway, games cannot be history because they are transcoded into fixed mathematical models, and history

[29] Emil Lundedal Hammar, 'Counter-Hegemonic Commemorative Play: Marginalized Pasts and the Politics of Memory in the Digital Game Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry', *Rethinking History* 21, no. 3 (2017): 372–395.

cannot be understood through a fixed mathematical formula. He argues that playing a simulation game does not teach history, but rather teaches the player how to interact with and master an algorithmic computer system. Players are not 'doing history' but are instead enacting 'inert code'. Essentially, playing a historical game takes one 'away from reality toward abstraction, away from history toward code'. [30] For example, playing *Age of Empires* (1997) does not teach the player about how civilizations and technology progress throughout the ages, but rather where to click, when, and at what times in order to give their units the correct instructions and solve the strategic mathematical puzzles of the game's code.

However, the existing body of literature on ludic and procedural rhetoric provides strong support for Chapman's counter-assertion that an 'algorithm can be history'. [31] Chapman mounts a compelling defence against Galloway's criticisms, pointing out that the problems Galloway outlines are inherent to *all* historical representation, including books. [32] A game is no less historical because it consists of 'inert code' than a book is unhistorical because it consists of unchanging words already written by the author. Moreover, as outlined above, games are made up of fiction *and* code, and Galloway's arguments discount the complexity and nuance offered by the narrative and fictional (or in our case, the non-fictional) layers of gamic representation.

The antiwar newsgame, *September 12* (2003), is an example of how procedural rhetoric can be understood on a level beyond its literal mathematical encoding. Although a political rather than historical game, *September 12*'s method of communicating its message provides a simple counterexample to Galloway's argument. *September 12*'s stated aim is to expose the 'futility of the US-led War on Terror' through the 'timeless maxim' that 'violence begets more

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[30] Alexander Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 95–103.
[31] Adam Chapman, 'Is Sid Meier's *Civilization* History?', *Rethinking History* 17, no. 3 (2013): 312-332.
[32] Chapman, *Digital Games*, 67.

violence'.[33] It communicates this argument through procedural rhetorical techniques. In the game, the player controls a weapon reticule pointing down at an ambiguously Middle Eastern town. The goal is to shoot and kill terrorists, but 'collateral damage' – the deaths of civilians – is inevitable. Mourners who gather around a dead civilian soon turn into terrorists themselves, and this continues until the town is overrun with terrorists. If this were to be described in terms of its mathematical model, one might say that for every one civilian killed, between two and five terrorists are generated. In computer code, this is constructed as a causal relationship: (if) 1 civilian killed, (then) 2-5 terrorists generated. If taken at literal face value, this is an extremely oversimplified rule that cannot be said to reflect the complexities of historical cause and effect. There will never be a real-life circumstance where exactly 2-5 new terrorists are automatically created for every one civilian casualty, regardless of other circumstances or influencing factors.

However, players do not solely register the literal mathematical coding of a game when playing it. As indicated above, the meaning of a ludic experience emerges from a multitude of layered signifiers and rhetorical devices. Players can understand and interpret the meaning of the abstracted procedural argument that is communicated. In this case, the argument is that US-led military actions in the Middle East have caused suffering and increased radicalization due to collateral damage. The metaphorical argument is legible to the player and can be applied to real-world situations even if its mathematical execution is not literally an accurate representation of reality. It does not matter that 2-5 terrorists are not generated for every 1 casualty in real life, because this is merely a simplified procedural abstraction of a complex argument. Likewise, Chapman and other authors have observed that words are always an abstraction of the messiness

[33] 'September 12th: a toy world', accessed April 11, 2022, https://www.gamesforchange.org/game/september-12th-a-toy-world/.

and complexity of historical action.[34] This sort of abstraction is an essential and unavoidable tool of the historian representing the past. According to Frank Ankersmit, any work of history is an abstraction of the daily reality of the past.[35] Therefore, Galloway's critique, although compelling in theory, does not hold up in practice when games are understood as rhetorical devices and abstractions rather than literal representations of reality. It is apparent that even within the rigidity and fixed computational models of game code, there is ample room for the fiction and code to interact in a way that conveys comprehensible arguments. Applied to history, these techniques can be used so that players remain cognizant of the incomplete, changing, and flexible nature of historical narratives.

Case studies: Fire Emblem: Three Houses, Paradise Killer, Detritus*, and* Time Historians

One of the most potent advantages of the slipperiness and multiplicity of history games is their ability to encourage gamers to do their own 'historying'. 'Historying' is Chapman's term for engaging audiences in tools, practices, and processes of the historian.[36] The case studies I examine will demonstrate how multiplicitous interactive historical narratives open space for 'historying' practices. Although scholarly literature in historical game studies has emphasised the complex epistemologies and discourses possible in ludic history, the field is lacking detailed examination of case studies. Close reading of games that engage in this mode of ludic history is necessary to understand where the limitations and possibilities may lie. The following section will begin by analysing non-historical games that have multiple paths and perspectives that resist consolidation or resolution into a single coherent story. I will then examine to what extent this

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[34] Chapman, *Digital Games,* 192.
[35] Frank Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth and Reference in Historical Representation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 6.
[36] Chapman, *Digital Games,* 163-192.

has played out in history games so far and how historiographically sophisticated they are or have the potential to be. Four main case studies will be examined in this section: medieval fantasy with branching storylines *Fire Emblem: Three Houses*, postmodernist murder mystery *Paradise Killer*, text-based historiographical indie game *Detritus*, and *Time Historians*, a scholarly attempt at a meta-historiographical game. Although the former two games are not historical, I argue their techniques and approaches to key conceptual issues are highly instructive and could be applied with ease to historical gaming. *Paradise Killer* particularly demands discussion since no historical game thus far has approached concepts of fact and truth in quite the same way.

Multiform stories and branching narratives

Since the early days of text-based adventure games, choice-based branching narratives (what Murray calls 'multiform stories') have been a major drawcard for the story-focused gamer. Companies such as Bioware (*Mass Effect, Dragon Age, Baldur's Gate, Jade Empire*), Quantic Dream (*Heavy Rain, Detroit: Become Human*) and Telltale Games (*The Walking Dead, The Wolf Among Us*) have become especially well-known for developing interactive narrative games that unfold differently based on the player's actions and decisions. *Black Mirror's* 'Bandersnatch' episode (2018) was a recent attempt to recreate this effect in live-action television. Games like *Civilization* can also be considered a type of multiform story, since each playthrough results in a different narrative as a result of different player decisions.

One of the major possibilities of multiform stories is their ability to explore historical counterfactuals. Counterfactual history itself is controversial and its value is often debated. E.H. Carr famously dismissed counterfactual musings as 'parlour games' and 'red herrings'.[37]

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[37] Ferguson, *Virtual History,* 4-5.

However, even Carr himself indulged in counterfactual lines of thinking in his own historical works. To address the question of whether Stalin's Terror in 1930s Soviet Russia was a direct outcome of the 1917 Bolshevik revolution or a distinct break from it, Carr asks whether the outcome of Soviet history would have been different had Lenin lived longer. He ultimately concludes that Soviet history would have been different if Lenin lived, indicating Stalin's Terror was the result of a discontinuity with Lenin's leadership.[38] It is evident that, in order to answer the question of what impact Lenin's death had on the course of the Soviet Union, one must ask what might have happened had he lived. Such a line of inquiry requires a form of counterfactual thinking.

I will not linger further on the controversies over counterfactuals, as these debates have been covered extensively elsewhere.[39] My goal in this section is to demonstrate the potential of video games to allow players to explore counterfactual histories. If one accepts Megill's assertion that 'all causal analysis presupposes counterfactuals', it becomes evident that branching and multiplicitous chains of causality in digital historical games can be a tool for critical historical thinking.[40] Many academics and historians in this area have praised historical games for this potentiality.[41] McCall, for example, emphasises the 'lab-like' replayability of historical games that allows for the exploration of historical contingency, causation, and counterfactual thinking.[42] Ferguson's book on counterfactuals is notably titled 'Virtual History', and within it

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[38] E.H. Carr, *What is History?,* 2nd ed (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 169, quoted in Ferguson, *Virtual History*, 55-56.
[39] Ferguson, *Virtual History,* 4-20.
[40] Megill, '"Grand Narrative"', 171.
[41] Alex Burns, '*Civilization III*: Digital game-based learning and macrohistory simulations', *Australian Foresight Institute* (July 2002), 4-5; Apperley, 'Modding the Historians' Code', 189-90; Chapman, *Digital Games*, 234-254, Megill, '"Grand Narrative"', 168-173.
[42] McCall, 'Teaching History', 517-542.

he describes historically valuable counterfactuals as 'simulations based on calculations about the relative probability of plausible outcomes in a chaotic world'.[43]

One might argue that historians must pay attention to historical counterfactuals due to their proliferation in popular works of historical fiction. To echo observations by Ankersmit and Hellner, it is evident that many of the 'postmodern games' of historical thinking frequently dismissed by scholars have emerged stronger and more pertinent in works of popular culture and media. Ankersmit and Hellner cite experimentations with blurring of history and fiction such as 'near-news, factoid fictions or "re-enactments"'. One could easily add counterfactuals to this list.[44] For the historian looking to engage in public historical practice, it is a matter of importance to understand the potential for historical thinking in works of this nature, due to their evident popularity and compelling nature for non-professional audiences.

Fire Emblem: Three Houses: counterfactuals and contingencies

Fire Emblem: Three Houses (2019) provides an example of a game with branching storylines that explores the contingencies of choice and alternative pathways. Although a medieval fantasy rather than a historical game, its narrative and design features are highly applicable to theorising about ludohistorical epistemologies. The game presents itself as a pseudohistorical epic and demonstrates complex webs of cause, consequence, and counterfactual thinking in its rich fictional historical world, making it a relevant case study demonstrating multiform, history-themed ludic narratives. *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* sees the player assume the role of a young professor in an elite military academy in the fictional continent of Fódlan. Fódlan consists of three once-warring powers that are now at peace: the Adrestian Empire, the Holy Kingdom of

[43] Ferguson, *Virtual History,* 85.
[44] Ankersmit and Kellner, *A New Philosophy*, 23-24.

Faerghus, and the Leicester Alliance. The eponymous three houses of the academy are populated by students from each of these respective rival powers. Near the beginning of the game, the player must choose which house they wish to teach at the academy. Halfway through the game, the narrative jumps five years ahead, and the three nations are now at war with each other. The house the player chose to teach at the school is now the house they are aligned with in the war, which subsequently leads the narrative down one of four potential paths (it is also possible to align with the Church of Seiros, a neutral power with its own military force). The game is therefore essentially four stories in one, each path presenting an alternative option of 'what could have happened' had different decisions been made and different alliances developed.

Compared to open-ended strategic simulation games like *Civilization, Fire Emblem: Three Houses*' narrative is significantly more personal. It prioritises individuals at the centre of political and historical action. The player character develops close emotional relationships with the young leaders of each nation, and these relationships have significant bearing on the outcomes of the narratives. For example, the Adrestian Empire's leader, Edelgard, longs for justice and freedom from tyranny, but has strong imperialist tendencies and a ruthless streak. If the player character joins her side, her worst impulses are tempered by the player character's emotional support and wise consul as her advisor. The Adrestian Empire is therefore able to purge Fódlan of corrupt elements and introduce egalitarian reforms after winning the war. If the player chooses another house, however, Edelgard becomes a merciless conqueror. Similarly, Crown Prince Dimitri of Faerghus suffers from childhood trauma as a result of his family's assassination, and without the support and guiding hand of the player character, he falls deep into psychological instability. Siding with Dimitri, however, enables him to overcome his inner demons and become a righteous, just ruler. *Fire Emblem: Three Houses'* branching narratives

allow the player to play with more than just the grand political and military counterfactuals seen in *Civilization*-type games. It allows them to see emotional, personal, and political histories skilfully interwoven, and to explore the flow-on consequences and contingencies in each of these realms. Furthermore, the complexity and narrative depth of the game's characters eschews the grand strategy genre pitfall of restricting its characters to simplified and rigidly defined categories.[45]

However, some aspects of this approach are likely to frustrate those who take a more structuralist view of history. One of *Three Houses*' potential failings is an overemphasis on individuals. The game leans into a 'Great Man' history that prioritises the player character as the axis on which history rotates. As is typical in fantasy video games, the player character is positioned as a special 'chosen one' figure. Their choices have a disproportionate influence on the outcome of history. The side the player chooses is the side that wins the war, and the player's influence is implied to be the deciding factor. The game also almost exclusively deals with elites and high politics, and leaves little room for the influence of the masses or the lower classes on history. This signals a potential limitation of counterfactuals in genres other than grand strategy: a possible overemphasis on 'Great Man' history, with single choices or single individuals shown as the driving forces behind historical change. Any game starring a single protagonist whose decisions and actions have a significant effect on the outcome of the branching narratives is at risk of prioritising this historical approach at the expense of others.

Although an overemphasis on individuals is a potential pitfall, there are still examples throughout history where this approach may work effectively in exploring contingencies and alternative outcomes. The 'Great Men' (or 'Great Individuals') who changed history may be few

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[45] Schut, 'Strategic simulations', 224-226.

and far between and are often overemphasised in popular histories, but such figures have existed throughout history. War is one historical condition that can be disproportionately influenced by the decisions and personalities of generals and war leaders, so it is not entirely inappropriate that *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* emphasises this in its narrative. Counterfactual scenarios of this nature, posed with Ferguson's requirements of plausibility in mind, can aid in determining the extent of the impact of individuals on the course of history. I will return to examples from Soviet history here, in keeping with Carr's counterfactual questions raised above. Lenin was an influential and powerful figure, but it is arguable that he may not have been able to enact the coup of October 1917 successfully without a strong base of support, much like Edelgard cannot win the war she begins without winning the loyalty and support of the player character and their followers.[46] A multiform story like *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* could allow players to explore the causality and contingency of such variables in a historical moment like the October Revolution. One could also use counterfactuals to examine the variables contributing to the success of the Red Army during the Russian Civil War. If Trotsky had not chosen to follow Lenin and instead gone into exile, depriving the Bolsheviks of his vital military leadership, could they still have won? How important was his leadership versus other factors influencing the victory?[47] *Fire Emblem: Three Houses'* emphasis on interpersonal conflicts and relationships could also have utility in exploring periods such as Stalin's Terror, a phenomenon notoriously influenced by personal agendas, whims, and the personalities of key figures.[48] The model

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[46] Social histories of October 1917 'from below' proliferated in the 1970s and 1980s, turning historiographical focus from Lenin and high politics to workers, peasants, and the influence of the masses on the course of events. A useful summary of this historiography can be found in *Revolutionary Russia: New Approaches to the Russian Revolution Of 1917*, ed. Rex A. Wade (Taylor & Francis Group, 2004).
[47] Geoffrey Swain, *Trotsky and the Russian Revolution* (London: Routledge, 2013).
[48] Wendy Z. Goldman, *Inventing the Enemy: Denunciation and Terror in Stalin's Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

presented by *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* could be used to allow players to explore the consequences of friendships, alliances, and betrayals in this period of history.

It is also worth noting that structural and societal factors do play a role in the narrative of *Three Houses*, somewhat mitigating the emphasis on individuals. For example, Fódlan's society is hierarchically structured based on the hereditary Crest system that sees special abilities passed down through bloodline. The power and prestige awarded by inheritance of a Crest is so potent that instances of oppression, corruption and abuse surrounding Crest possession are common. One of Edelgard's driving motivations is the revolutionary abolition of the feudal nobility and the authoritarian Church in order to end the oppressive influence of Crests. The game ultimately revolves around a critique of a feudal social structure based on rigid hierarchy and inheritance, a common trope of medieval fantasy fiction. Notably, however, the player can choose to what degree they engage with this critique, based on which pathway they choose. Edelgard's storyline is the most revolutionary, whereas siding with Faerghus or the Church results in preservation of the Crest system and maintenance of the status quo. In this way, player choice and multiple narratives suggest a compelling potential for games to present alternative historical frameworks with which the player can freely align themselves. Ultimately, *Three Houses* shows that, although narrative choice-based games can fall into the trap of overemphasising individuals as agents of historical change, narrative emphasis on structural factors can alleviate this tendency.

The choice-based branching storylines of *Three Houses* presents an anti-teleological framework for historical games. If all story paths are presented as equally viable, valid choices leading to radically different outcomes, historical events are not shown to be inevitable. A history game with this structure could avoid the overly deterministic and linear histories seen in some historical media. Instead, it asks the player to engage in critical causal analysis, tracing the

different consequences and contingencies of historical choices, actions, and conditions. It asks: why did history turn out one way and not the other? What were the major deciding factors contributing to the outcome, and how important were they? Through its use of a branching multiform story structure, *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* explores the different potential outcomes of political, military, and interpersonal contingencies in wartime. It proposes a model for playing with counterfactual military decisions and alignments. Due to its narrative richness and complexity, and the limiting of the player's control to a single major figure within a conflict, it gives us a closer proximity to these events than what grand strategy games like *Civilization* allow. As a result, it can explore the impact of emotional and personal relationships on large-scale political and historical events.

Multiple perspectives

Fire Emblem: Three Houses also provides a model for the exploration of multiple, conflicting perspectives on a single event without privileging one viewpoint as the 'truth'. The game's central conflict, Edelgard's desire to wage an imperialist war to overthrow the Church and unite Fódlan under the Adrestian Empire, can be understood very differently depending on the perspective assumed by the player and the path they have chosen. Starting a war against one's former friends is a difficult task, and the game skilfully evokes emotions of inner conflict in the player. However, Edelgard's story route positions her decision to begin the war as a necessary evil in order to overthrow an unjust system and bring about reforms. Whether the ends justify the means in Edelgard's case is largely left up to the player to decide. Playing Dimitri's route shows us a very different perspective of the war as an imperialist crusade, and of Edelgard as a warmongering fanatic. Those choosing to align with the Church are likely to view the Church's

status as a powerful neutral third party essential to keeping peace and order between Fódlan's warring nations. In contrast, players aligning with Edelgard are likely to agree with her perspective on the Church as an oppressive authoritarian presence preventing self-determination and progressive reform throughout Fódlan. The game alters the courses of events post-timeskip depending on the chosen route, which influences how players view the characters and their agendas in each respective timeline. However, players can take anywhere between 20 to 40 hours before reaching the diverging story events. This gives them ample time to begin forming their opinions on the state of the game's world and its characters' agendas before their choices begin to alter the plot.

The complexity of the factors leading Edelgard on the path of war and the subsequent consequences can be fully explored from all angles due to the game's multiform story. *Three Houses* has done this so effectively that it has created a deeply divided fanbase regarding the purpose and nature of the war and the ethical standing of the various factions. Suggested popular Google searches for 'Was Edelgard right?' at the time of writing include 'edelgard did nothing wrong', 'edelgard did everything wrong', and 'did Edelgard commit genocide?'. A search for 'Was Edelgard Right' on reddit.com returned over 122,000 results.[49] Writers on gaming news websites have published articles covering the debates or espousing their personal stance on Edelgard's crusade. Titles of these articles include 'Fire Emblem Three Houses: The Edelgard Controversy Explained', 'Fire Emblem Three Houses: 5 Reasons Why Edelgard Was Right (& 5 Reasons Why She Had To Lose)', and 'Edelgard Was Right: How Three Houses' Themes Could Support a "Correct" Choice'. The latter article drew 245 comments from users debating the

[49] Google search results for 'was Edelgard right', 19 October 2022.

author's stance.[50] Although the titles often frame these discussions in black-and-white terms of right and wrong, the resultant debates can be nuanced and complex. In fan conversations on popular forums such as Reddit, players draw on real-life historical examples in order to debate the ethics and morality of Edelgard's decisions. For example, one thread includes references to the United States' alliance with Russia during the Second World War and the Franco-Prussian War's influence on the World Wars.[51] Although they are about a fictional conflict rather than a real-life historical event, these fan conversations are examples of the sort of critical thinking that a multiform game like *Three Houses* can evoke through evaluation of competing perspectives and chains of cause and effect.

Imaginative design thinking can shed light on how the multiform video game structure could be used to encourage similarly critical historical thinking in the vein of *Three Houses*. For example, French lawyer and statesman, Maximilien Robespierre, a revolutionary often held responsible for the Reign of Terror in the period 1793-4, is an example of a controversial individual who still draws fierce debate in the historiography of the French Revolution. He is an Edelgard-like figure who can be seen as a champion of liberty, a well-intentioned extremist, or a cold-hearted tyrant, depending on which historian one asks or what one thinks about the Revolution as a whole.[52] A nonlinear story with unresolved branches like *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* could easily show different facets and nuances of a controversial leader like Robespierre

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[50] Ben Baker, 'Fire Emblem Three Houses: 5 Reasons Why Edelgard Was Right (& 5 Reasons Why She Had To Lose)', *The Gamer*, April 30, 2020, https://www.thegamer.com/fire-emblem-three-houses-edelgard-right-wrong/; Allison Stahlberg, 'Fire Emblem Three Houses: The Edelgard Controversy Explained', *Gamerant*, October 13, 2021, https://gamerant.com/fire-emblem-three-houses-edelgard-controversy-explained-hero-villain/; Lucas White, 'Edelgard Was Right: How Three Houses' Themes Could Support a "Correct" Choice', *Siliconera*, February 11, 2020, https://www.siliconera.com/fire-emblem-three-houses-edelgard-opinion/.

[51] u/angry-mustache, 'If the cycle of violence', Reddit comment, August 16, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/fireemblem/comments/cr4jck/edelgard_was_wrongand_the_game_tells_you_why/.

[52] A concise review of twenty-first century scholarship on Robespierre can be found in Marc Belissa and Julien Louvrier, 'Robespierre in French and English Language Publications since 2000', *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française* 371, no. 1 (2013): 73-93.

without advancing any single interpretation as the sole truth. Such an approach can be contrasted with that of *Assassin's Creed: Unity*, a game with a more linear narrative structure which came under fire from left-wing politicians in France for presenting a single view of Robespierre as a tyrant. MP Jean-Luc Melenchon, for example, called Robespierre's portrayal as 'propaganda against the people', and coverage from news website *Gamerant* argued his portrayal ventured into 'maniacal supervillain territory'.[53] The multiplicitous perspectives and pathways of *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* could provide an antidote to limited, fixed portrayals of controversial historical figures and offer opportunities for much more nuance, complexity, and critical thinking. This is evident in the fandom's notably divided views on Edelgard and the Church.

A multiform approach to historical game design can be a powerful way of destabilising hegemonic viewpoints about the past. The flexible and multiplicitous nature of multiform stories need not be resolved into a single 'canon' or 'correct' storyline. If hegemony can be described as 'whose and what viewpoint defines reality', then a game providing a multiplicity of viewpoints for the player to interact freely with and align themselves with at their will is inherently counter-hegemonic.[54] No one storyline or perspective need be designated as the 'ultimate reality' of the game's narrative. Games can thus engage players in a historical discourse that emphasises how 'not all stories can sit easily beside all others, that they are mutually incompatible, even contradictory.'[55]

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[53] '"Assassin's Creed Unity" Angers Some French Politicians', *Gamerant*, November 18, 2014, https://gamerant.com/assassins-creed-unity-history-controversy-politicians/.
[54] Berkhofer, 'A Point of View', 177.
[55] Alison Landsberg, *Engaging the Past: Mass Culture and the Production of Historical Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 144.

Endings

I now return to Chapman's argument that the removal of endings can present history as open-ended and anti-teleological. This style of game design can facilitate player-led flexibility in constructing the emplotment genre, and thus the meaning, of the past. As Chapman discusses, grand strategy games like *Civilization*, *Making History*, and *Total War* can effectively achieve this due to the flexible goals and weak framing narratives of open-ontological games. In genres other than strategy, however, the approach of removing endings is much less common. Potential problems therefore arise in the way that the 'end point' of the historical narrative is often presented. In more heavily narrative-driven genres such as action-adventure and point-and-click games, narrative outcomes are often clearly designated as 'good', 'bad' or perhaps 'neutral'. If the player receives the 'bad ending', they have completed the game, but in some ways they have 'lost' due to not achieving the most desirable narrative outcome. This can be seen as an implicit way of 'ranking' or 'grading' the player's performance and choices, an extension of the way video games are usually framed as win/lose challenges. Therefore, these games effectively arrange their multiple endings hierarchically, valuing some above others. This is antithetical to a historical approach that seeks to encourage open, flexible critical thinking, encourages the player to do their own 'historying', and emphasises the multiplicity of historical interpretation. Privileging one ending or narrative branch above another is, essentially, privileging one historical interpretation or narrative as 'the best' or 'the most correct'.

However, there are a number of games that bypass the hierarchically ranked (and therefore morally charged) 'good/bad' ending dichotomy. These games offer a multitude of outcomes that reflect on player actions without necessarily assigning moral value to them. For example, in *Silent Hill 2* (2001) and *Deus Ex* (2000), different outcomes do not have moral or

competitive values assigned to them. *Silent Hill 2* alters the resolution of the story based on the player's subtle, unconscious play behaviours throughout the game. Rather than being a way to measure success, the endings reveal something meaningful about the player's psychological and emotional engagement with the game. *Deus Ex* is another particularly useful example of how a game can force the player to reflect critically on a variety of socio-political and ethical challenges and evaluate the potential outcomes of their decisions. Towards the end of the game, the player is offered three different resolutions to the story: align with an AI supercomputer and create a (hopefully) benevolent cybernetic dictatorship, destroy the global communications network and start civilisation afresh via a new technological dark age, or join the Illuminati and rule with them in the shadows, unopposed. Not one of these outcomes is positioned as inherently positive or negative (or even realistic). Instead, it is left up to the player to align themselves with a political position and decide which imagined pathway would match their preferred socio-political conditions.

To return to our previous case study, *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* has been criticised for offering a universally 'good' outcome no matter which story path the player chooses to follow. No matter which side wins the war, the outcome is a hopeful, near-utopian future where peace is brought to the nation and the player character rules justly and fairly alongside their chosen monarch. This can be viewed as nullifying the opportunity for critical thinking offered by playing with the counterfactual branches of the multiform story. It is unrealistic to suggest that all potential choices or historical counterfactuals would have resulted in a positive outcome for a given historical actor. There is also a problematic hint of determinism in the implication that the player character is fated to win the war no matter what side they choose or how the war itself plays out.

However, the refusal of *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* to designate ‘good’ and ‘bad’ endings enables the game to present all pathways as equally viable to actors at the time. In this way, the potential paths are not hierarchically ranked or designated by the game as ‘better’ or ‘worse’ outcomes. Instead, the game invites the player to evaluate the socio-political outcomes of each path on their own terms, allowing them to choose freely whose value system they align with and not which one the game tells you is ‘best’. Furthermore, each victory comes with an equal amount of sacrifice that adds a level of moral complexity to the game’s decision-making. In all story paths, the chosen faction comes out victorious, and the opposing factions are all crushed in battle. A victory on the Church route, for example, leads to a utopian and promising future for all except those in Edelgard’s kingdom, whereas Edelgard’s victory spells death for Dimitri and destruction for the institution of the Church. This means that, in all story pathways, the player character must cut down their former friends and students. As a result, each path is as troubling as it is virtuous. This allows for a complexity and nuance that would not be possible by designating some alliances as ‘good’ and others as ‘bad’ (a common approach in many games). The moral implications of this are significant in light of the fact that the player can viably align themselves with any side. By denying the player a clearly legible ‘good’ or ‘bad’ choice, the game engages with what Peter Seixas calls the moral dimension of historical thinking, a concept that I will develop further in the next chapter.[56] In *Fire Emblem: Three Houses*, the ‘winners’ of history are not always the ‘good guys’ and the ‘losers’ of history are not always the ‘bad guys’. Rather, the game emphasises that fixed categories and concepts like ‘good guys’, ‘bad guys’, ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ are inherently unstable, constantly in flux depending on one’s vantage point. It allows the player to experience history from a multitude of perspectives, each having its

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[56] Peter Seixas, ‘A Model of Historical Thinking’, *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 49, vol. 6 (2017): 602.

own convincing moral convictions, agendas, and goals. This also imparts the message that history is written by and for the winners, and encourages the player to consider the consequences for the 'losers' of history.

I suggest that the way *Fire Emblem: Three Houses*' multiple storylines sit uncomfortably together goes some way to achieving the multiperspectivity and polyvocality espoused by Berkhofer. The flexibility of endpoints in multiform stories can encourage historical thinking in games by leaving it up to the player to decide on their preferred interpretation or counterfactual outcome. This also counters the criticism sometimes levelled at historical games that history is not a win/lose binary, and that games that focus on challenge and win/lose states are antithetical to history.[57] Games with multiple non-hierarchical endings can offer a more exploratory form of history, rather than a success/fail judgment that thereby imposes a single historical endpoint or 'truth' on the player.[58] Much like history itself does not inherently exist with a 'fixed beginning-middle-end structure waiting to be transcribed', multiform games can leave it to the historians – or in this case, the player-historians – themselves to 'devise beginnings and ends'.[59]

A single truth? *Paradise Killer*, a postmodern game

Flexible, multiform narrative games can acknowledge the multiplicity of historical truth. This style of historical epistemology is achievable since neither multiple endings, perspectives, nor emplotments in games need be resolved into a single 'correct' or 'canon' account. One of the most daring attempts to create a game with no definitive single story or truth claim is *Paradise Killer* (2020). *Paradise Killer* could easily be called a postmodern game. In the marketing, the

[57] Chapman, *Digital Games,* 149.
[58] A potential limitation of the game should be acknowledged here: the player must play and complete all narrative paths to experience the full effect of its multiple narratives.
[59] Ankersmit and Kellner, *A New Philosophy,* 128.

narrative, and the procedural rhetoric itself, the game emphasises the subjectivity and multiplicity of the past, and the role of the player in constructing their own 'truth' of what happened. The game's website reads: 'By choosing how to interrogate suspects and finding any evidence in any order, the player will discover not a singular truth but a truth they shape and craft.'[60] The language used here is telling. Throughout the game, the player is asked to investigate and create *'a* truth' or *'your* truth' rather than *'the* truth'. We can understand the game's use of the word 'truth' to mean an interpretive account based on evidence that is accepted as 'reality' by an individual or society. The game's approach here can already be said to have an affinity with the contemporary historian's goal of writing *'a* history' rather than '*the* history' of a given subject.

Though they may not initially seem relevant to historians, interactive crime and murder mystery games often deal with the sorts of issues surrounding truth, evidence, and interpretation that historians grapple with. Historians are often described as 'detectives', and scholars have sometimes likened the process of historical investigation to that of a criminal investigation.[61] When aiming to understand and write about the past, historians must engage in a sort of detective work. This work involves finding and piecing together primary sources, interpreting the evidence, and crafting a narrative from these traces that explains the course of events in question. Framing this process of historical inquiry as an investigation has been cited as an effective tool of historical pedagogy in both the classroom and museum contexts.[62] By becoming engaged in the investigative process of historical enquiry, non-specialist audiences can participate in the

[60] 'Paradise Killer', accessed 16 March, 2023, http://paradisekiller.com/.
[61] Robin Winks, *The Historian as Detective: Essays on Evidence* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).
[62] Rosalie Triolo, 'Being Historians and Detectives: Inquiry into History', *Agora* 44, no. 1 (2009): 50-54; Michael J. Arrato Gavrish, 'The Historian as Detective: An Introduction to Historical Methodology', *Social Education* 59, no. 3 (1995): 151-153.

process of 'historying' and thereby develop historical thinking skills. There are key differences between historical inquiry and police work: firstly, police detectives and lawyers are usually concerned with explaining the 'what' and 'how' of a crime, but beyond the establishment of a motive, they are generally less preoccupied with the 'why'. The long-term and structural causes contributing to an event, often the central interest of historians, are not usually the subject of legal enquiry (although they can be an element of a legal defence). Secondly, a criminal act is a much more concrete and palpable occurrence than the sometimes inaccessible or ephemeral objects of historical enquiry. One of the potential pitfalls of applying the detective approach to history is the implication that the historian can discover, in a Rankean sense, what 'really happened'. As we will see with the example of *Paradise Killer*, however, the detective format can also be put to more complex postmodernist epistemological ends that question the stability of facts and construction of 'truthful' narratives.

In *Paradise Killer,* the player assumes the role of a master detective tasked with investigating the locked-room murder of the 'Council'. The Council are the high leadership of cosmic god-worshipping, immortal superhumans known as the 'Syndicate'. The Syndicate have spent centuries striving to build a perfect paradise island on the backs of enslaved mortal humans. The game is set entirely on the 24th iteration of this island, soon to be vacated after yet another failed attempt at creating paradise culminating in the Council's murder. As it is an open-world game, the player is free to explore the Island in any order or manner they choose. There is very little gating, so most of the evidence, areas, and characters can be accessed from the start. [63] The game does not control what order you speak to suspects or find evidence in, or whether you find or speak to them at all. It is possible to ignore certain characters' testimonies entirely, and to

[63] A design mechanic where later areas or story sections of an open-world game are prevented from being accessed 'too early' by the player. This can be done with obstacles, locked doors, et cetera.

finish the game without ever discovering key characters or locations. At any point in the game the player can halt their investigation, commence the trial, and formulate their case against their accused suspect. In this way, the player is much like a historian who can (and invariably must) choose to stop researching at some point and present an argument based on the evidence they have, even if it is inevitably incomplete and selective.

When the player begins the trial, they may accuse any of the 12 main characters of being the culprit. If the player makes a satisfactory argument for the selected culprit's guilt based on the evidence they have collected, the accused will be found guilty and executed. Regardless of whether the accused 'actually' committed the crime (presuming the player can discern this, which they may not), the player's convincing argument will be taken by the Judge as truth. If the player does not have enough evidence to support their accusation, however, the Judge will declare the most 'obvious' suspect the culprit: the demon-possessed human Henry Division. The player may choose whether to attempt to pursue their idea of the 'truth' no matter the cost, or whether to allow their personal agenda to influence who they accuse. For example, the player may decide not to reveal the evidence that implicates their favourite characters in the crime out of a desire to save them from execution. In this way, evidence can be collected but not used to construct a narrative and thereby become a 'fact' in the case. The game's treatment of evidence thus echoes the way traces of the past may or may not become evidence in the process of investigative research.

Paradise Killer's design and narrative contrast with other murder mystery games like the *Ace Attorney* (2001-) and *Danganronpa* (2010-2017) series, both of which direct the player down linear story and gameplay pathways in order to uncover the 'true' killer. Both series are visual-novel-style games that, like *Paradise Killer*, task the player with investigating a murder

and uncovering the culprit(s) in a courtroom trial setting. Unlike *Paradise Killer*, however, the process of investigation and evidence collection must occur in a specific order. The player cannot talk to person X until they have spoken to person Y, they cannot advance to the next part of the investigation until all evidence has been discovered, and so on. Furthermore, the trials are structured around presenting the 'right' evidence and getting the 'right' answer. In *Ace Attorney*, for example, there is a 'penalty' system that functions like a 'health bar' would in other games. Whenever the player makes a mistake, such as accusing the wrong character, presenting the wrong evidence, or making a faulty deduction, penalties are deducted from this bar. If the bar reaches zero, the player automatically loses the case, reaching a 'Game Over' and starting again from the last checkpoint. Most of these games also have single endings and narrative outcomes, although in the second *Ace Attorney* game there is a clearly designated 'bad ending' where the game ends early due to an incorrect decision made during a trial. This sort of structure may be useful if one wishes to create a game that advances a single historical interpretation or argument. However, it is much less ideal for those who wish to engage with the multiplicity and indeterminacy of history and allow the player to do their own 'historying'. A game that funnels the player towards the single 'correct' answer is antithetical to a postmodern historical epistemology that acknowledges the impossibility of ever discovering a single master narrative or definitive interpretation of the past.

One can easily imagine how these varying approaches to the 'truth' could be applied to a historical or historiographical game. The conventional approach to 'historying' in a game, as exemplified by an *Ace Attorney*-style investigation, might see the player directed to uncover the truth behind a particular historical event. As the player explores the environment, collects oral histories, and trawls through evidence, the game forces the player into making particular

discoveries for the game to progress. Unless they find one specific vital letter, talk to every oral source, or ask an eyewitness a particular question in order to obtain a crucial bit of information, the game will not allow them to move to the next stage and formulate their argument. In this way, the player is led on a linear path towards the unfolding of the predetermined historical narrative that has already been decided upon as the truth by the developer-historian. If the player fails to make their case correctly or to find the right answer, the game ends and the player must try again until they reach the correct result and the truth is revealed. In essence, another 'master historian' somewhere has already discovered the 'truth', and the player is simply being led through the process of uncovering it. This style of game would advance a philosophy of history as a coherent, singular Great Story, a past that is knowable 'as it really was'. It reinforces the first of Megill's four identified attitudes to a coherent past: that there is a single coherent past that can be told either now or after further investigation.[64]

A *Paradise Killer*-style historical game, however, would place the player in a freely explorable open-world environment and present them with a variety of information that they may access according to their own preference. Evidence may be collected or missed; people may be included or excluded from oral histories; questions may be asked or skipped over. Rather than a predetermined order of collection, the player can find evidence and talk to people in any order. This means that, rather than evidence being pre-arranged logically, it is entirely up to the player to piece together and make sense of the traces of the past they have found. All the time, the player is aware that their evidence collection and understanding of the world is necessarily incomplete and subject to the limitations of their own choices and critical ability. It is thus left up to the player to perform the usual work of the historian in '[establishing] priorities and

[64] Megill, '"Grand Narrative"', 155-157.

hierarchies with respect to the totality of things which could be said about the world, allowing some phenomena to be simply ignored, while others are presented in a more or less extensive fashion'.[65] The approach of *Paradise Killer* therefore has more affinity with the third and fourth of Megill's identified attitudes to a coherent past: that there is a single coherent history that can never be told, or that we must question the idea that a single coherent history exists ontologically.[66]

Varying player characters could even be designed with different affordances and abilities to further explore the opportunities and limitations of historical practice. One character could be bilingual and thus have access to different sources, another could have a personal contact that allows them into difficult-to-access archives, another may have more funding, and so on. This technique would further destabilize the idea of a 'perfect' history with objective and complete access to all sources and perspectives. It would, instead, reflect the subjective, contingent, and constrained nature of real-life historical research. A game algorithm could even randomize the evidence available in each playthrough, making some resources inaccessible and giving the player access to different banks of evidence each time. This way, each playthrough would be slightly (or radically) different, resulting in different histories. Players would then be able to compare the narratives they come up with when different pieces of evidence are, or are not, available. This would counter the possibility in *Paradise Killer* for the player to search so carefully and thoroughly that every possible piece of evidence is found and reconciled into the narrative.

Most crucially, the competing accounts at play would not be positioned as definitively correct or incorrect. Instead, they would emerge as different constructions of the past using

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[65] Ankersmit and Kellner, *A New Philosophy,* 131.
[66] Megill, '"Grand Narrative"', 155-157.

different evidence and perspectives. This mirrors historical practice in real life, where different historians can select different materials and craft different accounts, thus resulting in differing histories. A player could very well formulate a history with a lazy search and very little evidence, but this would be judged not solely by its truth-value in reference to evidence (referential truth-claim) but rather additionally by its comprehensiveness, internal logics, and applied critical judgment. Much like in *Paradise Killer*, a historical narrative could be accepted as truth if it is presented coherently with ample evidence to support its claims. This is particularly so if the one making the argument is a respected authority like the master detective player-character. This does not preclude the ability of the player-historian to understand any number of truths about the past, much as the acknowledgment of the constructed nature of history and the inability of any one account to claim ultimate authority does not preclude historians from practicing the discipline. Rather, it could encourage the player-historian to develop a greater critical awareness towards evidence, interpretation, and authority, and to understand more deeply the mechanisms behind how any history is constructed. The player could advance their historical interpretation whilst still acknowledging how others may arrive at different conclusions, even when based on very similar investigations.

In the end, *Paradise Killer* does not entirely live up to its promise of a truly indeterminate truth. With enough gameplay time, it is possible to determine ‘what actually happened’ in the mass murder of the Council. The problematic implication here is that it still might ultimately be up to the developer-historian to determine how the game is programmed and therefore what the ‘correct’ interpretation is. It is important to note, however, that the game does not punish the player for crafting a narrative other than that which ‘actually’ occurred, provided there is enough evidence found to support it. The Judge places their trust in the player character’s legendary

detective skills, and if the argument is well-made and substantiated by enough evidence, it will be accepted as truth. This is perhaps a poignant indictment of most people's understanding of truth and historical reality. If a source one believes to be credible (such as a historian) presents an account with enough evidence and reasoning behind it, one tends to accept it, even if the evidence is faulty or selective. Alongside showing us the fallacy of single interpretations and of the Great Story, a game like *Paradise Killer* could also provoke us to question the narratives we often readily accept, showing us that all sources are potentially fallible – as are historians.

Detritus: the 'ludohistoriographical game'

The most interesting experiments with storytelling and game mechanics can often be found within small indie projects. An example of this is *Detritus: A History Book*, a short interactive text-based game that I encountered on itch.io.com, a site for indie developers to upload their games. *Detritus* achieves two things better than any other game I have yet encountered: it gives players access to the processes of the professional historian, and it dramatizes the constructed nature of historical narratives and texts.

Detritus presents the player with the task of editing a popular history book of collected essays. The subject matter is the violent colonial relationship between two fictional races, one of which, the 'Detriti', is clearly coded as an indigenous race, and the other, the 'Flotilli', as the supposedly 'civilized' colonisers. The key event triggering the creation of the book is the 'Surrender Massacre', an incident where the Detriti attacked the Flotilli and caused an 'unprecedented' death toll. The history book is presented as a way to provide 'answers' to a society seeking to understand this recent tragedy. The player is presented with a series of short essay excerpts and must select one for each chapter of the history book. Each essay addresses the

conflict from a different perspective: a Flotilli commander, a Detriti elder's story as told to a Flotilli writer, a second-generation Detriti disowned by their own family and defected to the Flotilli, and various others. Different chapters also include fragments of various primary and secondary sources: a Flotilli auction of Detriti heirloom jewellery, a physiological study of Flotilli and Detriti anatomy, and so on. Chapters to be curated include Language and Culture, Ancient History, First Contact, and those addressing the recent conflicts, allowing the game to touch on a variety of social, cultural, and political issues. Overall, the picture that emerges from the game's narrative evokes strong parallels with indigenous-coloniser relations in countries such as Australia, the United States and Canada. The competing historical accounts presented in the game recall public memory disputes over colonization, such as Australia's ongoing 'history wars' over the nature and extent of violence used by British settlers in Australia.[67]

Detritus' mechanics quickly and effectively show the player how a variety of perspectives on a historical event can come into conflict. As one would expect, the different essays provide vastly different and often irreconcilable accounts of Detriti-Flotilli relations and the historical events that they generated. Some sources describe Detriti attacks on Flotilli settlements as ruthless and destructive, whereas others emphasise their non-lethality and frame them as scrounging missions. The language used to describe the various hostilities are politically charged and euphemistic, and reveal much about the way historical narratives are constructed and framed. For example, the Detriti killed by Flotilli are framed as aggressors and described as having 'committed suicide by forcing military intervention in their activities'. An incident called 'Hellfire', in which considerable destruction was wrought on the Detriti by Flotilli military technology, is described by Flotilli sources as having 'disrupted Detriti operations'. However,

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[67] Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2003).

Detriti sources understand Hellfire as a profound tragedy inspiring severe collective grief and trauma. Detriti language and culture are also understood very differently depending on the source. Some emphasise the supposedly primitive and inferior nature of Detriti culture, whereas others acknowledge their complexity and rich tradition. Notably, the Flotilli are referred to as 'a History making people', in contrast to the implied history-less and therefore civilisation-less Detriti. The game's statement here is a clear reference to Eurocentric colonialist constructions of culture, history, and civilization itself.

Significantly, the game positions the player as a Flotillite, and the book must always be edited from this perspective. As a Flotilli, the player does not have access to Detriti language. The only Detriti-written chapters are by an individual who has assimilated into Flotilli culture and, by the end, considers themselves a 'true Flotillite'. Flotillite sources often contain blatantly racist statements: one asks, 'when a people simply roots about in the mud for generations … what are we to expect from the quality of their stock?' In another source, a Flotilli captain describes the Detriti's 'general cognitive inferiority'. Even the more sympathetic sources often blame the Detriti for their own destruction. At best, they contain 'benevolently' racist, paternalistic, and patronising statements. The game depicts multiple irreconcilable perspectives on a historical event and dramatizes the construction of a historical narrative out of these perspectives, but also reminds the player that this process is necessarily incomplete and partial, especially when attempting to write a history across cultures.

The professor who has tasked the player with editing the book reacts differently depending on what chapters have been chosen. These reactions impart some sense of the socio-political significance, influence, and consequences of varying historical narratives. For example, if the chapters chosen are largely sympathetic towards the Detriti, the professor responds with:

> Currently the work is shaping up as a very empathetic text! This might be just what we need when so many people are seeking answers that it might not be possible to give. I do worry that the fury of victims across the planet might turn on you in the absence of people to blame, but I trust you know what you're doing.

If more pro-Flotilli texts are selected, however, the professor responds in this way:

> Currently the work is shaping up as a straightforward (and very readable!) prediction of what has now happened. It comes across as almost prescient, though in places your choices for your brand have been … brave. I'm worried about alienating 'gentler' demographics.

Reviews are also given after the book is completed. Pro-Flotilli reviews describe the book as 'a raucous reminder of who we are in the face of those who want to destroy our way of life'. A more sympathetic text yields a review that describes the book as a 'a quiet, crystallised shard of what we [Detriti and Flotilli] could have been to one another'.

The decision to create a fictional scenario for this historiographical experiment is deliberate and effective. Since the game is based on a fictional world, the player cannot bring their own preconceived notions about the 'truth' of what happened to their construction of the narrative. Indeed, even after multiple playthroughs, it is extremely difficult if, not impossible, to discern what 'really' happened, or which account is closest to the 'truth'. There is no evidence the player can consult beyond the oral testimonies of those who lived through these events. The game does not attempt to ask the question of who is right or wrong in their interpretation of the Surrender Massacre. Rather, there are simply perspectives, and it is up to the player to decide whose perspective they are going to advance as a historical text. Because of the game's ambiguity, it achieves what *Paradise Killer* stops slightly short of achieving: a truly indeterminate truth.

One could call *Detritus* a *ludohistoriographical* game. To draw on the words of Chapman, by 'granting access to historical practice' and allowing the audience to craft a virtual historical text, it allows the player to do their own 'historying'.[68] Through gameplay, the player interacts with multiple strands and interpretations of history and can arrange them into their own historical narrative. Furthermore, the game not only vividly illustrates the process of selection in the construction of historical texts, but also provides feedback about the cultural and political significance of what is selected and left out of history. Playing a historical game structured like *Detritus* could engage the public in a historical practice that acknowledges 'the ongoing tension between stories that have been told and stories that might be told'.[69]

Time Historians: getting away from 'the facts'

Some further attempts to create ludohistoriographical games have emerged in the scholarly field, but not all of them have been equally successful or compelling. I wish to contrast *Detritus'* ludohistoriographical game design with that of *Time Historians,* a game designed as part of a PhD project by Manuel Alejandro Cruz Martinez. The goal of *Time Historians'* development was to investigate deconstructionist historiographical gaming, and thereby to create a game with a deconstructionist historical epistemology. *Time Historians* places the players in a distant future where the discipline of history itself has been destroyed and there are no surviving records or memories of humanity's past. The player must travel back in time and collect data to restore the historical record. The game then moves into a cooperative multiplayer mode where players must vote on which pieces of data will be used to complete various parts of the historical record.

[68] Chapman, *Digital Games*, 22.
[69] Lynn Hunt, 'History as Gesture; or, The Scandal of History', in *Consequences of Theory*, eds. Jonathan Arac and Barbara Johnson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 102-103, quoted in Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story,* 75.

Martinez writes that his project is aimed at engaging players in 'a critical form of historying, where players end up recreating the process of data-gathering, analysis, and deliberation'.[70] Self-reflexivity and metagaming approaches were also considered important to the deconstructionist epistemological approach. Martinez's research-by-design approach was informed by two main avenues of investigation: scholarly research into historical video games and deconstructionist history, and focus groups interviewing potential audiences about their ideas relating to history and gaming.

The collection of the data in the first 'phase' of gameplay introduces a constraint on player affordances that conveys the selective and finite nature of historical research itself. As the player navigates ancient Egypt, they must collect 'nouns' that can later be used to fill the historical record. However, the player may only select three nouns to keep in their inventory and take back with them to the game's present-day timeline. The player is simply instructed to select their nouns 'according to [their] own criteria', and it is deliberately left ambiguous as to what that might be. The evidence-gathering process in *Time Historians* can be likened to the experience of selecting which documents to photocopy and take home in an archive to which the historian only has a couple of days' access. The game therefore successfully encodes two key ideas into its design: the fact that historical sources are selected (and excluded) by historians according to their subjective goals and ideologies, and the fact that historical research is inevitably limited by time and material constraints.[71] As mentioned above in my discussion of *Paradise Killer*, such an approach towards evidence-gathering could have enhanced *Paradise Killer*'s deconstructionist examination of narrative creation.

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[70] Manuel Alejandro Cruz Martinez, 'The Potential of Video Games for Exploring Deconstructionist History' (Dissertation, PhD: University of Sussex, 2019), 152.
[71] Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth and Reference,* 129-131.

Time Historian's deconstructionist epistemology falls somewhat flat in its execution during the voting phase of the game. In the game's second phase, factual sentences appear on screen with one word removed. Four of the 'nouns' collected by the players are randomly chosen to appear on screen, and the players must then vote which of the nouns should be chosen to fill this sentence. The noun with the most votes is inserted into the sentence. Green ticks appear for the players who together voted for the most popular answer, and red crosses appear on those who voted for any other response. Importantly, the answer designated as 'correct' here is determined solely by popular vote, not by factual correctness. However, although Martinez states in his thesis that he did not wish to offer the player a 'right' answer, the 'right' (accurate and truthful) answer is often obvious, such as in the following example (Figure 1):

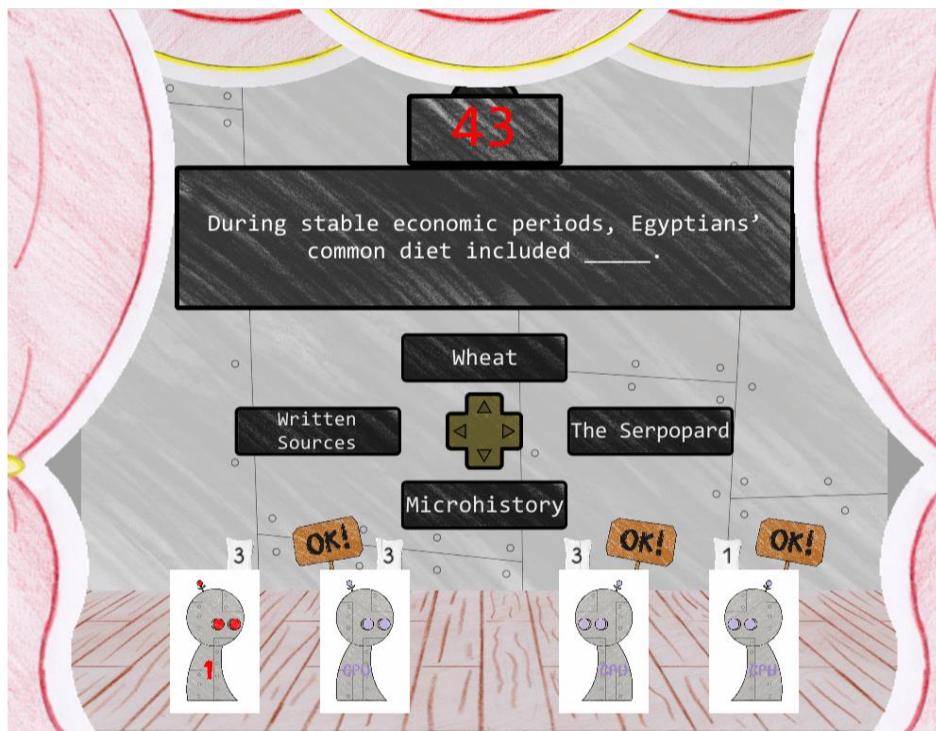

Figure 1: Screenshot from Time Historians *(reproduced in according with Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License).*

In other examples, all the possible answers given are nonsensical (Figure 2):

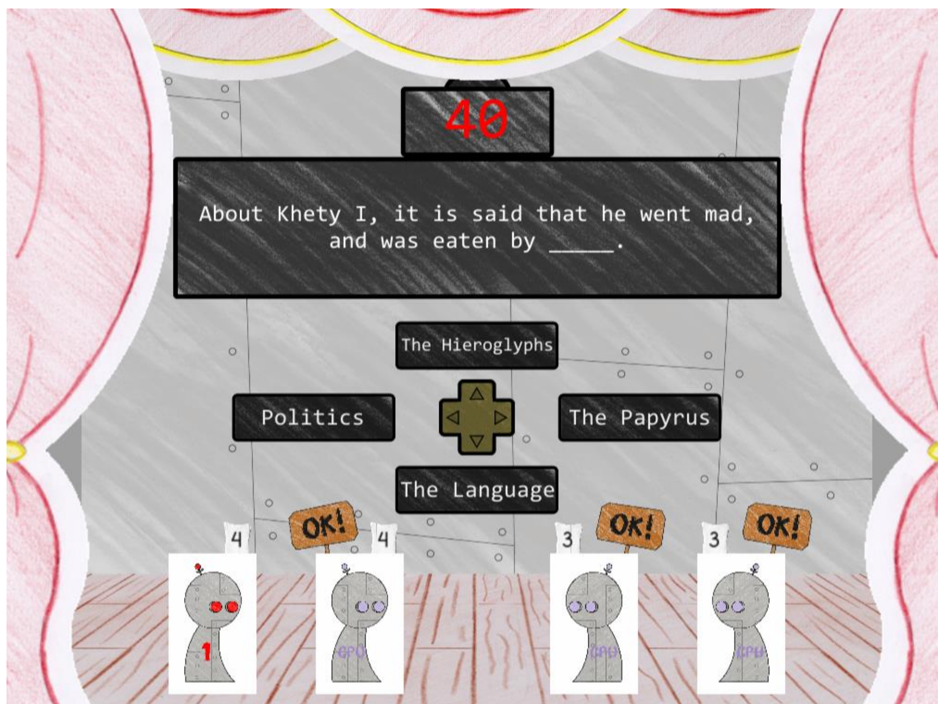

Figure 2: Screenshot from Time Historians *(reproduced in according with Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License).*

One can contrast this with *Detritus*, where the 'correct' option is entirely indeterminate, no clear right answer or narrative emerges, and all the interpretations presented are roughly equally plausible (even if some are more appealing than others). In *Time Historians*, however, nobody would think it plausible that, to take an example from the game, 'Historians use Romans to examine and analyse a sequence of past events.' The game informs the player that once the voting is complete, they can 'see the historical narratives [they] have created'. However, they are not really narratives at all in the sense that we understand and use the term 'historical narrative'. Rather, they are bits of historical trivia. *Detritus*, with its competing accounts and ideological interpretations of the same event, can be said to allow the player to construct historical narratives. *Time Historians* cannot be said to offer this same affordance.

Time Historians would have been considerably more compelling and deconstructionist if it had allowed the players to play with genuine interpretations of the past, rather than inserting

factoids into banal sentences. Admittedly, a 'fact' is not necessarily a 'fact' when talking about the ontological uncertainty of past reality, and 'facts' can be contested. There could have been potential for an interesting investigation into this idea, but *Time Historians* stops short of executing this critique. This is largely because there are such obvious correct and incorrect answers in *Time Historians* that the alternative options do not read as historically reasonable or plausible to its audiences. There are a few instances where all the offered nouns might plausibly fit the given sentence, but they are few and far between, and largely a result of procedural chance.

Time Historians may admittedly have a different goal altogether from what I have discussed already. The game might merely aim to highlight how power and consensus determine what is or is not a historical 'fact' and what is set down in the historical record. Players may come away with the impression that even an idea that seems completely 'wrong' to us can be accepted as historical truth if enough people with power and influence insist that it be so. This is a compelling and perhaps frightening proposition, and potentially a way that postmodern arguments about the nature of knowledge and truth can be encoded in gameplay. Martinez's post-gameplay interviews with participants confirm the fact that this interpretation can come through despite the game's flaws. One participant, for example, said that the game made them think about the idea that 'history is determined by what sounds correct and popular consensus'.[72] The process of discovering how the voting mechanic itself works also functions as a moment of revelation for the player. Players were not informed that the 'correct' answer was determined by consensus, so many of them initially believed the game was judging them on the factuality of the response. Players eventually realised, however, that the 'correct' answer was simply the one that

[72] Martinez, 'Deconstructionist History', 175.

more people voted for. Martinez intended for this to be a ‘moment of disruption’ leading to reflection and knowledge, mirroring the concepts of rupture and critical reflection discussed in Chapter One of this thesis. Leading the players to this realisation through gameplay, allowing them to arrive cognitively at this discovery themselves, is arguably a powerful and effective way of introducing players to deconstructionist ideas.

However, the efficacy of this argument is undermined in the game by the simplistic factual nature of the content, and the fact that the voting options are often so nonsensical as to be completely implausible. Martinez’s post-gameplay interviews confirm this: many of the participants were focused on choosing the ‘correct’ answer, an effect I contend is a result of the content being so fact-based. One participant even described the game as being more about ‘making nonsense sentences’ rather than making history – a sharp contrast to *Detritus*’ nuanced negotiation of competing perspectives and narratives. Furthermore, even the promising argument about the limitations of historical evidence collection is undermined by the fact that all possible pieces of evidence appear in the voting phase anyway by virtue of the four-player system. All pieces of evidence are usable regardless of what the player selected. Had the limited inventory meant that certain pieces of evidence were completely lost if not picked up by the player, the arguments about selectivity and evidence might have been more powerful.

Martinez argues that the game successfully engages with deconstructionist historical epistemologies, and I agree to a certain extent. It emerged from Martinez’ research that players did become aware of how historical ‘fact’ can be determined based on power and consensus. The game was evidently a worthy and useful experiment that resulted in some interesting gameplay mechanics. I strongly admire any attempt to create a game ‘in which players can explicitly recognise their aim of creating historical narratives and ponder about it’, as Martinez stated was

his goal.[73] However, I question whether players would be able to meaningfully extrapolate this insight to real-world historical understanding, given the nonsensical nature of the game's affordances. More work needs to be done to refine *Time Historian's* execution, despite having the best of intentions.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how existing video games show examples of engaging with deconstructionist and postmodernist historical epistemologies. The games discussed in this chapter take advantage of the dynamic flexibility and complexity of digital media to communicate key tenets of deconstructionist historical thinking. Games like *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* give players the ability to experiment with chains of causality and to explore alternative options. The multiplicity of historical narratives in such games allows us to avoid teleological histories that frame what has happened in the past as inevitable. The easy ability of games to present multiple conflicting interpretations that do not have to resolve into a single truth allow historians to dispel the existence of a coherent Great Story and instead explore the ambiguity and indeterminacy of the past. It is thus evident that the 'alternatives, possibilities, maybes' and 'unknowns' that conventional narrative films often struggle to acknowledge, according to Rosenstone, can be the natural domains of the historical video game.[74] Historical games designed along the lines of *Paradise Killer* and *Detritus* could allow us to counteract the tendency in much historical media to, as Berkhofer writes, '[conceal] how sources become evidence in historical practice and how histories are put together as texts'.[75] Instead, audiences can be invited to

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[73] Martinez, 'Deconstructionist History', 204.
[74] Rosenstone, Robert, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 58.
[75] Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story,* 69.

participate in aspects of historical practice, such as the selection of evidence and the evaluation of competing interpretations. As a result, audiences can be introduced to elements of critical historical thinking and participate in the creation of history for themselves.

Digital games and their complex historical epistemologies potentially have significant utility in both conventional history education and the development of a public historical consciousness. Historical theorists and educators have criticized the pedagogical tendency to adhere to 'descriptive-event history' (the telling of a complete story) instead of focusing on how historical narratives are constructed from fragmentary evidence.[76] Esther Yogev has argued that, in order to fulfil the vital task of strengthening political-critical thinking in history education, learners must instead be encouraged to do their own 'historying' through navigating 'fragments of information and different perspectives'. In other words, learners must be given access to the 'historian's toolbox'. Furthermore, Yogev cites a 'meeting with a narrative Rashomon', in which students are exposed to conflicting historical accounts, as another central tenet of critical historical education with positive political and social outcomes.[77] As demonstrated in this chapter, games have significant potential to explore the multiplicity of historical narratives in elegant, accessible ways. By giving the public access to the tools of the historian, there is potential for games to engage the general public in a more sophisticated, critical, and nuanced historical process than has hitherto been the case.

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[76] William Stow and Haydn Terry, 'Issues in the teaching of chronology', in *Issues in History Teaching*, ed. James Arthur (London: Routledge, 1999), 83-97.
[77] Esther Yogev, 'On the Need to Strengthen Political-Critical Thinking in History Education', *International Review of Education* 59, no. 5 (2013): 636-641.

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORICAL CHOICE, AGENCY, AND COMPLICITY IN GAMES

Chapter Outline

Chapter Three engages with concepts of choice and complicity in historical games. This chapter examines how video games can help audiences understand crucial historical questions of why people in the past acted the way they did and how they could have made the choices they did, even when they seem difficult to comprehend for a contemporary audience. I begin with general discussions of the concept of agency inflation and the nature of choice in gaming. I will then introduce Jeremiah McCall's Historical Problem Space (HPS) framework as a way of analysing how historical choice is constructed in games.[78] I will examine how HPS-informed pedagogy was implemented in a university classroom setting via the 'Purges' game, a tabletop-style roleplay I implemented in a 2018 course on Stalin's Russia. My discussion of this game will elaborate on ludohistorical arguments about choice and agency under terror. As players navigate these problem spaces, they become more deeply aware of what choices faced people in the past, and how these choices were shaped by historical context. This digital practice, I argue, can counteract the tendency to become teleological and to inflate individual agency in hindsight.

Chapter Three also moves towards the theme of the Holocaust by investigating how games portray complicity with authoritarian regimes and human rights abuses. I argue that games can better help us understand an especially troubling historical question: how could ordinary people become bystanders and perpetrators of horrific historical crimes? To answer this question, I examine the games *Train* (2009) and *Papers, Please* (2013). These games lure the player into

[78] Jeremiah McCall, 'The Historical Problem Space Framework: Games as a Historical Medium', *Game Studies* 20, no. 3 (2020).

'dark play' practices and implicate them in virtual crimes, thereby causing them to reflect on the historical significance of systemic conformity and complicity. These case studies illustrate how games might ethically and constructively engage with historical bystandership, implication, and complicity in the Holocaust.

Understanding historical choice

Thus far, we have seen that the interactivity and flexibility of games can be advantageous for fostering historical thinking. In this chapter, I will expand on the idea of choice in historical games by closely examining how games can contextualize and complicate historical choice for a contemporary audience. Building on the previous chapters' explorations of video game history as anti-teleological, I will discuss how games can aid perspective-taking, and thereby help mitigate the pitfall of agency inflation when evaluating the past. I will focus especially on how ludic mechanics of choice can be used to explore a specific historical issue: the complicity of historical actors in repressive political regimes, human rights abuses, and atrocities. An essential part of this discussion is the moral framing of historical decision-making in contemporary works, and the possibility of empathy with those in complicit, antagonistic, or condemnable moral positions. I will argue for the ability of games to complicate moral judgments on past actors. My discussion will provide examples of how games might explore ambiguity, uncertainty, and the 'choiceless choices' faced by those in extreme scenarios such as the Holocaust. This chapter will therefore establish a case for the potential of games to achieve complex and meaningful examinations of historical decision-making, a central element of their ability to provoke historical thinking.

Agency inflation

When evaluating the choices made by historical actors, we tend to inflate the amount of agency they had (or perceived themselves to have had) at the time. We cast binary 'right/wrong' judgments on their actions based on our knowledge of the result. We know these outcomes due to the benefit of hindsight, making it hard to avoid teleological explanations. As Tom Apperley states, 'what was contingent in the past seems inevitable in hindsight'.[79] A pertinent example of this can be seen in contemporary judgments about the decision made by Jewish families regarding whether to try and flee Nazi Germany in the years preceding the Holocaust. It is easy to look back and judge actions by the outcome. A present-day audience may think of the decision to leave as the obvious 'right' choice and wonder why more Jews did not make that choice.

An example of such a binary judgment can be seen in an unnamed 'serious game' made by David C. Moffat and Angela Shapiro. The game aims to educate schoolchildren about a Polish survivor's flight through 1940s Europe. Although Moffat and Shapiro's game is commendable in many ways, their discussion of the choices made by the protagonist's family remain within a good/bad dichotomy, framing decisions to stay or leave as 'right' or 'wrong'. They defend this judgment teleologically in light of the outcome of survival: leaving was the 'right' option, since the protagonist survived.[80] However, evaluating such a decision on its own terms can reveal that the options were not so clear, and the outcomes not so discernible, for actors at the time.

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[79] Tom Apperley, 'Modding the Historians' Code: Historical Verisimilitude and the Counterfactual Imagination', in *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, eds. Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B.R. Elliott (New York, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 189.

[80] David C. Moffat and Angela Shapiro, 'Serious games for interactive stories about emotionally challenging heritage', paper presented at *2015 Digital Heritage,* Granada, Spain, 2015, 3.

The historiography and popular imaginings of Nazi-occupied Europe provide a prime example of our tendency to imagine past actors had more agency than they actually did. Drawing on the work of Timothy Snyder, Vesna Drapac and Gareth Pritchard have argued that modern consideration of the actions available to those living under Nazi German rule have become subject to 'agency inflation' – the 'exaggerated sense of the options that were available to people in Hitler's Europe'.[81] According to Drapac and Pritchard, contemporary perspectives tend to suggest that 'ordinary people had a plurality of choices'. Due to the presumed availability of choices, the choice *not* to resist actively is often judged as a choice to collaborate by default. However, these paradigms underestimate factors that constrained behaviour. Such factors include imperfect knowledge of the situation, and the 'intensity of terror and the extent to which fear seeped into social relations'. State violence was such an integral and fundamental part of everyday life that it placed significant limitations on the options available to most citizens.[82] If this led to collaboration, it was more often than not a form of what Snyder calls the 'collaboration of negative opportunism, the desire to avoid something worse'.[83] Our inability fully to perceive the limitations on individual agency in these periods often means we cannot adequately understand or explain the significance of individual choices. In turn, this affects our moral assessments of the actions of those living through these periods, as we project our anachronistic, teleological sense of their available choices onto the past.

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[81] Vesna Drapac and Gareth Pritchard, *Resistance and Collaboration in Hitler's Empire* (London: Palgrave, 2017), 94.
[82] Drapac and Pritchard, *Resistance and Collaboration,* 94.
[83] Timothy Snyder, 'Author's Response by Timothy Snyder, Yale University', *H-Diplo Roundtable Reviews* 13, no. 1 (2011): 25; Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 398.

Games, agency, and morality

This chapter argues for ludic simulation as a way of complicating historical choice and countering the agency inflation described by Drapac and Pritchard. Removing the blinkers of hindsight involves the sort of perspective-taking Seixas advocates, wherein we consider the options that seemed available from the limited viewpoint of the historical actor.[84] It requires taking agency into account and balancing it with constraining contextual factors. Video games can situate the player within the problem space of the historical actor, subjecting them to the same constraints and limitations and, with good design, the same uncertainties regarding outcomes. This sort of perspective-taking can have a powerful anti-teleological effect by making salient how viable alternative possibilities seemed to actors at the time. As Niall Ferguson describes it, 'what actually happened was often not the outcome which the majority of informed contemporaries saw as the most likely: the counterfactual scenario was in that sense more 'real' to decisionmakers at the critical moment than the actual subsequent events'.[85] Simulation of historical decision-making can show how what seems 'inevitable in hindsight' was, in fact, highly contingent in the past.[86]

This chapter's discussion of choice is linked to the concepts of historical empathy discussed in Chapter One, and to the concepts of teleology and contingency discussed in Chapter Two. According to Peter Seixas' 'big six' historical thinking skills, history education should promote an understanding of human agency through the lens of cause and consequence. Seixas argues history should 'set human decisionmaking in context in a way that communicates choice and intention, while accounting for historical context and conditions'.[87] Furthermore, Seixas

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[84] Peter Seixas, 'A Model of Historical Thinking', *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 49, vol. 6 (2017): 601.
[85] Niall Ferguson, *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (London: Picador, 1997), 88.
[86] Apperley, 'Modding the Historian's Code', 189.
[87] Seixas, 'A Model', 601.

emphasizes the inescapable ethical dimensions of history, including our judgments of historical subjects' actions and decisions. All this must be achieved with the help of what Seixas calls 'historical perspective-taking', and what I have extended to include 'historical empathy' more broadly in Chapter One.[88] Historical understanding requires examining how an actor's choices and actions were reasonable on their own terms, given their contexts, affordances, and limitations. Such a mode of understanding may perhaps bring us closer to a useful and historically grounded ethical self-reflection in the present.

Games have a unique capability to depict human choice due to the player's agency in the game environment. According to Alison Landsberg, the agency exercised by playing a game is 'ontologically different' from the experience of watching a film or reading a book, 'no matter how engaged we are with the representation' in the latter.[89] It is true that films and books are not consumed passively. However, Janet Murray makes an important distinction between the agency in video games and the activity involved in consuming other media. Murray asserts that 'activity alone is not agency'. Rather, agency is when the media environment responds meaningfully to player actions. Agency is 'the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices' in a world that is 'dynamically altered by our participation'.[90] Something in the diegetic game world changes according to player action, whether it be a path opening, a different dialogue option selected, a different item used, or an enemy defeated. Even in the most linear games, the meaningful responsiveness of the game environment to the actions of the player sets it apart from a visual novel, webcomic, or hypertext narrative. The player must

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[88] Seixas, 'A Model'.
[89] Alison Landsberg, *Engaging the Past: Mass Culture and the Production of Historical Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 163.
[90] Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 126-128.

decide upon and carry out an action that has some sort of value attached to it in order to progress the game, whether it be talking to someone, examining an object, or opening a door. The effects of these actions are ontologically different from turning a page or clicking 'next'. Games, therefore, largely unfold based on player choice. Following from this, if 'history on film is largely about emotion', as Robert Rosenstone argues, we might say that history in games is largely about choice.[91]

Games frequently become a 'procedural possibility space for moral choices'.[92] The affordances offered to the player have ethical implications both inside and outside the diegetic narrative. However, moral choices in games can often be quite simplistic. As discussed in the previous chapter, there are many games that position choices along a 'good/bad' binary and subsequently lead players to 'good/bad endings'. The binary procedural construction of choice-consequence is not only simplistic but teleological. It assumes that 'good' choices lead to 'good' outcomes and vice-versa. *Infamous* (2009) is an example of a game that has been criticized for its overly simplistic binary construction of moral choice. The game encourages the player either to be extremely virtuous (saving civilians, avoiding collateral damage, etc.) or extremely evil (killing civilians, causing riots, destroying food supplies etc.). The endings, respectively, see the player either save their city and bring peace, or plunge their city into chaos and rule as its evil overlord. Skill progression is programmed so that the player can only unlock the strongest in-game abilities if they reach either extreme end of the moral binary. The procedural rhetoric therefore essentially excludes any possibility of complicating moral choice or remaining in an

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[91] Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 118.
[92] Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 284.

ambiguous 'grey' zone. Although traversing the extremes of morality may be a fun gameplay gimmick, it lacks the sophistication and nuance of real-life moral decision-making.

Games can and often do adhere to a good/bad moral binary, but there are many examples of games that offer more complex choices without overly moralised consequences. Many simulation games offer the player a 'sandbox' of goals from which they may choose. According to McCall, these games are about 'making choices under a set of limitations', and there is often 'no clearly better answer, just a question of goals' chosen by the player.[93] *The Sims* (2000-) is an example of a simulation game where goals are almost entirely left up to the player. Consequences are not generally framed in moral terms. For example, the game does not punish or condemn you if you kill a player-character. There are also many video games that linger in the moral 'grey zone' or refuse to provide clear moral judgments on player choices, some of which were discussed in the previous chapter. *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* (2019), explored in detail in the previous chapter, is one such example. In this game, none of the four possible story paths is presented as morally better or worse than the other, just as none of them is presented as the 'true' story or 'canon' option. *Deus Ex* (2000), similarly, offers three different ideological choices for the future of humanity at the conclusion of the game, none of which are presented as morally or competitively better or worse than the others. The three endings are not intended to measure how well the player performed in the game, nor are they responsive to the player's in-game ethical behaviour. Rather, they are offered as catalysts for player interrogation of the merits of various political factions and agendas presented throughout the game. Bogost describes the complex 'procedural morality' of *Deus Ex* as an examination of 'the deep uncertainty of justice and

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[93] Jeremiah McCall, *Gaming the Past: Using Video Games to Teach Secondary History* (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), 33.

honour in an ambiguous global war'.[94] It is this commitment to 'deep uncertainty' that allows the game to explore nuanced, complex ethical and socio-political conditions. *Deus Ex* and *Fire Emblem: Three Houses'* endings resist conventional 'good ending' and 'bad ending' categorisations. Rather than a value system being imposed on the player, the player is allowed agency in deciding upon the 'best' course of action.

There are also games that deliberately or incidentally constrain player choices. Many games with linear and predetermined gameplay paths take the form of what Jaroslav Svelch calls a 'fixed justice' scenario, in which the player must conform to a particular moral behaviour and cannot progress unless they do.[95] In such games, a nonviolent alternative way to proceed is not available to the player. These approaches are often a result of the imposition of a gameplay genre such as first-person shooter. They therefore generally lack any moral or historical intention beyond an entertaining way to interact with a setting. However, this is not always the case, as demonstrated by *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012), a game that deliberately constrains moral choice in order to explore issues of trauma, agency, complicity, and war crimes in the U.S. War on Terror.[96] As Ryan Lizardi argues, the 'absence of choice' in a historical game like this can point us towards recognizing the importance of choice, or a lack thereof, for historical actors.[97]

Whether a game has a fixed or flexible ethical system has implications for the moral dimensions of historical thinking. Thinking about how agency, choice, and morality are constructed in historical games can help us answer several questions. Is a given game arguing that there was a historically 'wrong' or 'right' way to behave in a particular scenario? Is 'wrong'

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[94] Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 286.
[95] Jaroslav Svelch, 'The Good, The Bad, and The Player: The Challenges to Moral Engagement in Single-Player Avatar-Based Video Games', in *Ethics and Game Design: Teaching Values through Play*, eds. Karen Schrier and David Gibson (IGI Global: Hershey, 2010), 58-59.
[96] Holger Pötzsch, 'Selective Realism: Filtering Experiences of War and Violence in First- and Third-Person Shooters', *Games and Culture* 12, no. 2 (2017): 168.
[97] Ryan Lizardi, 'Bioshock: Complex and Alternate Histories', *Game Studies* 14, no. 1 (2014).

or 'right' judged teleologically according to the outcome we know in hindsight? Does this game allow the player anachronistically to impose contemporary morality onto the past, or does it attempt to constrain the player within the value system of a historical actor? Are the limitations and affordances available to the player historically grounded and reasonable? Do they represent how a historical actor might have viewed their situation at the time? Perhaps most importantly, thinking about historical games through the lenses of choice and agency can help us to explore networks of causation, motivation, power, chance, and knowledge that assist us in explaining human behaviour in the past.

Mapping ludohistorical choices with the historical problem space framework

One of the most useful frameworks for conceptualizing ludic historical meaning in games is McCall's Historical Problem Space (HPS). We can broadly think of a historical problem space as an abstracted ludic representation of a particular historical actor and their context. The HPS is a method of mapping out the relational functions of these abstracted game elements to understand better the meanings they assume when they operate within a ludic system. A core tenet of the HPS is that historical elements in a game cannot only be judged according to their representational (textual or visual) fidelity. They must also be evaluated on how they function as interactable elements of a game world. Thinking about a game in terms of its HPS first involves identifying the nature of its player agent(s) and whose problem space is being represented. It then maps out the player goals, what sort of virtual game world they are in, and how they can interact with or be affected by game elements. Game elements include agents (allied, enemy, or neutral), resources (for example, money, building materials), obstacles (such as unnavigable terrain or hostile animals), and tools (weapons, vehicles). When looking at any given element, the historian

can then ask: 'How does the overall historical problem space, including genre conventions, shape how this component functions and, accordingly, presents historical content?'[98]

The HPS framework is especially useful for mapping out how choices are represented procedurally in games, making it a relevant approach to issues of choice and complicity. The HPS rests on the 'central idea of games as a set of affordances in an environment and sees gameplay as mostly about perceiving affordances'.[99] Therefore, according to McCall, the HPS can map out 'how game designers … represent contextualized decision making in the past through gameplay'. The affordances (abilities, possible actions, environment, narrative paths etc.) and resources (money, food, social connections, etc.) in a game create a ludic system. This system positions the player within the decision-making context of a historical actor. Such systems are always abstracted to some extent, as one can never represent the infinite complexity of the past in its entirety. The critical question then becomes whether the choices made by the developers in their construction of the problem space are grounded in defensible historical argument.[100] By thinking about a potential Holocaust game as the representation of a particular historical actor's problem space, new ways to interact with the past and address complicity emerge. I will examine complicity and the Holocaust later in the chapter. First, however, I will present a case study that illustrates historical choice, agency, and knowledge more broadly.

The *Purges* game: choices under terror

This section will detail an analogue (pen and paper) game I developed for classroom use that demonstrated ludohistorical arguments about choice and agency. This thesis does not focus

[98] McCall, 'The Historical Problem Space'.
[99] McCall, 'The Historical Problem Space'.
[100] McCall, 'The Historical Problem Space'.

primarily on games for classroom use. However, many of the lessons learned from attempting to communicate historical arguments in formal school settings are highly instructive for those looking to use historical games as a public engagement tool. This is because game mechanics can be deployed in a range of games, contexts, and settings to achieve a desired argumentative end. In this case study, it became evident that games illustrating the constraints, affordances, and challenges of moral decision-making under authoritarian regimes can be educational and engaging both in and out of the classroom. The complexity of the historical problem spaces that games can create, and the immersive-yet-critical nature of their engagement with the player, enable them to convey these ideas effectively to students and, by extension, the general public.

In 2018, I was a teaching assistant for 'Russia in War and Revolution 1917-1953', a third-year undergraduate history course at the University of Adelaide. During this course, I designed and implemented a short interactive text-based narrative game that put the player in the position of a university student during Stalin's Great Terror of the 1930s. The goals of the game included (1) fostering historical empathy and perspective-taking with someone living through Stalin's Terror, (2) examining the nature of historical choice, and (3) highlighting the effects of uncertainty, paranoia, and information control on decision-making that characterised the period. The game generally took between 10-15 minutes to complete and was read orally to students. However, it was based on the structure and style of text-based adventure games and so it could easily be adapted in software such as Twine and distributed in a digital format. Throughout the game, the players were presented with a scenario that forced them to make a series of choices. Some choices' outcomes were affected by dice rolls. Depending on the choices made and the dice roll results, multiple story paths branched off and led to one of twelve different possible endings – a considerable level of complexity given the game's short length. The game was

delivered to small groups of 4-7 students who had to reach consensus for each in-game choice. This game mechanic was designed to encourage critical interrogation of affordances, limitations, and potential consequences.

At the commencement of the game, a prologue given to the students outlined their inhabited character and contextualised the action. It explained that they were collectively to assume the role of a university student in Moscow in 1938, as the Purges began to intensify and people around them began to 'disappear', arrested by the NKVD. Intoxicated by alcohol at a gathering one night, the player-character and their two best friends told anti-Stalin jokes to each other. Not long afterwards, one of the friends, Larissa, disappeared. The game then progressed with a series of choice-driven scenarios. For example, players first had to decide whether to contact the third friend present at the gathering to agree on a common story about what happened that night. Players then decided whether to denounce their friends pre-emptively or do nothing, whether to attend a summons to interrogation or try to flee, what to say at the investigation, and so on. Earlier decisions had consequences later in the game. For example, if players denounced one of their friends early in the game but later were arrested for their own treason, they may have been able to get a lighter sentence due to their earlier display of 'patriotism'.

One of the game's main purposes was to show players what sort of conditions might have led someone to make deals with the secret police, denounce a friend, or otherwise collaborate in the apparatus of state violence and oppression. By assuming the role of an historical actor and inhabiting a historical problem space framed by various affordances and opportunities, players could see and understand the complex systems underlying historical choices. Such an approach is also taken by the game *Papers, Please*, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

The major impetus behind the *Purges* game's creation was to show students how difficult it was to foresee the consequences of one's decisions during this period. Placing players in the game's specific historical problem space removed the benefits of hindsight and allowed players to experience how historical actors did not necessarily have the information, freedom, or foresight to predict the outcome to which their decisions might lead. At the commencement of the game, the players did not know why Larissa disappeared or whether she had been arrested. Similarly, it was unknown whether Larissa had already denounced the player-character or not. These deliberate gaps functioned as constraints on player behaviour that affected their decision-making. Players therefore had to consider carefully the potential consequences of their actions. For example, players might have reasoned that, if Larissa had been arrested, it was quite likely that she may have talked about the jokes at the party. It therefore might have been prudent to denounce her pre-emptively to save one's own skin. However, she may not have talked at all, and denouncing her might have led to the needless betrayal of a friend. Later in the game, players discovered that Larissa was colluding with the NKVD, a potentially unforeseen twist that cast earlier decisions in a very different light. The dice roll mechanic was also introduced to mimic the role of historical chance and unpredictability. This was intended to reflect that in Stalin's Russia, there was arguably a level of arbitrariness to the Terror that made future outcomes very difficult to predict (and therefore, to systematise into a historical game). Despite being directed from the centre, the state apparatus enforcing terror was large, cumbersome, and frequently driven by personal agendas.[101] The outcome of one's trial or interrogation could very well have relied on random and unpredictable factors, like the mood of the interrogating officer on a given day.

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[101] Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 168-170; Peter Kenez, *A History of the Soviet Union from the Beginning to the End* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 103-11.

The ludic structures of the historical problem space were therefore designed specifically to communicate historical arguments about agency, choice, and knowledge in the Stalinist period. The *Purges* game was designed to reflect the general confusion, lack of information, and unpredictability of consequences that Soviet citizens experienced during the 1930s. The game was an example of how one might combat agency inflation in historical analysis. It illustrated how for those living in historical epochs of violence, authoritarianism, and uncertainty, it could be difficult to predict the consequences of one's decisions or know whether one was making the best possible choice. As twenty-first-century observers looking back, we must take many factors into account when assessing and explaining the choices made by historical actors.

Choice, complicity, and 'playing the bad guy'

The issues of historical choice and agency become especially pertinent when thinking about complicity. The question of how seemingly ordinary people can become part of the mechanisms of terror, abuse, and atrocity remains pressing for both historians and the public. As I will argue in this chapter, games have a unique ability to depict complicity. This is due to their interactive nature, demanding action from the player in order for their historical narratives to unfold. The *Purges* game discussed above already provided some examples. By giving the players an opportunity to participate in denunciation, it suggested ways in which historical actors may have contributed to broader mechanisms of terror from an individual, bottom-up level.

Historians have done extensive work to understand the mechanisms of bystandership and complicity, particularly in the realm of Holocaust studies. In recent years, Holocaust studies have begun to move beyond the simplistic categories that formerly dominated discussions of mass

participation, consent, and culpability.[102] Raul Hilberg introduced what is arguably the most influential framework for studying the various roles assumed during the genocidal process. Hilberg conceptualized those living through the Holocaust as belonging to one of three categories: bystander, perpetrator, or victim.[103] Although useful as broad descriptors, this 'triadic' model often finds itself ineffectual in the face of the impossible ethical dilemmas faced by those in situations such as Primo Levi's 'grey zone'.[104] Such categories often fail to capture the complex, insidious mechanisms of structural complicity that shape human behaviour. Scholars have since proposed frameworks that attempt to transcend, complicate, and introduce ambiguity to the misleadingly neat categories of the triadic model. An approach seen in Frank Bajohr & Andrea Löw's work, for example, views the actions of peoples living under Nazism through a 'prism' of behaviours.[105] Timothy Williams, meanwhile, has broken the triadic categories into fourteen sub-categories covering a spectrum of behaviour.[106] Victoria J. Barnett has similarly conceptualized 'bystander behaviour' as fluid and changeable, slipping over time into either complicity or resistance.[107] These are only a small handful of the myriad ways the categories have been developed, challenged, and extended.

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[102] For some useful works focusing on bystandership and complicity, see Frank Bajohr and Andrea Löw, eds., *The Holocaust and European Societies: Social Processes and Social Dynamics*, 1st ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016); David Cesarani and Paul A. Levine, eds., *Bystanders to the Holocaust: A Re-Evaluation* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2002); Henrik Edgren, ed., *Looking at the Onlookers and Bystanders: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Causes and Consequences of Passivity* (Stockholm: Forum för levande histori, 2012).
[103] See Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1961) and *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe, 1933–1945* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993).
[104] Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (Summit Books, 1988), 42.
[105] Frank Bajohr and Andrea Löw, 'Beyond the "Bystander": Social Processes and Social Dynamics in European Societies as Context for the Holocaust', in *The Holocaust and European Societies*, eds. Bajohr and Löw, 5.
[106] Timothy Williams, '"I am not, what I am": A Typological Approach to Individual (In)action in the Holocaust', in *Probing the Limits of Categorization: The Bystander in Holocaust History,* eds. Christina Morina and Krijn Thijs, 1st ed., vol. 27 (Berghahn Books, 2019), 72-89.
[107] Victoria J. Barnett, 'The Changing View of the "Bystander" in Holocaust Scholarship: Historical, Ethical, and Political Implications', *Utah Law Review* 2017, no. 4, (2017): 638-639.

The bystander is perhaps the most fraught and contested category of the triadic model. Although the bystander has been an increasingly popular subject of study since the 1990s, the first comprehensive attempt to map the field of bystander studies came only in 2019's *Probing the Limits of Categorization: The Bystander in Holocaust History.* Its editors introduce the volume by labelling the bystander as the 'broadest and vaguest' of the triadic model's categories. They draw attention to the proliferation of alternative concepts, including 'neighbours, ordinary people, auxiliaries, accomplices, or profiteers', as proof of the term's complexity, ambiguity, and ongoing contestation.[108] Conceptions of the bystander can span an enormous gamut within the broad category of those who do not directly murder or injure a victim, but are nevertheless part of the machinery that has permitted such a thing to happen. They can be active (a politician, administrator, menial worker etc.), passive (doing nothing to facilitate abuse, but nothing to prevent it), both, or anywhere in between. Another common thread in some approaches is a refusal of the 'bystander' category entirely in favour of asserting a near-inescapable web of implication. This is the strand of thought that accuses all Germans living under Nazism (sometimes also occupied nations and even the rest of the world) as culpable bystanders for whom silence equalled implicit consent to genocide.[109]

A central question in theories of bystandership is how much responsibility and agency to ascribe to those existing on the peripheries of genocide.[110] Michael Rothberg, drawing on Hannah Arendt, articulated the inadequacy of our frameworks for describing "'this vicarious responsibility for things we have not done": that is, for the manifold indirect, structural, and

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[108] Morina and Thijs, *Probing the Limits*, 1-2.
[109] Barnett, 'The Changing View', 633-634, 637-638.
[110] A recent example of an ongoing historiographical debate over guilt and culpability can be seen in the Dutch case, a summary of which is outlined in Christina Morina, 'The "Bystander" in Recent Dutch Historiography', *German History* 32, no. 1 (20141): 101–111.

collective forms of agency that enable injury, exploitation, and domination but that frequently remain in the shadows.'[111] Rothberg outlines how the concept of 'bystander' is insufficient to describe those who played important roles in the Nazi genocidal project, but were not direct perpetrators located in spaces of 'extreme duress' such as concentration camps.[112] Rothberg thus proposes the term 'implicated subject' to describe one who indirectly facilitates historical and political injustice.[113]

Regardless of which model one finds most valuable, it is clear that bystandership and complicity are complicated, nuanced topics that have been difficult to translate into media works. The complexity of the frameworks that have arisen in academic literature lead many works to revert to the perpetrator-bystander-victim triad. The messy and contested category of bystander, in particular, has often been ignored in media works in favour of an overrepresentation of the small number of easily identifiable 'heroes' and 'villains'.[114] That said, a number of films, including *Mephisto* (1981) and *The Grey Zone* (2001), have successfully engaged with questions of implication, complicity, and moral ambiguity. There is certainly space for these narratives in popular entertainment media.

However, as the next section will discuss, these narratives have not yet made the leap into an interactive narrative or ludically expressive form. I will suggest that interactive, simulative Holocaust works, modelled after the sort of video game typified by *Papers, Please*, hold potential to convey sophisticated understandings of complicity, implication, and perpetration that have not yet been seen in digital media.

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[111] Hannah Arendt, 'Collective Responsibility', in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2003), 157, quoted in Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 1.
[112] Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject,* 40.
[113] Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject,* 20.
[114] Wulf Kansteiner, 'Hidden in Plain View: Remembering and Forgetting the Bystanders of the Holocaust on (West) German Television', in *Probing the Limits,* eds. Morina and Thijs, 269.

One of the most pressing fears related to depictions of complicity in gaming is a reluctance to allow players to re-enact episodes of historical violence and abuse. This reluctance is what Adam Chapman and Jonas Linderoth have dubbed the 'fear of the antagonistic playable position'.[115] Giving players the opportunity to inhabit the roles of historical 'villains' has traditionally stirred controversy. The ability to play as the Taliban in the multiplayer mode of *Medal of Honor* (2010), for example, drew enough public criticism that the name 'Taliban' was removed from the multiplayer mode and changed to 'Opposing Force'. The game *1378(km)* (2010), which pits escapees against border guards during the Cold War, was similarly criticized for allowing players to assume the role of a border guard. Cancelled Holocaust-themed game *The Cost of Freedom* (2018), which I investigate in Chapter Four, was lambasted for allowing the player to play as a Nazi concentration camp guard. As Chapman and Linderoth observe, these controversies revolve around the fear of giving people the ability to re-enact episodes of historical cruelty. There are real and important moral and ethical concerns associated with this possibility. Real-life victims of these atrocities are often invoked during such debates. Critics argue that the ability to play as the historical aggressors devalues, disrespects, and trivializes the traumatic experiences and memories of real-life victims. At times, Holocaust survivors themselves have added their voices to these debates, often saying that the ludic representation of their experiences is an affront to their trauma.[116]

There are some games, however, that manage to delve into the territory of players-as-historical-antagonists without being widely considered offensive or trivial. These games show the potential for the exploration of historical complicity in interactive media, provided there is

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[115] Adam Chapman and Jonas Linderoth, 'Exploring the Limits of Play: A Case Study of Representations of Nazism in Games', in *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments*, eds. Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderoth and Ashley M.L. Brown (Routledge, 2015), 138.
[116] Chapman and Linderoth, 'Exploring the Limits of Play', 139-140.

careful structuring and framing for interaction with sensitive topics. Scholars such as Kristine Jørgensen and Marina Hassapopoulou have argued that games can provide a sophisticated way of exploring complicity due to their interactivity.[117] *Spec Ops: The Line* is perhaps the most well-studied 'antagonistic playable position' in historical gaming. In *Spec Ops: The Line*, the player inhabits the role of a traumatized U.S. solider who unknowingly commits war crimes against the civilian population of Dubai. Jørgensen has discussed how *Spec Ops: The Line* establishes player expectations of a conventional first-person shooter (FPS) that removes civilians and avoids atrocity, but subsequently subverts these expectations. It therefore makes the player complicit in the problematic implications of the FPS genre itself. Drawing on interviews with players, Jørgensen argues that interactivity causes players to feel a direct sense of moral responsibility over in-game actions.[118] It thus creates a 'meaningful sense of discomfort' that reaches outside of the fictional diegetic space and into the affective state of the player. This discomfort catalysts reflection and insight into the player's complicity in the virtual war crimes committed by the traumatised soldier protagonist. Staffan Bjork reaches similar conclusions in his analysis of *Spec Ops: The Line*, arguing that the game lures players into feeling bad about themselves by setting up a 'false frame' of expectations that is later subverted.[119] According to Jørgensen, the game's effect results in what Heidi Hopeametsä and Markus Montola call a *positive negative experience*. They define a 'positive negative experience' as an intense and distressing experience that is nonetheless gratifying in its catalysing of new reflections and revelations. In the case of *Spec*

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[117] Marina Hassapopoulou, 'Playing with History: Collective Memory, National Trauma, and Dark Tourism in Virtual Reality Docugames', *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 16, no. 4 (2018); Kristine Jørgensen, 'The Positive Discomfort of Spec Ops: The Line', *Game Studies* 16, no. 2 (2016).
[118] Jørgensen, 'Positive Discomfort'.
[119] Staffan Bjork, 'Fabricated Innocence: How People Can Be Lured into Feel-Bad Games', in *The Dark Side of Game Play*, eds. Mortensen et. al., 185.

Ops: The Line, the experience leads to insight into trauma, war crimes, and the role of the United States in Middle Eastern conflicts.[120]

Could games' engagement with complicity extend to extreme historical atrocities such as the Holocaust? The field of digital Holocaust memory studies has begun to critique the notable representational silence of games about the Holocaust more broadly, a subject covered in detail in Chapter Four of this thesis. Holocaust scholar Wulf Kansteiner has called for Holocaust memory to '[arrive] in the digital age' and 'go fully interactive and simulative' in its examination of complicity. According to Kansteiner, this new step in Holocaust media memory is not only desirable but necessary to 'facilitate a new self-critical memory' of the Holocaust in light of the fading relevance of traditional media of Holocaust memory culture. His argument here points towards the present-day moral and political imperative of Holocaust memory culture to prevent future genocide and is worth quoting at length (emphasis my own):

> Simulative interactive narrative worlds exploring past and present crimes against humanity could also offer new, decidedly *self-critical perspectives on perpetrator and bystander biographies.* Digital game formats seem to be very well suited to have players experience in their own virtual life the slippery slope of the conformism, prejudice and fanaticism that precede genocide. In this fashion, genocide gaming could assume a self-critical quality and teach players, reflecting on their own virtual ethical failures and virtual crimes, how to recognize and counteract the early warning signs of radicalization and indifference. Since gaming with its extraordinary immersive potential offers the ambivalent (and for 'analoguers' very troublesome) experience of being simultaneously inside and outside a given simulative world, a Holocaust game could help overcome a didactic impasse that cosmopolitan Holocaust culture has thus far never been able to solve: *it could complicate and possibly undermine the troublesome structural parallels between the passive bystanders of the Holocaust of the 1940s and the relative passive consumers of official Holocaust culture of the last four decades*, a culture that has taught consumers the virtues of remembering the victims (never again genocide w/h memory)

[120] Heidi Hopeametsä, '24 Hours in a Bomb Shelter: Player, Character and Immersion in Ground Zero', in *Playground Worlds: Creating and Evaluating Experiences of Role Playing Games*, eds. Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros (Helsinki: Solmukohta, 2008), 195; Jørgensen, 'Positive Discomfort'; Markus Montola, 'The Positive Negative Experience in Extreme Role-Playing', in *DiGRA Nordic '10: Proceedings of the 2010 International DiGRA Nordic Conference: Experiencing Games: Games, Play, and Players*, 9 (2010): 4.

> but *provided little meaningful guidance in self-critically engaging with legacies of perpetration and preventing large scale victimization* (never again genocide).**[121]**

Kansteiner concurs with Brenda Romero's statement that games can 'convey complicity like no other medium can'.[122] His argument suggests promising possibilities about how games might achieve this. So far, however, these possibilities remain vague and hypothetical without a lengthier treatment of the functions and implications of digital game mechanics. Here, it is necessary to delve more deeply into the specifics of how Holocaust-themed games might engage audiences in nuanced, complex theories of complicity. In the following section, I will examine two games. The first is *Train*, an analogue Holocaust-themed board game that, although not digital, nevertheless provides an instructive example of a ludic Holocaust memory project structured around complicity. The second is *Papers, Please*, a Cold-War-inspired border control simulation game that, although not Holocaust-themed, is a powerful and persuasive example of how digital simulation games might procedurally communicate arguments about complicity under authoritarian regimes. Together, a discussion of these two games opens potentially fruitful avenues for the development of digital Holocaust memory projects using video games as a medium for mass public education and engagement.

Train: unspoken rules and systems of conformity

Although a board game and not a digital game, Brenda Romero's art game *Train* is an early and important attempt to ludically communicate concepts of bystandership and complicity in the Holocaust. By manipulating social conventions around game play, the game cleverly interrogates

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[121] Wulf Kansteiner, 'Transnational Holocaust Memory, Digital Culture and the End of Reception Studies', in *The Twentieth Century in European Memory*, eds. T. S. Andersen and B. Törnquist-Plewa (Leiden: Brill, 2017): 305-343.

[122] Brenda Romero quoted in Kansteiner, 'Transnational Holocaust Memory', 314.

conformism to social rules. *Train* tasks players with the goal of loading as many people onto a train's box cars as possible. The board consists of box cars on train tracks sitting on broken glass. Small yellow pegs represent the humans that must be loaded onto the cars. A typewriter sits to the side, and the players read instructions from typewritten cards. As the game progresses, the players move the train across the tracks, and the cards announce various obstacles that may prevent the train from reaching its destination. It is up to the players to decide how to react.[123] Cards may also contain speed boosts or ways to sabotage other players. The game encourages players 'to exhibit an almost ruthless efficiency, to carefully balance the risks and rewards of various strategies to accomplish the goal in the most rapid way possible'.[124]

The game's message hinges on its 'twist': when the player's boxcar reaches the end of its route, they flip over a 'Terminus' card that reveals the train's destination to be a concentration camp. The player then realises they have been eagerly trying to load Jews onto box cars destined for the gas chamber.[125] Initially, the concept of a game executing such a 'gotcha moment' admittedly seems manipulative and shallow, especially when dealing with genocide. One might characterise the concentration camp revelation as an out-of-nowhere 'gut punch', rather than what historians have established as a result of years of racism, oppression, authoritarianism, and warmongering. Presuming complete innocence on behalf of the player may problematically suggest that Holocaust-implicated workers were completely ignorant about the fate of deported Jews. One critic posting on boardgamegeek.com expresses these concerns in their blistering

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[123] 'Monopoly, Cluedo, Holocaust the board game?', *The JC*, October 28, 2010, https://www.thejc.com/news/world/monopoly-cluedo-holocaust-the-board-game-1.19037.
[124] Kristan J. Wheaton, 'Brenda Braithwaite Is Amazing (Game Education Summit – Part 4)', June 17, 2009, https://sourcesandmethods.blogspot.com/2009/06/brenda-brathwaite-is-amazing-game.html.
[125] Dean Takahashi, 'Brenda Romero's Train board game will make you ponder', *VentureBeat*, May 11, 2013, https://venturebeat.com/2013/05/11/brenda-romero-train-board-game-holocaust/.

review of the game, claiming *Train* has 'no sense of historical truth' and that the scenario it depicts is 'not anything close to the experience of Perpetrators in the Final Solution'.[126]

However, close examination of how the game is played reveals that it has another, less overt, yet equally prescient goal. *Train* manipulates social conventions around game play in order to interrogate issues of complicity and conformity to social rules. The game uses ambiguity and 'procedural gaps' in its ruleset as key design elements that influence how complicity, choice, and conformity to a destructive system are presented in the game. To explain this, I will draw on Devin Monnens' useful analysis of their experience playing the game and Heather Lee Logas' DiGRA 2011 conference proceedings on the meta-rules of *Train*.[127] These authors emphasise the ambiguity of the game's rules, and specifically how culturally accepted 'unwritten rules' about gameplay dictate how players interpret these ambiguities. Players tend to follow unspoken rules about how the game should be played that ultimately facilitate their participation in the simulated genocide. These rules are never explicitly stated, but generally include: do not 'skip' to the end to find out where the train is going, do not interfere with other people's belongings, play the game to win, continue playing until the end is reached, and so on. The ruleset of the game is ambiguous enough that players must navigate how to play the game through mutual negotiation, interpretation, and consensus. Monnens' reflections on their gameplay experience of *Train* are pertinent here:

> If games only progress through consensus, then a game's operation is made possible only through consensual agreement about a rule's interpretation. Ironically, genocide seems to

[126] William Boykin, 'Train – A Historical Game With No Sense of Historical Truth', *Board Game Geek,* October 11, 2010, https://boardgamegeek.com/thread/572773/train-historical-game-no-sense-historical-truth.
[127] Heather-Lee Logas, 'Meta-Rules and Complicity in Brenda Brathwaite's *Train'*, in *Proceedings of DiGRA 2011 Conference: Think Design Play* (2011); Devin Monnens, 'Tactility and Ambiguity: The Mechanics and Message behind Train', *Desert Hat*, March 8, 2010, https://deserthat.wordpress.com/2010/03/08/tactility-and-ambiguity-the-mechanics-and-message-behind-train/.

> occur through consensus as well – consensus of the common people with the will of the ruling power and perpetuated by the silent and the apathetic.[128]

In order to produce complicity, *Train* takes advantage of players' socially conditioned desire not to 'spoil' the twist for others. Romero has recounted that most players do not reveal the true destination of the trains to other players who have not yet uncovered it. Instead, they watch silently as more figures are loaded onto the trains and taken to camps. They therefore become complicit in the progression of the game due to unwritten rules about 'spoiling the ending'.[129] Of particular interest is the way some players navigate the game's rules once the twist is revealed. Players may choose to continue playing the game according to the 'rules', or they may try to 'break the system' and save the people instead. This option is more challenging, reflecting the reality of the difficult choices faced by non-conformists in Nazi Germany.[130] These players often decide to work privately against the other players on their own to prevent humans being taken to camps. Gaming news website *VentureBeat* reported that one player hid the yellow pegs under the board to prevent players from loading them onto the trains. Others declared that figures who refused to reboard escaped to Denmark or Switzerland. Some reported purposely trying to derail the trains of other players who had not yet figured out their destination, or blocking other tracks with their own train.

Fascinatingly, players still tend to perform acts of resistance and sabotage within the boundaries of the system and its unwritten rules. They continue to appear to follow the norms of the game, not revealing the twist or interfering with player belongings. Rarely do these in-game resisters share their knowledge of the end destination with the other players.[131] Romero also

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[128] Monnens, 'Tactility and Ambiguity'.
[129] Logas, 'Meta-Rules', 5.
[130] 'Monopoly, Cluedo, Holocaust', *The JC*.
[131] Logas, 'Meta-Rules', 5.

reported that audiences who are aware of the game's true goal generally do not interfere with the gameplay. Instead, onlookers watch and whisper, but do not act to prevent players from loading their cars with human figures.[132] The game can therefore act as a troubling indictment of bystander behaviour, causing onlookers to reflect on their own inaction. Through its clever manipulation of the conventions around playing a board game, *Train* acts as a mirror to real-life complicity under destructive systems where people are more likely to go along with what is easy, expected, and socially acceptable.[133]

The game generally evokes a strong emotional response in its players. Only one copy of the game exists, and Romero herself has been present for almost all playthroughs. In interviews, she has shared the reactions and behaviours of players before and after the game's revelation. *VentureBeat* reported that many players of the game felt 'a clear sense of shame' at realizing their complicity in the action. Some 'cry' or 'feel hate'.[134] At a conference presentation about the game, the revelation of the twist provoked 'audible gasps' and one attendee 'was so moved by the experience that she left the conference room in tears'.[135] A rabbi who played the game blessed it as a 'work of Torah'.[136] In some playthroughs, onlookers have been compelled to intervene and prevent players from continuing. Logas reported 'stunned' onlookers and her own 'sense of rage' when observing a player continuing to load boxcars after discovering the camp destination.[137] One blogger who knew about the game's twist wrote: 'I was reluctant to start because somehow it felt I might be made complicit.'[138] One man continued to play by himself

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[132] Logas, 'Meta-Rules', 7.
[133] Monnens, 'Tactility and Ambiguity'; Logas, 'Meta-Rules', 2.
[134] Takahashi, 'Brenda Romero's Train'.
[135] Jordan Deam, 'TGC 2009: How a Board Game Can Make You Cry', *The Escapist,* April 30, 2009, https://v1.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/video-games/conferences/tgc_2009/6021-TGC-2009-How-a-Board-Game-Can-Make-You-Cry.
[136] Takahashi, 'Brenda Romero's Train'.
[137] Logas, 'Meta-Rules', 7.
[138] Monnens, 'Tactility and Ambiguity'.

long after others had left the game; he was determined to free every person. He told Romero: 'I can't walk away.' The sense of complicity created by the game led this man to feel a sense of responsibility that extended beyond the game's frame, influencing his decision to continue playing. Here the clever ambiguity of the rules comes into play. The rules declare: '*Train* is over when it ends.' For this man, it would not end until his in-game actions alleviated his real sense of complicity and responsibility.[139]

The ultimate message of *Train* is that people are more likely to go along with the silent unwritten rules structuring their behaviour than to go against the status quo and resist complicity in atrocity. In interviews, Romero has made it explicit that complicity was the key theme she wanted to communicate with *Train*. 'People blindly follow rules … Will they blindly follow rules that come out of a Nazi typewriter?'[140] Her website also poses another key question: 'Will people stand by and watch?'[141] Most interestingly, however, her comments emphasise how macro-systems influence choice and action. 'The player is part of a system, and Romero says that all 'human-on-human tragedy has a system'.[142] Another quotes Romero as saying: 'I was trying to figure out a way to show people how you can be complicit in a destructive system. That's all a game is, it's a system of rules … But when humans do something unspeakable to other humans, there is a system there too.' *Train's* goal is to lead people to go along with the rules, to adhere to expected conventions about social behaviour and how games are played, and to therefore be complicit or even active participants in simulated genocide. Through its involvement of complicit players in a destructive system, the game also forces critical reflection on historical free will, choice, and foresight.

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[139] Takahashi, 'Brenda Romero's Train'.
[140] Takahashi, 'Brenda Romero's Train'.
[141] Brenda Romero, 'Train', accessed April 13, 2022, http://brenda.games/train.
[142] Takahashi, 'Brenda Romero's Train'.

An excerpt from Monnens' recollection of their playthrough provides a final poignant illustration of how *Train* examines the uncertainty and unpredictability of historical choice. Here, they describe how players are invited to break the game's glass window panel with a hammer before starting the game:

> What the kid doesn't realize is that he just started the Holocaust within the gamespace by reenacting Kristallnacht. I suppose I am one of the silent idlers who sat by and let it happen. I, the holder of rules. Perhaps he is just another casualty of historical ignorance, along with patrons who fail to give the fancy typewriters – actual SS typewriters used to write orders for genocide – little more than a first glance.[143]

Papers, Please: the problem space of authoritarianism

Train is a useful example of an analogue game that plays with ideas of historical complicity, but how could such a project be executed in a digital form? One of the most successful examples of a game that engages with themes of complicity, agency, and choice is *Papers, Please*. This game is notable for the way it situates the player within the historical problem space of an implicated subject. Its construction of a historical problem space simulating a complex web of affordances and limitations enables the player to interrogate the webs of complicity inherent to authoritarian regimes. *Papers, Please* can teach players about complicity without having to be retooled into a specific historical setting. However, it also provides an example of how a game set during the Holocaust could use procedural rhetoric to interrogate the categories of complicit, implicated, and bystander individuals and groups in a particular historical context.

Described as a 'Dystopian Document Thriller,' *Papers, Please* is an immigration control simulator that places the player in the shoes of a border officer. The game is set in 1982, in a fictional Eastern European Cold War era-inspired communist country named Arstotzka.

[143] Monnens, 'Tactility and Ambiguity'.

Although it has an invented setting, the game clearly draws on the history of immigration and border control in the former Soviet Bloc. It deliberately and conspicuously signposts its historical allegory through its Soviet-inspired visuals and tropes. In the game, the player is tasked with inspecting passports and immigration papers and deciding whether to let people across the Arstotzkan border. Immigration rules and requirements change regularly, so the player must keep ahead of the confusing changes and carefully examine papers for any inconsistencies or missing requirements. As waiting hopefuls approach the border, they often plead their case or share details of their plight. The player must make decisions while dealing with repercussions from the player-character's bosses and the financial needs of the player-character's family. Meanwhile, daily news reports keep the player abreast of the wider consequences of their actions on the border, for good or for ill. Much like the Holocaust resistance game, *Through the Darkest of Times* (2020), *Papers, Please* has no explicit goals, no clearly 'wrong' or 'right' way to play, and no single ending. It is up to the player to decide on their priorities and allegiances, and how much they are willing to risk for them.[144]

Papers, Please forces the player to make difficult decisions. The constraints placed on the player's decision-making processes illustrate the difficulty of making ethical choices while living and working under an oppressive regime. For example, the player-character is paid according to how well they perform their job, so if too many mistakes are caught, the player-character can be fired, lose their apartment, or even be imprisoned. Such a fate would leave the player-character's family with no financial support. The player must therefore weigh the opportunities to help others against the potential consequences that the player-character's family

[144] Elisa Budian, 'Interview with Jörg Friedrich on Procedural Rhetoric in His Game *Through the Darkest of Times*', *Gamevironments* 13 (2020): 496.

and loved ones may suffer. In one instance, the player encounters a woman whose husband has just been admitted into the country with the correct papers, but she is missing her entry ticket. She begs to be let in with her husband, terrified to be separated from him. The player is presented with a dilemma: bend the rules and let her in, or follow procedure and keep her out? If the player is caught doing the wrong thing, the player-character's pay might be docked, and their family may not be able to afford food. To make matters even more fraught, a guard may offer the player a cut of the bonus he gets every time someone is detained. When the player-character's son is sick with a cold and the family may not be able to afford the next month's rent, it may be extremely tempting to detain that desperate wife with the missing entry papers. The player-character's pay also changes depending on how quickly and efficiently they process people. However, if they overlook a mistake and accidentally admit a terrorist, several guards may die in a suicide bomber attack. The game is thus constantly placing the player in difficult moral situations and confronting them with the consequences of their choices. Rarely is a choice straightforward or uncomplicated in *Papers, Please*.

The detailed simulation of the player-character's decisions illuminates the constraints and limitations on choice that all historical actors faced in difficult situations. This is where the HPS framework can be used to understand better how these influencing factors relate to one another and exert pressure on the player's decision-making processes. A full HPS analysis would map out the resources, tools, environment elements, other agents, and so forth that make up the game's system. For the purposes of this chapter, I will map out only some of the constraints and affordances on player behaviour, emphasizing the aspect of the HPS that focuses on decision-making. By thinking of *Papers, Please* in terms of its constraints and affordances for player behaviour, the game's problem space can start to be understood as follows:

Constraints on player behaviour:

- Rent must be paid
- Family might get sick
- Risk of letting in terrorists or criminals, which means people might die
- Mistakes mean citations and docked pay
- If refused entry, refugees may be killed in their home country
- The player-character could be imprisoned for not following procedure
- Moral and ethical constraints (for example, not wanting to cause harm or take bribes)

Affordances:

- Player can take bribes
- Possibility to upgrade apartment, which would mean less cold and sickness
- Possibility to flee to a neighbouring country (but doing so requires confiscating valid passports from immigrants)
- Opportunity to help people in need (for example, by admitting refugees)
- Opportunity to aid the (questionable) resistance movement, EZIC

Each point in the above list can be further broken down into constraints and affordances, for example:

- Opportunity to aid the (questionable) resistance movement, EZIC
    - May help bring down the oppressive regime
    - EZIC offer money, which can be used to secure family's wellbeing

- May be asked to do immoral things (for example, killing someone)
- If EZIC takes power and the player helped them, they may end up in a better situation (for instance, in a better apartment, or safe from risk of imprisonment)
- If EZIC cannot take power but the player is caught helping them, they will be put to death

The HPS framework helps us map the complex constraints, affordances, goals, dangers, and motivations offered to the player. Through this framework, we can think of *Papers, Please* as a game that simulates the decision-making field of the historical actor, implementing the exerting influences of their historical context as a series of ludic rules. It is crucial to note that the consequences of these decisions are generally unknown to the player, and they are often quite unpredictable. There is enough complexity in the code for events to feel organic rather than predictably scripted. For example, if the player denies entry to a woman with incorrect papers, they would normally expect to avoid a citation. However, the woman in question is in fact the lover of the player-character's supervisor. If she is detained, the player-character is arrested the next day and a 'Game Over' screen is reached. Without the benefit of hindsight, the player cannot know whether her hints that 'the boss would not be happy' with her detainment are legitimate. There are also many things the player cannot do. A player may dearly want to help an immigrant with incorrect papers, but they know one more infraction will have them sentenced to hard labour, and then who would look after their family? Moreover, is it worth risking a hard labour sentence to help a stranger one knows nothing about? How can the player know if the person is telling the truth or if they're a criminal in disguise? The control of knowledge has been documented as a prominent feature of authoritarian regimes, making this aspect of the game's

design historically validated by existing scholarship. A detailed analysis of the game provided by Peter Mawhorter et. al. uses the lens of 'choice poetics' to confirm the efficacy of *Papers, Please's* strategic ambiguity. They concluded that the game 'uses a carefully crafted choice structure to illustrate to the player how autocratic regimes instil complicity in their citizens by manipulating uncertainty'.[145] The *Purges* classroom game discussed above achieved a similar effect for the historical context of Soviet Russia.

Papers, Please combats agency inflation by making the player subject to the constraining forces of state violence, poverty, and instability. Through its complex and historically grounded ethical dilemmas, the game can explore the limitations on choices made by historical actors. In an accessible interactive format, it engages the public in questioning why so many 'ordinary people' have historically been implicated in oppressive regimes, abuses, and atrocities. It provides an examination of the banality of the mundane, everyday jobs and actions required to make an authoritarian regime function. Much like *Train,* it illustrates a system – a system of corrupt and corrupting authoritarian bureaucracy that places significant constraints on human choice and behaviour, a system that is crafted and organised to utilize ordinary people in its mission of oppression and control. It helps us understand how people responded to historical conditions that were not necessarily of their own making, but that they were, nevertheless, embroiled in and forced to grapple with. By enabling players to experience for themselves the complicit individual's problem space, it conveys how, to quote Henrik Edgren, 'the options available to the bystander are therefore not always evident, even though it sometimes seems like

[145] Peter Mawhorter, Carmen Zegura, Alex Gray, Arnav Jhala, Michael Mateas, and Noah Wardrip-Fruin, 'Choice Poetics by Example', *Arts* 7, no. 3 (2018): 2.

they are that when we … judge the bystander in retrospect'.[146] As a result, it complicates categories of bystandership, resistance, and perpetration, and opens space for more nuanced and complex conceptualizations of implication. A game like *Papers, Please* therefore presents historians with a valuable opportunity to engender broader public understanding of the options available to historical actors and the labels we place on their behaviours, particularly in times where extreme social conformity is enforced by terror and authoritarian control.

By looking at *Papers, Please* through a historical problem space lens, it can become clear how a similar interactive game could engage with ideas of complicity and implication during the Holocaust. There are, however, still obstacles to overcome and ethical questions to grapple with for a self-critical digital memory culture around complicity, implication, and bystandership to emerge. For one, there is enduring cultural anxiety over the antagonistic playable position, a topic mentioned earlier that will be further examined in the following two chapters. It is likely that creators would need to justify clearly why an interactive, simulative experience should allow a person to facilitate simulated genocide in even the most distanced and roundabout ways. There are also enduring misunderstandings around what it means to be a 'game', and whether games can appropriately address a serious topic. As Chapman and Linderoth have discussed, framing something as a game can be seen as inherently trivializing.[147] Game developers are also faced with material constraints such as funding and marketability. I agree with Kansteiner's suggestion that such a project would be best tackled by a Holocaust memory institution, but it would require considerable resources, creativity, and innovative vision to achieve.[148]

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[146] Henrik Edgren, 'The project "Bystanders – Does it matter?"', in *Looking at the Onlookers and Bystanders: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Causes and Consequences of Passivity*, ed. Henrik Edgren (Stockholm: Forum för levande histori, 2012), 16.
[147] Chapman and Linderoth, 'Exploring the Limits', 138.
[148] Kansteiner, 'Transnational Holocaust Memory', 335.

I argue there are significant enough opportunities unique to the medium to make navigating these obstacles a worthwhile mission. The choice-based interaction exemplified by *Papers, Please* would be ideal for communicating the complexity of 'choiceless choices' to a mass audience. A Holocaust-based game's problem space could map out what Lawrence L. Langer has defined as the 'crucial decisions [that] did not reflect options between life and death, but between one form of abnormal response and another, both imposed by a situation that was in no way of the victim's own choosing'.[149] Following this, the complex moral dilemmas of the 'grey zone' could potentially be represented in interactive narrative form. Depicting the Sonderkommando directly would necessitate use of a concentration camp setting, which could easily become ethically problematic, as discussed in the next chapter. However, games also allow for abstracted visuals (as in *Papers, Please*) and nonvisual forms of storytelling, which could mitigate the ethical risk of simulating a concentration camp. There are also a range of available genres and gameplay styles. For example, the visual novel genre could translate something like Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980-1991) into an interactive form. One could easily imagine a game inspired by the trajectory of the actor-turned-propagandist at the centre of Klaus Mann's novel *Mephisto* (1936), or the 'bookkeeper of Auschwitz', Oskar Gröning. There are countless other professions that belong to the indirectly complicit individuals who make up the bureaucracy of terror and genocide—janitors, train conductors, local governors, Hitler Youth leaders, office clerks, schoolteachers, newspaper editors. Any one of these figures could have their agency, choice, and complicity interrogated through a simulated problem space like the one seen in *Papers, Please*.

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[149] Lawrence L. Langer, *Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1982), 72.

The game also presents a profoundly different view of resistance to that which is seen in most popular media, particularly in works about the Second World War. Portrayals of resistance generally adhere to a paradigm that emphasises overt, spectacular, conventionally 'heroic' acts of violent sabotage: blowing up bridges, armed uprisings, assassinations, and so on. They conform to the three major traits of popular definitions of resistance as identified by Claudia Koonz: organised, clandestine, and masculine.[150] Popular culture reflects this paradigm. Sabotage, as Mercedes Camino argues, was quickly 'established … as the more cinematic form of resistance' soon after the Second World War, exemplified by films such as *The Battle of the Rails* (1946) and *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957). Thus, the archetypical resister in the public consciousness became 'the image of a French young man wearing a beret and wiring rail tracks while a train approaches'.[151] However, the sort of resistance available to the player in *Papers, Please* is not the dramatic armed uprising seen in many films and games. Instead, the opportunities for resistance reflect those that may have been realistically available to a menial government clerk, such as ignoring protocol or bending the rules slightly for someone. This sort of resistance is often considered 'invisible', but it was far more widespread than the acts of armed men that are overrepresented in media.[152] Although 'everyday resistance' acts may seem mundane compared to the dramatic armed resistance we are used to seeing, they are not without sacrifice and consequence. *Papers, Please* conveys the tension and stakes attached to even the most seemingly banal decisions. Every act available to the player is an opportunity to resist or be complicit in a totalitarian system, but the choices are not at all simple or clear-cut, and there are potentially abhorrent consequences at every turn. Such a depiction in the popular medium of

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[150] Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics* (Routledge, 2013), 332

[151] Mercedes Camino, *Memories of Resistance and the Holocaust on Film* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2018), 9.

[152] Drapac and Pritchard, *Resistance and Collaboration*, 174-181.

video games could go a long way towards broadening and diversifying popular conceptions of resistance to include women and non-combatants, as well as other underacknowledged forms of resistance under the Nazi empire.

'Dark play' and the utility of guilt

The concept of 'dark play' can help explain how the ethically discomforting gameplay of *Papers, Please* and *Train* can function as a self-critical tool. Dark play can be defined as 'exploring subversive or immoral behaviour and allowing the player to experiment with the sinister aspects of the human mind in a safe environment built around fictional events'.[153] Although the action takes place in a game, it is not necessarily playful in the way 'games' and 'play' are traditionally understood to be fun, frivolous and trivial.[154] Mary Flanagan's book *Critical Play* engages with the constructive potential of dark gameplay: she labels the act of playing out forbidden scenes and negative scenarios as 'unplaying' and highlights its capacity for societal and political critique.[155] The concept of 'abusive gameplay' can also be included in this discussion. 'Abusive gameplay' occurs when the game itself is designed in a way that resists being played and purposely puts the player in frustrating and uncomfortable positions. Its goal is to 'deny' play and 'force it outside of its conventional rhetorics'. It can thereby '[establish] a dialogue between the designer and player' that can be used for critical ends.[156] Unplaying and abusive play have roots in Dada, Fluxus, happenings, and performance art, all forms of contemporary art that defy conventional artistic sensibilities, break the fourth wall, and involve the audience in the production or execution of the artistic work. There is therefore a long-

[153] Kristine Jørgensen, 'Dark Play in *Dishonored*', in *The Dark Side of Game Play,* eds. Mortensen et. al., 212.
[154] Mortensen, *The Dark Side of Game Play*, 5.
[155] Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 33.
[156] Miguel Sicart, 'Darkly Playing Others', in *The Dark Side of Game Play*, eds. Mortensen et. al., 100-104.

established history of provocative interactive experiences used for self-critical reflection and politico-ideological communication.[157] Video games that aim to unsettle, shock, or otherwise destabilise the relationship between the game and the player can be seen as part of this tradition, with the associated potential to be put towards critical and interrogative ends.

Guilt is a key emotion evoked by 'dark play' experiences based around difficult moral choices. Guilt becomes a mechanism of self-critical reflection as players consider what actions they performed and why. When implemented carefully, guilt can play an important role in the 'oscillation' between immersion and alienation outlined in Chapter One, where a moment of rupture can catalyse player reflection on the source of their guilty emotions. Game studies scholars have already begun analysing exactly how guilt can help convey historical arguments. For example, Rebecca Mir and Trevor Owens have discussed how the power of guilt can provoke more nuanced history in games. The adoption of a disturbing point-of-view can force players to examine certain events, such as colonisation, from different perspectives. They use the game Sid Meier's *Colonization* (1994) as an example. Mir and Owens argue that although the game itself glorifies colonisation, the game mechanics themselves consist of much dull, repetitive resources shuffling. These mechanics reveal the 'ennui of the bureaucratic evil at the core of the game' that makes the player complicit in colonialist abuses.[158]

However, scholars debate whether games can truly evoke feelings of guilt outside of the 'magic circle' of gameplay.[159] Ever since the emergence of concerns about video games causing real-life violence, there have been many studies and debates over the extent to which video game actions influence real-life morality. Some scholars argue there commonly exists a 'fallacy of

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[157] Sicart, 'Darkly Playing Others', 100-104.

[158] Rebecca Mir and Trevor Owens, 'Modeling Indigenous Peoples: Unpacking Ideology in Sid Meier's Colonization', in *Playing with the Past*, eds. Kapell and Elliott, 92-93.

[159] Bjork, 'Fabricated Innocence', 177.

ethical immersion'.[160] This concept builds on what Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman call the 'immersive fallacy': the fallacy of the belief that games will eventually reach the point where they will become indistinguishable from reality.[161] The fallacy of ethical immersion states that since players are always aware of the unreality of the game, they will never feel true guilt. Seemingly supporting this idea, a study by Torill Elvira Mortensen on player reactions to playing on the Dark Side in *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (2011) claimed that such gameplay actually conjured pleasure rather than guilt. One of Mortensen's player interviewees, 'Adrian', initially appears to confirm this: he confidently asserts that he 'will never have a guilty conscience' from playing a game, as he knows it is not real.[162]

However, further results from Mortensen's study complicate this assertion, suggesting players do feel real (moral) emotions in games. Mortensen describes how Adrian subsequently considers what he would do if the situation were real. Adrian demonstrates a 'high degree of reflection' on his game actions that show him as a 'moral being with a contextual awareness'. In the same study, another player, 'Iason', reports experiencing feelings of guilt when playing games. Mortensen argues that the emotional experiences of these players ultimately disprove the fallacy of ethical immersion.[163] Jørgensen's analysis of *Spec Ops: The Line* also points to the rhetorical power of provoking negative emotions in the player. Her interviews with players of the game reveal significant feelings of discomfort, guilt, and moral responsibility.[164] Similary, Svelch has observed that 'when morally engaged, the player also experiences real emotion over a

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[160] Torill Elvira Mortensen, 'Keeping the Balance: Morals at the Dark Side', in *The Dark Side of Game Play*, eds. Mortensen et. al., 158.

[161] Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play – Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 443.

[162] Mortensen, 'Keeping the Balance', 160.

[163] Torill Elvira Mortensen, 'Keeping the Balance: Morals at the Dark Side', in *The Dark Side of Game Play*, eds. Mortensen et. al., 161.

[164] Jørgensen, 'Positive Discomfort'

fictional event' in a game.[165] Although it is likely that a game can never evoke a real enough guilt to truly convey the magnitude of historical events such as colonization, slavery, genocide, and the Holocaust, this does not mean that guilt is entirely useless in provoking historical thinking when carefully implemented.

'Moral engagement' is the key factor to consider regarding whether games can elicit emotions such as guilt. The field of media psychology has written extensively about moral engagement and disengagement factors. Moral disengagement factors are in-game cues that lessen feelings of guilt over in-game violent actions. They thereby allow the player to enjoy the violent gameplay. These cues can include the in-game justification of violence and the dehumanization of enemies [166] Likewise, when moral disengagement cues are missing, players can experience guilt and associated negative emotions when made to perform actions they consider morally objectionable. Tilo Hartmann et. al.'s 2014 review of the field found that 'most users feel irritated, if not outright guilty or morally disgusted, if a video game urges them to engage in virtual violence against seemingly social characters that is not contextualised by moral disengagement factors'.[167] Examples cited include the torture sequence 'By The Book' in *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013) and the massacre of civilians in the 'No Russian' mission in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (2009). The violence required of the player in these instances is unjustified by the conventions of the genre or in-game disengagement factors. Such violence therefore breaks the contract of play between player and game, triggering negative moral emotions. Hartmann et. al.'s review found increasing evidence that players perceive video game characters 'as social

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[165] Svelch, 'The Good, The Bad, and The Player', 57.
[166] Tilo Hartmann, K. Maja Krakowiak and Mina Tsay-Vogel, 'How Violent Video Games Communicate Violence: A Literature Review and Content Analysis of Moral Disengagement Factors', *Communication Monographs* 81, no. 3 (2014): 310-332.
[167] Hartmann et. al., 'Moral Disengagement Factors', 312.

beings that also deserve proper moral treatment', and that in particular, 'more empathic users tend to feel guilty about harming … video game characters'.[168] It is likely that weakening of the 'magic circle' that fences gameplay off from the 'real world' plays a role in moral engagement, as Bjork argues is the case in *Spec Ops: The Line*.[169] Similarly, Jørgensen argues the emotions players experience during *Spec Ops: The Line* are made possible by compromising the safety of the 'magic circle'. Interaction in this game 'oversteps the sense of safety created by detachment'. As Jørgensen explains, 'by positioning the player as somehow responsible, the sense of safety connected to the fact that this is 'play' also threatens to break.'[170]

As indicated in Chapter One, however, it is likely that an over-reliance on emotions such as guilt could be counterproductive to fostering critical historical thinking. It is important to preserve a sense of critical distance from the emotions experienced, particularly in dealing with potentially traumatic topics such as the Holocaust. Overly weakening the 'magic circle' could have secondary traumatizing effects similar to those experienced by schoolchildren visiting concentration camp sites.[171] Karen Schrier and David Gibson have argued that, rather than trying to achieve a level of verisimilitude that provokes visceral guilt, a more systemic exploration of ethics that relies on a 'Brechtian approach of critical distancing and logical evaluation' is needed.[172] It may in fact be an advantage that a video game about historical violence could never elicit the amount of guilt that would emerge as a consequence of feeling like one is 'really there'. With slightly lowered stakes and a degree of (but not complete) emotional safety, critical historical thinking can occur without being overwhelmed by emotional trauma. This approach

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[168] Hartmann et. al., 'Moral Disengagement Factors', 311-312.
[169] Bjork, 'Fabricated Innocence', 177.
[170] Jørgensen, 'Positive Discomfort'.
[171] Michał Bilewicz and Adrian Dominik Wojcik, 'Visiting Auschwitz: Evidence of Secondary Traumatization Among High School Students', *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 88, no. 3 (2018): 328-34.
[172] Karen Schrier and David Gibson, *Designing Games for Ethics: Models, Techniques and Frameworks* (Hershey: Information Science Reference, 2011), 45.

may be the key to allowing players to engage in complicit gameplay with troubling historical periods such as the Holocaust without gratuitous exploitation, distasteful visuals, or inappropriate overidentification.

Conclusion

The case studies examined in this chapter demonstrate how historical games can explore issues of choice, agency, and complicity. If, as Bogost writes, 'choices are selectively included and excluded in a procedural representation to produce a desired expressive end,' it follows that the choices offered can express historical arguments.[173] The sheer volume, dynamism, and richness of the information that can be presented to the player simultaneously, as seen in the complex web of affordances in *Papers, Please*, indicate that highly sophisticated historical arguments can be presented. A game built around a carefully researched problem space grounded in historical argument can enable us to virtually map the affordances, limitations, and options available to historical actors. In this way, games can help us overcome teleological explanations of historical events. They can mitigate the effects of hindsight and our knowledge of historical outcomes when attempting to assess the choices of historical actors in a particular context. The *Purges* game detailed in this chapter is just one example of how ludic perspective-taking within a historical problem space can convey historical arguments about a given period, especially those related to knowledge control, uncertainty, and instability in periods of terror and violence.

The act of 'doing' in a game – the user input required to progress the action – makes the player 'complicit in the unfolding of the work'.[174] Historical complicity can therefore be examined by manipulating the amount of choice and agency permitted to players alongside

[173] Bogost, *Persuasive Games,* 45.
[174] Hassapopoulou, 'Playing with History', 370.

careful construction of the problem space and affordances. In short, presenting difficult choices in games like *Papers, Please* can illustrate the way complicity works. It can demonstrate the complex interplay between an individual's choice and their broader historical context. It raises questions such as: why did the player not take the alternative presented to them? How reasonable or realistic did that alternative seem to them at the time? What caused them to be complicit in the arrest of that person or the theft of that item? Was it pure self-interest? Were there other constraints on their behaviour that caused them to act that way, such as threats from above, illness, or starvation? This sort of self-critical reflection is key to historical understanding of complicity and historical choice.

By reflecting critically on these issues, we arrive at a key historical question that has seldom been examined in interactive media: under what circumstances do people become cogs in the machinery of terror? Such pressing historical questions are especially pertinent in the twenty-first century, where rising right-wing authoritarianism and antisemitism across the globe make Holocaust memory a crucial component of the fight against global fascism and racism. Here, we cannot ignore the moral and ethical dimensions of historical thinking, particularly when using memory culture as a self-critical tool in the present. A game that places players within the problem space of the complicit individual and invites them to grapple with its ethical and historical questions could encourage audiences to consider to what extent they themselves could become similar cogs in similar machines. Kansteiner has urged Holocaust memory to embrace digital popular culture in order to perpetuate self-critical 'never again' memory, and a game about complicity could go some way in answering that call.[175]

[175] Kansteiner, 'Transnational Holocaust Memory', 310.

PART TWO

VIDEO GAMES AND THE HOLOCAUST

CHAPTER FOUR

THE CREATION AND RECEPTION OF HOLOCAUST-THEMED GAMES

Chapter Outline

Chapter Four is devoted to the representation and reception of the Holocaust in digital games. I discuss some of the commonly cited issues regarding the reluctance of the custodians of Holocaust memory culture to embrace games as a mode of communication. These issues include trivialization, gaming as 'fun' and 'entertainment', the educational potential of Holocaust games, and the virtual re-enactment of historical crimes. To trace how these issues have played out in public discourse, I investigate three ill-fated attempts at Holocaust game development: *Imagination Is The Only Escape* (cancelled 2013), *Sonderkommando Revolt* (cancelled 2011), and *The Cost of Freedom* (cancelled 2018). Public controversies involving these three games reveal how the limits of Holocaust representation in games are constantly renegotiated in the public sphere. My investigation will examine the development trajectories of these games, as well as media, audience, and industry responses. I will shed light on the historical values held by the public, and how they influence the process of negotiating the limits of acceptable representation of the Holocaust. In short, I will seek to understand what kind of ludic Holocaust histories are considered appropriate. How, by whom, and under what circumstances are ludic media 'allowed' or 'not allowed' to represent the Holocaust? My findings in this chapter indicate that reception of Holocaust gaming is more complex, nuanced, and ambivalent than is commonly assumed.

Gaming, discourse, and the Holocaust

Videogames and those who play them have been a frequent subject of controversy since the medium's inception. Games have been criticised for a range of reasons, from outrage over graphic content to concern over addiction and cognitive damage. Responses to video games that represent violent, troubling, or otherwise traumatic historical events are currently an under-researched area of video game controversy. Games have been criticised (and sometimes lauded) for portraying events such as slavery, 9/11, and the JFK assassination. The Holocaust remains an especially important centre of debate over the limits of representation in video games. Studying critical and popular reactions to games that engage with Nazism and the Holocaust is crucial for understanding how and why games might portray traumatic histories, and what significance these representations have for popular memory.

This thesis argues that it may be advantageous for Holocaust memory to embrace video games as a medium for public historical thinking and understanding. Chapters One and Two establish the ability of games to encourage critical historical thinking via empathy and multiplicity respectively. Chapter Three outlines some powerful ways in which games can explore important issues of complicity. In light of this, we must ask why there have been almost no Holocaust-themed video games. In order to understand how and why historical complicity in the context of the Holocaust can be explored via video games, we must understand the troubled history of attempts to make Holocaust games and the public responses to them. I have already alluded to the 'limits of representation': the ongoing debate surrounding how, why, when, where, and in what manner the Holocaust might be represented in historical writing, media, and fiction more broadly.[1] This chapter examines where the limits of representation might actually lie in a

[1] Saul Friedlander, ed. *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the 'Final Solution'* (Harvard University Press, 1992).

digital Holocaust memory culture that is constantly re-negotiated through public controversies and a mosaic of discourse between official, institutional, popular, and industry channels.

The history of gaming's relationship with the Holocaust is fraught, and marked by cancellations, controversies, and taboos. Although authors such as Sue Vice have argued that Holocaust media should extend beyond strictly factual nonfiction, this openness has rarely extended to the digitally simulative counter-factualism we see in video games.[2] Studies by Adam Chapman, Jonas Linderoth, and Eugen Pfister have identified trends of whitewashing, depoliticisation, and 'meaningless quotation' that amount to an essential erasure of the Holocaust in commercial Second World War games.[3] Chapman and Linderoth have observed how military-themed games, from *Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway* (2008) to *Battle of the Bulge* (2015), remove swastikas and other symbols of Nazism. These games thereby sanitise the playable Axis powers into the 'clean Wehrmacht'.[4] Pfister has echoed these observations in his examination of the depoliticisation of war games, especially due to German censorship laws and media controversies.[5] Wulf Kansteiner concludes that 'Holocaust memory has simply not yet arrived in the digital age', citing public backlash, institutional inflexibility, and the perception of the gaming medium as 'lowbrow'.[6] For various reasons, the ludic memory of the Second World War

[2] Sue Vice, *Holocaust Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2000).
[3] Adam Chapman and Jonas Linderoth, 'Exploring the Limits of Play: A Case Study of Representations of Nazism in Games', in *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments*, eds. Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderoth and Ashley M. L. Brown (New York: Routledge, 2015), 140. See also: Eugen Pfister, '"Man Spielt Nicht Mit Hakenkreuzen!": Imaginations of the Holocaust and Crimes against Humanity During World War II in Digital Games', in *Historia Ludens: The Playing Historian*, eds. Alexander von Lünen, Katherine J. Lewis, Benjamin Litherland, and Pat Cullum (New York: Routledge, 2019), 267-284.
[4] Chapman and Linderoth, 'Exploring the Limits', 147.
[5] Pfister, '"Man Spielt Nicht Mit Hakenkreuzen!"', 275.
[6] Wulf Kansteiner, 'Transnational Holocaust Memory, Digital Culture and the End of Reception Studies', in *The Twentieth Century in European Memory*, eds. T. S. Andersen and B. Törnquist-Plewa (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 311.

is almost entirely devoid of acknowledgment of the genocide of European Jews and other victims of the Nazis' genocidal policies.

Ignoring the Holocaust in Second World War games may be a safer option, but what about the games that *do* try to address this devastating moment in history? In order to understand fully the nature of the relationship between the Holocaust and digital interactive entertainment, we must carefully examine such games, both released and unreleased. The latter may be even more important in understanding the negotiated limits of popular representation in games. Up to this point, there has been a notable lack of in-depth analysis of either the execution or reception of this small but fascinating group of games. A number of projects that attempted to engage directly with the Holocaust, such as *Imagination Is The Only Escape* and *Sonderkommando Revolt*, were cancelled amid media controversies. There are a few exceptions to this rule: *Through the Darkest of Times* (2020), *Attentat 1942* (2017), and *My Memory of Us* (2018) engage with scholarship-informed themes of civilian resistance or escape. However, such games are still rare, particularly when compared to the glut of combat-focused Second World War games. Despite the perceived inefficacy of traditional means of Holocaust education and the growing interest in digital communication, video games are still a realm in which Holocaust memory is deafeningly quiet.

This chapter unravels some of the tangled threads of the game industry's attempts to engage with the Holocaust. I examine the circumstances under which three Holocaust-themed games were cancelled for development: *Imagination Is The Only Escape*, *Sonderkommando Revolt,* and *The Cost of Freedom*. These games all attempted to portray the Holocaust in some way, all received media coverage and were controversial to varying degrees, and all were eventually cancelled. However, there are key differences between them. Where *Imagination Is*

The Only Escape intended to be educational and child-friendly, the other two were violent and graphic 'shoot-em-up' games. *The Cost of Freedom* was unique, and particularly condemned, for allowing players to assume the role of a camp guard.

In this chapter, I specifically focus on cancelled games, as the discourses therein are the most revealing in regard to public negotiation of the 'limits of representation'. Chapter Five examines a Holocaust game that was released to critical acclaim: the 1997 PC adaptation of Harlan Ellison's famous 1967 short story *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream*. My discussion in Chapter Five compares and contrasts the nature of the game and its reception with the cancelled case studies in the present chapter. It reveals some key traits that allow *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* to depict the Holocaust in ways other games could not. I intend for these two chapters combined to provide a detailed discussion of the history, current state, and possible future of Holocaust representation in digital games.

The reception of Holocaust games has significant implications for the arguments made in the first part of this thesis. If video games are a suitable medium for critical historical thinking at the highest level, as I argue in Chapters One to Three, it follows that they should be able to handle the most complex, troubling, and challenging topics. If video games are unable to engage with the full spectrum of human history, the extent of critical thinking they can foster would be limited. This would raise questions about their suitability as a medium of historical communication as a whole. The Holocaust is a locus of debate about trauma, ethics, and representation in history and popular culture. It could therefore be seen as the ultimate 'litmus test' for video games as an effective and sophisticated form of historical engagement. I do not intend to enter into the debate over the Holocaust's supposed 'uniqueness'. However, I acknowledge that the Holocaust has been treated as a uniquely destructive and traumatic event in

human history in its historiography and in popular memory. As a result, the (im)possibility of representing the Holocaust has been theorised about more extensively than most other historical subjects. There are arguably more complex and specific rules of representation around the Holocaust in public history culture than there are for many other topics.[7] If games can transcend ethical and representational issues to engage with this part of history, we might conclude that there are no inherent limitations uniquely preventing games from depicting the Holocaust as do other popular media. Recognising this fact would open up new opportunities for interactive media to foster critical historical engagement with even the most challenging historical topics, of which the Holocaust is one.

At several points in this chapter, the issue of games as 'art' is discussed in the public discourses I analyse. I will make some comments here on 'art' and historical representation, as I do not wish the reader to think I am conflating the two. The methodologies and practices of art and history are different and must be recognised as such. As outlined in the introduction, however, a core premise of this thesis is that historical arguments can be communicated through art and fiction, such as film, visual art, and historical novels. Although the process of historical research is distinct from that of creating art, in practice they can and do overlap in a work of historical fiction where art is informed by and reliant on historical research. Furthermore, whether games are perceived as 'art' influences whether they are also viewed as high- or low-brow cultural forms. As we will see, the perceived hierarchical status of a medium affects whether it is considered suitable to engage with the Holocaust. Therefore, discussions around gaming, art, and historical representation are relevant elements of the discourses outlined in this chapter.

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[7] See Friedlander, *Probing the Limits of Representation.*

I will briefly comment on my approach to collecting data from user comments in this chapter. DeVaughn Croxton and Gerd Kortemeyer have observed some difficulties in studying the efficacy of informal learning. The moment an academic study is conducted on a subject, a formal structure is imposed. Therefore, motivation to learn can easily become externalized, and it becomes difficult to measure the subject's intrinsic, independent learning motivation. For this reason, Croxton and Kortemeyer chose to gather organically created data from the Internet in the form of YouTube videos.[8] I take a similar approach in my data collection of discourses surrounding historical games and the Holocaust. This method of data collection is appropriate, since I am interested primarily in the sort of discourses Holocaust gaming triggers in organic, user-controlled environments, without the presence of a researcher, teacher, or other authority figure. There are limitations to this methodology, as outlined by Croxton and Kortemeyer. Very little can be determined about the context and prior knowledge of the posters, participants are necessarily self-selected, and a total comprehensive review of all comments on the Internet cannot be done. However, these small-sampled reviews still yield insight into the themes, values, and discourses with which players engage. To avoid 'cherry-picking' desirable results, I selected popular discussion threads and forums that generated debate relating to the subjects of interest (e.g. whether or not a game should have been cancelled). I then conducted thematic analyses of all user responses and identified the major discursive patterns that emerged. The results of these thematic analyses guided my discussions of each game's reception. I have avoided basing my main conclusions on these investigations where possible, given their necessarily selective nature. However, I draw on them where appropriate to suggest the existence of discursive phenomena that has not yet been identified or closely examined.

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[8] DeVaughn Croxton and Gerd Kortemeyer, 'Informal physics learning from video games: a case study using gameplay videos', *Physics Education* 53, no. 1 (2017): 1-2.

Imagination Is The Only Escape: Fairytale, Myth, and Misconceptions

One of the few serious attempts to create an educational commercial game about the Holocaust has never been released. This is despite its persistent creator, a crowdfunding attempt, and considerable news coverage throughout its long and embattled development cycle. The eight-year-long attempt to conceptualize, fund, and find publishing support for a game about a child living through the Holocaust is a revealing case study. It provides insight into public and media discourses surrounding Holocaust representational culture, standards of historical taste and appropriateness, and the possibilities and limitations of digital games addressing trauma and war. My research into this game revealed that, contrary to enduring widespread belief, the project was not cancelled by Nintendo because its Holocaust content was deemed inappropriate for a children's game. Rather, the project failed due to its developer's volatile personality, personal troubles, and history of failed releases. I discovered that the reception of the game concept was largely positive, and did not provoke significant condemnation. As the first, and arguably most influential, public debate about the representation of the Holocaust in video games, *Imagination Is The Only Escape* occupies a central and important place in the history of Holocaust gaming and its public response. It has spawned persistent myths about the industry's reception of Holocaust games.[9] My analysis of the reasons behind the game's cancellation is therefore a significant contribution to our understanding of public discourse around Holocaust representation and video games.

The game's notoriety dates from 2008, when a number of online news outlets began reporting on a novel controversy. Luc Bernard, a French-born British game developer with

[9] Kansteiner, 'Transnational Holocaust Memory', 312; Pfister, '"Man Spielt Nicht Mit Hakenkreuzen!"', 275.

Jewish heritage, was beginning to design a video game intended to teach children about the Holocaust. Tentatively titled *Imagination Is The Only Escape*, the game would feature a young Jewish boy separated from his parents in Nazi-occupied France, retreating into his imagination to escape the country and survive the Holocaust. Bernard first teased the game on his *Destructoid* blog in February 2008, describing it as 'Schindler's List meets Alice in Wonderland'.[10] The game was to have fantasy elements blended with historical realism and serious subject matter, in keeping with the theme of seeing the Holocaust through the eyes of a child. Screenshots on this first blog post show cartoonish anthropomorphic creatures alongside 'History Facts' noting that 1.5 million children were murdered during the Holocaust. Fantastical imagery had been used to explore the Holocaust in media previously. It may come as no surprise that Bernard listed *Life is Beautiful* as one of his favourite films, and occasionally likened his game to the film.[11] Perhaps anticipating the potential controversy, Bernard's first blog post stated: 'Yes games can be art and talk about important subjects like films can.'[12] The 33 comments on this blog post were either positive or indulged in offensive humour. There was no sign of backlash, as reflected in *Joystiq*'s initial article about the game's blog teaser, which contained no trace of unease or controversy about the game.[13]

One month later, however, the minor media storm surrounding the game began. On March 10, 2008, the *New York Times* (*NYT*) published an article titled 'No Game About Nazis

[10] Luc Bernard, 'New DS game', *Destructoid*, February 19, 2008, accessed via the Wayback Machine, https://web.archive.org/web/20110617231958/http://www.destructoid.com/blogs/lucbernard/new-ds-title-71130.phtml.
[11] Dean Takahashi, 'Holocaust game creator takes issue with World War II shooter games as distasteful (interview)', *VentureBeat*, September 7, 2013, https://venturebeat.com/2013/09/07/holocaust-game-creator-takes-issue-with-world-war-ii-shooter-games-as-distasteful-interview/2/.
[12] Bernard, 'New DS game'.
[13] Candace Savino, 'Upcoming DS game described as "Schindler's List meets Alice in Wonderland"', *Joystiq*, February 20, 2008, accessed via the Wayback Machine, https://web.archive.org/web/20150128061122/http://www.joystiq.com/2008/02/20/upcoming-ds-game-describe-as-schindlers-list-meets-alice-in-wonderl/.

for Nintendo'. The article claimed that Nintendo had refused to publish the game and that it would 'not be distributed in the United States'.[14] It implied that the 'gruesome historical facts' in the game had led Nintendo to block its release on its family-friendly platforms, suggesting it would be inappropriate to expose children to Holocaust content via their gaming platforms. On the same day, the British game publisher Altern8 released a press statement about their relationship to Bernard and *Imagination Is The Only Escape,* addressing the 'extreme media interest and misinformation' surrounding them.[15] Altern8's press release clarified that although they were publishing another game by Bernard titled *Eternity's Child*, *Imagination Is The Only Escape* was simply an early concept. Importantly, the press release also stated that 'no company, i.e. games company outside of Alten8 has been approached to discuss the viability, suitability or publishing and distribution of this game'.[16] Elsewhere, an Altern8 spokesperson confirmed to *Eurogamer* that 'no one has blocked it' and that Nintendo had not even been approached about the game.[17] It is difficult to determine the origin of the claim that Nintendo had blocked the game release. The notion firmly took hold after the *NYT* article and was repeated in many other places despite confirmation from Altern8 that this was not the case. Bernard later told *Kotaku* that Nintendo Europe were 'scared that it has bad taste' but he did not think they were trying to block the game's release.[18] Bernard stated: 'I doubt they would want to ban an educational game that is

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[14] Sridhar Pappu, 'No Game About Nazis for Nintendo', *The New York Times*, March 10, 2008, https://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/10/technology/10nintendo.html.
[15] GamesIndustry International, 'Imagination is the only escape' (Media Release, March 10, 2008), https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/imagination-is-the-only-escape.
[16] GamesIndustry International, 'Imagination'.
[17] Robert Purchese, '"No one has blocked" Holocaust DS game', *Eurogamer*, March 10, 2008, https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/no-one-has-blocked-holocaust-ds-game.
[18] Brian Ashcraft, 'Nintendo Won't Release Holocaust DS Game [Update]', *Kotaku,* March 10, 2008, accessed via the Wayback Machine, https://web.archive.org/web/20090319110929/http://kotaku.com/365711/nintendo-wont-release-holocaust-ds-game-%5Bupdate%5D.

non violent, where to [sic] profits are going to help stop another genocide, this isn't just about the war this game, it's to try and teach children something so they don't end up racist.'[19]

The potential educational value of the game emerged early as a major theme in discourses defending its existence. Bernard repeatedly emphasised the educational aims of his game in order to justify it to its detractors. Popular game critic James Stephanie Sterling covered the story with a supportive article for *Destructoid* and echoed Bernard's assertions. Sterling advocated for the importance of teaching children 'how very real and frightening this period of history was, but through a medium that they can digest better than any text book — videogames'. Sterling claimed that young people who learned about Hitler only in school lessons would not have found the subject 'compelling', and the game could make children care about the topic.[20] These sentiments anticipated later arguments made by some scholars and practitioners in the field of digital Holocaust memory. These scholars, such as Kansteiner, argue that traditional Holocaust scholarship has been evidently ineffective at warding off fascism and antisemitism in the twenty-first century. Therefore, new digital and interactive educational paradigms must be embraced.[21] Bernard also frequently compared the educational utility of games to that of films such as *Life is Beautiful* in order to validate the medium as equally capable of addressing serious subjects. The theme of comparing film to gaming will become particularly significant in discussions of the next case study, *Sonderkommando Revolt*.

Bernard also invoked Holocaust survivors and the Jewish community in order to defend the appropriateness of his game. The approval of survivors as a legitimising force in the creation

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[19] Ashcraft, 'Holocaust DS Game [Update]'.
[20] James Stephanie Sterling, 'Exclusive: The Truth About The "Holocaust" Game', *Destructoid*, March 10, 2008, https://www.destructoid.com/exclusive-the-truth-about-the-holocaust-game/.
[21] Kansteiner, 'Transnational Holocaust Memory', 335; Jennifer Rich and Mikkel Dack, 'Forum: The Holocaust in Virtual Reality: Ethics and Possibilities', *Journal of Holocaust Research* 36, no. 2–3 (2022): 201-203.

of Holocaust media is a prominent recurring theme in this chapter's case studies. This is unsurprising given the way Holocaust survivors and their trauma are frequently invoked in discussions about ethical Holocaust representation.[22] In Sterling's article, Bernard stated that 'a lot of the Jewish community have support for this game'.[23] His personal blog also repeatedly referenced survivors he worked with on development of the game.[24] A *Jewish Chronicle* article from 2008 reported that Holocaust survivor Jack Kagan initially condemned the game, prompting Bernard to travel and talk with Kagan. Bernard's blog claimed he won Kagan over in favour of the game. However, Kagan wrote to *Rolling Stone* in 2013 that 'his opinion about the game never changed. Kagan maintained: 'The Holocaust story is not for a game, for children or adults.'[25] It is likely that Bernard genuinely wanted to honour survivors by seeking out their input. He may have also been aware that the public approval of Holocaust survivors was an important factor affecting his game's reception. Sentiment might quickly turn against his game if Holocaust survivors like Kagan publicly disapproved of it.

First cancellation

Imagination Is The Only Escape disappeared from headlines until Bernard attempted to crowdfund the game in 2013. What happened to the game in the intervening five years? One might initially suspect that the *NYT* coverage incident led Bernard to abandon it. However, my investigation into the events surrounding the game has revealed that career failures and personal problems were a much greater cause of the game's cancellation than public controversy.

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[22] Chapman and Linderoth, 'Exploring the Limits', 140.
[23] Sterling, 'Exclusive'.
[24] Luc Bernard, 'World War II game still alive', June 22, 2008, accessed via the Wayback Machine, https://web.archive.org/web/20080922213420/http://lucbernard.blogspot.com/2008/06/world-war-2-game-still-alive.html.
[25] Laura A. Parker, 'Inside Controversial Game That's Tackling the Holocaust', *Rolling Stone*, August 31, 2016, https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/inside-controversial-game-thats-tackling-the-holocaust-251102/.

On July 31, 2008, Bernard's first game *Eternity's Child* was released on Steam to poor reception. The game was reportedly buggy, unfinished, and difficult to play. *Destructoid* was particularly scathing towards the game, with two of its reviewers giving it a 1/10 rating. One described it as 'the worst game I've played in several years'.[26] Deleted comments make it difficult to discern what happened next, but it is evident that Bernard publicly responded to the reviews and took the harsh criticism poorly. *Rock, Paper, Shotgun* described the events as an 'unfortunate debacle' in which Bernard went on a 'drunken explosion' in response to the *Destructoid* review.[27] Few details remain about what Bernard actually said. The incident resulted in a torrent of online hate directed towards Bernard. Commenters took umbrage against both the poor quality of the game and Bernard's defensive responses in the comments. Several comments on the *Destructoid* article simply read 'Luc, go f--- yourself'. Some of the milder comments were supportive of Bernard and praised the art, but expressed heavy disappointment with the game and agreed with the reviewers' criticisms.[28]

Shortly after the *Destructoid* fiasco, Bernard announced on his blog that he was quitting video games.[29] He revealed that the negative press made him 'ill' and 'an alcoholic'.[30] In an interview with *Gamasutra* on 19 August, Bernard admitted: 'I basically destroyed my career'. In a 2019 tweet reflecting on the ordeal, he said that the furore made him 'suicidal'.[31] However,

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[26] Anthony Burch, 'Destructoid review: Eternity's Child', *Destructoid,* August 1, 2008, accessed via the Wayback Machine, https://web.archive.org/web/20081015141859/https://www.destructoid.com/destructoid-review-eternity-s-child-97583.phtml.
[27] John Walker, 'Eternity's Child: The Wrong Platform', *Rock Paper Shotgun,* August 5, 2008, https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2008/08/05/eternitys-child-the-wrong-platform/.
[28] Burch, 'Eternity's Child'.
[29] https://web.archive.org/web/20080901074503/http:/lucbernard.blogspot.com/2008/08/wont-be-contuning.htmlLuc Bernard, 'Won't be contuning [sic]', August 11, 2008, accessed via the Wayback Machine, https://web.archive.org/web/20080901074503/http:/lucbernard.blogspot.com/2008/08/wont-be-contuning.html.
[30] Damien McFerran, 'Luc Bernard Quits Video Game Development', *Nintendolife*, August 12, 2008, http://www.nintendolife.com/news/2008/08/luc_bernard_quits_videogame_development.
[31] Luc Bernard (@LucBernard), 'I experienced mob mentality with the internet over a decade ago when Anthony Burch gave my first game a 1/10 and I felt like he was personally attacking me too', Twitter, September 2, 2019, https://twitter.com/LucBernard/status/1168458797532102656.

Bernard returned to game development in 2009, and released several projects to mixed success in the following years.[32] Overall, the picture emerging of Bernard's career at this time is one of an inexperienced developer struggling to maintain a high-quality output.

2013 return and failed IndieGoGo crowdfunding attempt

In 2013, Bernard attempted to resurrect *Imagination Is The Only Escape*. He created an IndieGoGo crowdfunding campaign with a goal of USD $125,000 to fund the game's development.[33] The page advertised it as the 'first game to focus on the human element of one of the world's worst atrocities: the Holocaust', and contrasted it with the mass of military shooters that focus on combat. The description situated the game within the context of broader Holocaust media culture, citing movies and television as media that have long addressed 'thought-provoking historical fiction'. One section on the page was titled 'Why Is This Game Important?' and attempted to draw attention to the cultural significance and historical value of the game. It argued that 'understanding the mental toll the Holocaust took on the victims … is pivotal in a global society', and that the game aimed to 'inspire more people to research and learn about the Holocaust'. The page represented an earnest attempt to elevate the status and role of the video game medium as one of historical and educational value: 'Video games are often seen as meaningless distractions for children, but *Imagination* has the opportunity to blaze a trail for other games that look to tackle controversial, but important topics.'

[32] Jim Squires, 'Steam Pirates mysteriously yanked from the App Store', *Gamezebo*, May 23, 2010, https://www.gamezebo.com/2010/05/23/steam-pirates-mysteriously-yanked-app-store/; Mike Thompson, 'Steam Pirates Review', *Gamezebo*, May 31, 2010, https://www.gamezebo.com/2010/05/31/steam-pirates-review/.
[33] 'Imagination is the Only Escape', *Indiegogo*, accessed April 25, 2022, https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/imagination-is-the-only-escape#/.

There was less press coverage of the game in 2013 than in 2008, and the tone of discourse was markedly different. This time the activity was largely limited to gaming-specific news sites like *Kotaku* and *Polygon*, in addition to brief stories on some Jewish news sites.[34] In contrast to the coverage in 2008, the 2013 press emphasised the educational, narrative-driven, serious tone of the game. Multiple outlets emphasised how the game differed from *Call of Duty* and *Wolfenstein*-style games that make war seem 'fun' and emphasise heroic combat in a way that detracts from historical truth.[35] *Push Square*, for example, described it admiringly as 'a war game like no other; a game which looks to show war for what it really is — a terrible, tragic event which should never be celebrated, much less turned into some kind of entertainment'.[36]

A changed video game industry may have accounted for the considerable shift in the media's attitude towards the game. By 2013, narrative-driven indie games were much more common. There were now more reference points for the style of game Bernard was aiming to make. *The Verge* likened it to the hugely successful Telltale Games *Walking Dead* series (2012-2019). *Rolling Stone* compared it to *Papers, Please* (2013) and *That Dragon, Cancer* (2016), games praised for their emotional experiences and adult subject matter.[37] Though Bernard was attempting to crowdfund the game, he told *Push Square* that Sony were 'looking at it'. *Push Square* commented this was 'unsurprising', as in 2013 Sony were attempting to expand their

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[34] Jason Schreier, 'A Video Game About the Holocaust', *Kotaku*, September 6, 2013, https://www.kotaku.com.au/2013/09/a-video-game-about-the-holocaust/; Dave Tach, 'Imagination is the Only Escape seeks to educate about the Holocaust through a game', *Polygon*, September 4, 2013, https://www.polygon.com/2013/9/4/4695298/imagination-is-the-only-escape-holocaust-game.
[35] Damien McFerran, 'The PS Vita Could Be Getting A Game About The Holocaust', *Push Square*, September 12, 2013, http://www.pushsquare.com/news/2013/09/the_ps_vita_could_be_getting_a_game_about_the_holocaust; Andrew Webster, '"Imagination is the Only Escape" looks at the Holocaust through a child's eyes', *The Verge*, September 3, 2013, https://www.theverge.com/2013/9/3/4689536/imagination-is-the-only-escape-holocaust-through-childs-eyes.
[36] McFerran, 'The PS Vita'.
[37] Parker, 'Inside Controversial Game'; Webster, 'Imagination'.

indie collaborations.[38] I suggest that the changed climate of the games industry in 2013 led news outlets and commenters to be more immediately receptive towards the game's concept. In 2008, there were few well-known touchstones for indie games addressing serious topics. By 2013, there were many precedents for games of this sort, addressing complex and mature topics such as grief, illness, and depression.

In 2013, as in 2008, there was little evidence of controversy around the game. One article in the Jewish publication *Tablet Magazine* titled 'The Problem with That Holocaust Video Game' broke this trend, calling the game 'misguided'. It asserted that 'games seldom inspire any sort of intellectual or historical pursuits', and that people would not be spurred to learn about the Holocaust by '[trivializing] the subject matter by turning it a video game'.[39] *Haaretz* reported that Dr. Liat Steir-Livny criticized the game because 'a child who grows up in a world where he can switch between being a Holocaust victim and a soccer star on a whim "will never be able to begin to understand the extent of the trauma … This is a very problematic phase in the trivialization of the Holocaust."' However, *Haaretz* also included an argument for the opposing view that the game is 'legitimate and important', providing a balanced discussion of both sides rather than unilateral condemnation.[40] My investigation found almost no criticism or controversy of the game in 2013's coverage beyond what I have just discussed, and none from any gaming-focused sites. Most articles instead express a fear or expectation of *likely* or *potential* controversy. It seems that most commentators were preparing for a controversial firestorm that had little sign of actually occurring.

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[38] McFerran, 'The PS Vita'.
[39] Alexander Aciman, 'The Problem With That Holocaust Video Game', *Tablet*, September 13, 2013, https://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/144867/the-problem-with-that-holocaust-video-game.
[40] Oded Yaron, 'Is There Room for a Holocaust Computer Game?', *Haaretz*, October 5, 2013, https://www.haaretz.com/.premium-is-there-room-for-a-holocaust-computer-game-1.5344981.

The story that Nintendo initially rejected the game proved surprisingly resilient, despite multiple media reports to the contrary.[41] Several sites repeated the misinformation that Nintendo blocked it from publication.[42] A dramatic story about one of the world's biggest game companies deeming a children's Holocaust game unpublishable was perhaps more attention-grabbing than a story about a developer abandoning his own game due to personal problems. The enduring misconception about the game's cancellation is an important part of the popular perception of *Imagination Is The Only Escape,* and of games about the Holocaust in general.

Despite more positive reception to the idea of an educational Holocaust game, the project still could not move forward in 2013. Bernard's IndieGoGo campaign ran for over a month, but only raised USD$5,000 of its $125,000 goal. The campaign was a 'flexible goal', which meant the creator received all funds raised, even if the project did not reach its target. Today, a number of angry comments remain on the IndieGoGo page from financial supporters who feel Bernard took their money without delivering a product. Many are disgruntled that there has been no satisfactory update on the game, or what Bernard did with the $5,000 raised. Bernard had ceased tweeting about *Imagination Is The Only Escape* in 2013, and there were no further updates about this particular game.

Bernard has recently returned to his attempts to create an educational Holocaust game after working on other variably successful video game releases. His project is now called *The Light in the Darkness* and prominently involves a collaboration with a Holocaust survivor.

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[41] Webster, 'Imagination'.

[42] 'Jewish developer seeks funds for Holocaust game', *The Jerusalem Post,* September 10, 2013, https://www.jpost.com/Jewish-World/Jewish-News/Jewish-game-developer-to-market-Holocaust-game-for-smartphones-325720; Tara MacIsaac, 'Holocaust Game Rejected By Nintendo Turns to Smartphone, Crowdsource', *The Epoch Times,* September 10, 2013, https://www.theepochtimes.com/holocaust-game-rejected-by-nintendo-turns-to-smartphone-crowdsource_282844.html; 'Holocaust-themed video game for smartphones developed', *World Jewish Congress,* September 10, 2013, https://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/news/holocaust-themed-video-game-for-smartphones-developed.

Bernard began tweeting about this game in 2021.[43] Joan Salter, an 83-year-old Holocaust child survivor and researcher, is listed as the game's writer, representing another attempt to legitimise the project with survivor input.[44] Bernard continued to be active in the games industry in the intervening time period, but with mixed success. He released the reasonably well-received *Plague Road* in 2017. A Kickstarter campaign for his game *Skull Pirates* made over twice its funding goal in 2017. *Skull Pirates* was finally announced to be completed in 2020, after significant delays past its initial 2018 release date. Recent comments indicate a number of Kickstarter backers still have not received their game. Several other games are listed as 'Coming Soon' on the Arcade Distillery website and are seemingly abandoned.[45] These latter examples seem to indicate that Bernard's unreliability as a developer has persisted. One hopes that *The Light in the Darkness* can evade the fate of Bernard's other troubled projects.

A manufactured controversy?

Was *Imagination Is The Only Escape* too controversial to exist, or was it a game caught between misleading press, a resultant media storm, and the problems of its creator? These questions are crucial to understanding the relationship between the video games industry and depictions of the Holocaust. *Imagination Is The Only Escape* was the first widely publicized game to attempt to deal seriously with the Holocaust since 1995's *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* (discussed in the next chapter). As such, the media discourses surrounding it arguably influenced the creation and reception of future Holocaust-related games.

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[43] Luc Bernard, 'The light in the Darkness. A title I've been trying to get made for over a decade is now coming to life', Twitter, January 20, 2021, https://twitter.com/lucbernard/status/1351754695107248128?lang=en.
[44] Katherine Brodsky, 'Can a Game Get Young Players Interested in Holocaust History?', *Wired*, September 14, 2021, https://www.wired.com/story/the-light-in-the-darkness-voices-of-the-forgotten-holocaust-history-game/.
[45] Arcade Distillery, 'SkullPirates - A piratey action-RPG', *Kickstarter,* last updated April 15, 2022, https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/arcadedistillery/skullpirates-a-piratey-action-rpg/posts.

Media coverage of *Imagination Is The Only Escape* consistently overrepresented the degree of backlash it received. For example, *The Inquirer* stated: 'All over Internet bogs [sic], the game has been dubbed as sick.'[46] This is almost certainly an exaggeration, as I have uncovered very little evidence that this was the case (even allowing for the possibility of deleted comments). The frequent talk of controversy and persecution reveals an attitude of defensiveness not only from Bernard but the wider games industry. This was not entirely unwarranted, but almost certainly overstated. In truth, the vast majority of commentators from within the gaming industry and press, and even a large number outside of it, expressed support for the game. Ultimately, it seems the majority of people involved were preparing for a controversy that simply did not eventuate. Though Bernard's comments about the severity of controversy are often contradictory and therefore potentially unreliable, I believe the following interview exchange reflects the situation most truthfully:

> *GamesBeat*: Have you gotten any particularly controversial feedback so far?
> Bernard: To be honest with you, not really. Lots of people seem to think there will be controversy around this title, but there really isn't. If you look through the comments, people are generally for this. Nobody has really gone nuts about it. People just think it's very risky.[47]

On the other hand, there was significant disgruntlement, scepticism, and vitriol towards Bernard for his buggy releases, attitude towards critics, and failure to deliver on projects. Various sources have called Bernard 'not an easy person to work with', 'a personality', and a

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[46] Nick Farrell, 'Nintendo DS game sparks Holocaust row', *The Inquirer,* March 10, 2008, accessed via the Wayback Machine,
https://web.archive.org/web/20191225103349/https://www.theinquirer.net/inquirer/news/1025423/nintendo-ds-game-holocaust-row.
[47] Takahashi, 'Holocaust game creator'.

'man of thousands of ideas…but no finished projects'.[48] There are some very disparaging views of Bernard expressed on internet forums. One popular Reddit post essentially called Bernard a con artist. The post claimed he 'ran off' with the $5,000 from *Imagination Is The Only Escape*, recycled old games as thinly disguised new releases, and mysteriously failed to deliver on *Skull Pirates* despite making over twice its funding goal.[49] One journalist noted that the IndieGoGo campaign showed signs of 'Kickstarter red flags' that indicate a developer might not be capable of delivering what they had promised. These red flags included a lack of gameplay or game footage; they had nothing to do with controversy over subject matter.[50] *Cliqist* similarly suggested that the game missed its IndieGoGo goal because there was 'no gameplay' previewed on the page. The game was only a very early concept that gave players no indication of how they would actually interact with it.[51] A Reddit thread about the IndieGoGo campaign reinforced this: several commenters agreed that they would not financially back a game in such an early-concept-art stage with no preview of gameplay.[52] In addition, the disastrous releases of *Eternity's Child* and *Steam Pirates* could not have instilled gamers with much confidence in Bernard's abilities. Indeed, Bernard admitted to *VentureBeat* that he shelved the game for five years because he 'felt

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[48] Airola, 'Oh my! I had completely forgotten Luc Bernard!', *Nintendo Life*, September 4, 2013, https://www.nintendolife.com/ne ws/2013/09/interview_designer_luc_bernard_talks_wii_u_and_crowdfunding_his_vision#comment1850741; Henmii, 'Ah, Good old Luc Bernard!', *Nintendo Life*, September 6, 2013, https://www.nintendolife.com/news/2013/09/interview_designer_luc_bernard_talks_wii_u_and_crowdfunding_his_vision#comment1855106; 'Who Remembers Eternity Child's Luc Bernard, Where Has He Been?', *Oyaji Games*, accessed Jan 16, 2023, https://oyajigames.com/luc-bernard.html.

[49] u/redakdal, '[skull pirates] A game that literary steals money from you', Reddit, April 12, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/shittykickstarters/comments/bc4s2k/skull_pirates_a_game_that_literary_steals_money/.

[50] Dan Seitz, 'Want To Play A Game About The Holocaust?', *Uproxx,* September 5, 2013, https://uproxx.com/viral/want-to-play-a-video-game-about-the-holocaust/.

[51] Greg Micek, 'Will This Holocaust Game See The Light Of Day?', *Cliqist*, September 23, 2013, http://cliqist.com/2013/09/23/will-this-holocaust-game-see-the-light-of-day/.

[52] daneran, 'Holocaust-themed indie game "Imagination Is The Only Escape" goes crowdfunding', Reddit, September 7, 2013, 'https://www.reddit.com/r/Games/comments/1lveog/holocaustthemed_indie_game_imagination_is_the/.

like, as a director, [he] wasn't experienced enough to tackle it'.[53] It is evident that public trust in Bernard was low around the time of his crowdfunding project for reasons that had nothing to do with the Holocaust. They were instead related to his erratic personality, unreliability, and poor track record as a developer.

Although comprising a minority, a handful of voices objected to the game. One of Bernard's 2008 blog posts reads: 'The press don't understand anything. Some have labelled it as a Nazi Torture game ... Ok listen just everyone calm down.'[54] My research uncovered only one article from 'U Talk Marketing' titled 'Nazi torture game set for UK launch'. The article mentions its 'gruesome' facts but acknowledges that the game is intended to be 'educational'.[55] One comment on the 2013 *Jerusalem Post* article reads: 'This is repulsive on so many levels. The Holocaust as a GAME???? As someone who lost most of their family, I am offended.' Another lengthier comment asserts 'video games are simply NOT an appropriate story telling forum to teach about the Holocaust', detailing how the 'fun' requirements of gameplay and necessity of player agency do not mesh with the powerlessness and tragedy of the Holocaust.[56] The idea of the Holocaust not being fun or enjoyable as a setting is a reasonably frequent theme in comments that are sceptical about the game.[57] This is a central issue that I will return to throughout this chapter and in Chapter Five.

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[53] Takahashi, 'Holocaust game creator'.
[54] Luc Bernard, 'Ok this is getting out of hand', *Destructoid*, March 10, 2008, https://www.destructoid.com/blogs/lucbernard/ok-this-is-getting-out-of-hand-74810.phtml.
[55] 'Nazi torture game set for UK launch', *U Talk Marketing*, March 10, 2008, https://web.archive.org/web/20120311184231/http://www.utalkmarketing.com/pages/Article.aspx?ArticleID=4666&Title=Nazi_torture_game_set_for_UK_launch.
[56] 'Jewish developer', *The Jerusalem Post*.
[57] Kub, 'The question remains whether anyone will want to play it at all...', *Altergranie*, Wordpress, March 12, 2008, https://translate.google.com/translate?hl=en&sl=pl&u=https://altergranie.wordpress.com/2008/03/12/grywalny-holocaust/&prev=search.

Public discourse and historical values

A 2008 thread on gaming news website *Gamespot* provides a snapshot of the range of responses to the game.[58] These responses reveal public attitudes regarding historical knowledge and education, video games as a medium, and standards of representation of the Holocaust. Several major themes stand out in the supportive comments: (1) the educational potential of gaming, (2) the legitimising effect of Holocaust representations in other popular media, (3) the requirement of games to be 'fun', and (4) debates about the epistemological value of dramatic storytelling versus documentary realism in historical media. Positive comments outweighed the negative or sceptical ones, both for the game in particular and the ability of games to engage with historical issues like the Holocaust more generally. A large number of commenters expressed disappointment with the news of the game's cancellation and had been eager to play it. This is significant given that the thread is from the game's initial appearance in 2008, at the time when media coverage expressed more trepidation about the game, and fewer indie games with mature subject matter existed as a reference point for commenters. As demonstrated above, reception was generally more positive overall in 2013 than in 2008. (In the following discussion, the usernames of quoted commenters have been placed in parenthesis after their respective quotes.)

A large number of people justified the game's worthiness through its educational aims. Several commenters argued that the game could not possibly be anti-Semitic or offensive if its aim was to educate children about the realities of living through the Holocaust. Commenters praised the potential of interactive software to teach people about the Holocaust, with special regard for its reach, modernity, and ability to foster empathy. According to one user, games have 'real potential to teach through methods that are rarely used and to a fairly large audience'

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[58] Jaysonguy, 'When Is The Jewish Holocaust Game Due?', *Gamespot*, June 1, 2008, https://www.gamespot.com/forums/nintendo-fan-club-1000001/when-is-the-jewish-holocaust-game-due-26413940/.

(kodai). Another comment argued that history can be taught through multiple avenues and that modern twenty-first-century methods should be utilized to their fullest extent: 'Here is the perfect way to link the past to the present. You have the survivors telling their story from one of the main media delivery systems of the time.' (Jaysonguy) One user accused another of being 'one of the people that doesn't believe software can be used in teaching and it simply must be a game now and forever' (kodai). This comment then went on to say: 'I personally [sic] think that it can be used to garner interest in a subject and be a useful aid in teaching from that point of view … just what about the holocaust is so special that no approach [sic] must be made from any medium outside of books and documentaries?' (kodai)

The last line of this quote suggests another major discursive theme in the argument that games can engage with the Holocaust. Commenters frequently invoked other media that are commonly accepted forms of Holocaust representation, including books, documentaries, and especially dramatic feature films. They expressed confusion or outrage that it is 'acceptable' for other media to address the Holocaust, but not video games. Commenters accused detractors of hypocrisy, double-standards, or prejudice towards games as a medium. Dramatic feature films such as *Schindler's List* were frequently invoked. I would argue that this is because such films are the 'closest' media relation to the video game, as something primarily devised and aimed at entertaining a mass audience. In particular, *Imagination Is The Only Escape* was likened to *Life is Beautiful* and *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) as evidence that fantasy is a viable genre for Holocaust engagement. One commenter wrote, 'Books aren't the only way that people can learn about events like this, if that were the case movies like *Saving Private Ryan* and *Schindler's List* would have never been made' (Jaysonguy). It is clear that a subset of the gaming population believe games should be elevated to the same status as books and films, and that there is little material or

conceptual difference between a film and a game that addresses the Holocaust. For these supporters, the existence of other media that engage with these historical issues justifies the existence of games that do so as well.

As suggested above, the 'entertainment factor' is another key theme in discussions about Holocaust games. In response to arguments justifying Holocaust gaming with examples from film, some commenters singled out the video game as a medium uniquely reliant on 'fun' gameplay and entertainment. As a result, these commenters did not consider them appropriate to become a vehicle for Holocaust education. One user argued that Holocaust representations should remain within media that are 'capable of taking on the "documentary" role', such as films and books, instead of a medium that was 'born as entertainment' like video games (aries8269). Another sarcastically asked: 'Is World War 2 super happy fun time?' (Spektre41) These comments echoed the *Venture Beat* article that predicted: 'Critics would say that such a game should never be made and that the Holocaust is too touchy a subject to be handled in a medium where the object is fun.'[59] These gamers value video games as entertainment objects, and so for them, it is difficult to reconcile the idea of virtually experiencing a traumatic historical event with playing a video game.

Conflicting values about the nature of history and how it should be taught are also evident in these discussions. Notably, there is a tension between those who believe history should be taught as 'just the facts' versus those who desire multiple perspectives, alternative ways of telling, and emotional connection with the subject matter. Those in the former category perceived an incompatibility between historical documentary and video game entertainment. One wrote: 'terrorism, ethnic clensing [sic], and genocide being topics that really should not be in the

[59] Takahashi, 'Holocaust game creator'.

form of video game entertainment as it is not a medium conducive to being a factful docutmentary [sic] to which most history lessons reside.' (aries8269) This user also argued that 'the words "documentary" and "entertainment" don't mix'. Another claimed that when teaching about the Holocaust, 'you need to give the straight facts' (EnterSandman), and a video game aimed towards children would not be capable of doing that.

In contrast, other commenters emphasised the educational value of showing a historical event through the novel perspective of a child. They acknowledged that Second World War games had focused narrowly on the soldier in combat. They therefore welcomed the 'breath of fresh air' that *Imagination Is The Only Escape* would have offered. One user wrote: 'I would much rather get a chance to see through the eyes of jewish [sic] person, than starring [sic] down the barrel of a rifle shooting Nazi after Nazi.' (myols) They later stated: 'History is something people learn in different ways and viewpoints; this is simply trying to build upon another.' (myols) These comments reveal a segment of the gaming audience that believes 1) the Holocaust is drastically underacknowledged in video games, 2) there is a disproportionate emphasis on the soldier's experience and very few Jewish perspectives, and 3) drama and emotion can be used as a valid method of teaching something about a historical event. The third point will be familiar to those who have read Rosenstone's work on dramatic film as a form of historical discourse.[60] Evidently, some gamers believe that video games have the potential to achieve the same ends as film in this regard. As one user wrote, the 'dramatic elements of the users experience world' would then make players 'more receptive to assimilating the holocaust facts the game presents'

[60] Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995); Robert Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (Harlow, England: Longman/Pearson, 2006).

(kodai). These comments indicate a degree of public acceptance of the interactive, emotive, and multiplicitous ways that video games can engage with Holocaust education.

What can we learn from the media events surrounding *Imagination Is The Only Escape* and the game's resulting legacy? Evidently, discussions about Holocaust representation, education, and memory culture are occurring outside of academia and the historical profession. We can see that the general public hold ideas about what history is and how it should be taught, and they are capable of engaging in debates around these ideas that echo the ideas discussed by academic historians. This is an encouraging sign for a continued engagement between historians and the general public in an ongoing negotiative process of how history can and should be constructed and communicated in broader media.

The *Imagination Is The Only Escape* saga illustrated fear and trepidation within the industry towards a game ambitiously tackling the Holocaust, and a mixture of support and scepticism from outside it. Most interestingly, the oft-repeated narrative that even an educational and sensitive Holocaust game was too offensive for Nintendo is evidently false. Instead, the real reason for the game's disappearance had more to do with Bernard's lack of experience and public trust, other failed projects, and personal problems. It could be argued that the media myth surrounding *Imagination Is The Only Escape* affected public perception of games that tried to tackle the Holocaust for quite some time. It is impossible to prove that this had a direct influence on other developers' actions. However, it is undeniable that the myth that Nintendo refused a game about the Holocaust persisted for many years afterwards and is still a widely held false belief today. Several academics have repeated it in their publications.[61] It is possible that this belief, so strongly held and often repeated, has affected developers' and consumers' opinions on

[61] Kansteiner, 'Transnational Holocaust Memory', 312; Pfister, '"Man Spielt Nicht Mit Hakenkreuzen!"', 275.

whether the Holocaust can be made into a game. Pfister has echoed this sentiment, suggesting the depoliticization of the Second World War and absence of the Holocaust in games was a reaction to controversy.[62] As seen in the next section on *Sonderkommando Revolt*, *Imagination Is The Only Escape* was cited in debates on later games that attempted to address the Holocaust. There were no further attempts at a narrative-based educational game about the Holocaust until *My Child Lebensborn* in 2018, ten years after *Imagination Is The Only Escape* was first announced.

The discourses surrounding the game also reveal various historical values held by the public regarding Holocaust representation and education. The most interesting conclusion from this investigation is that the vast majority of both media and user commenters expressed enthusiasm about the idea of a game representing the Holocaust. Very few commenters took offence to the idea of the game. There were some who expressed doubt about video games' ability to deliver factual historical information, struggled to reconcile 'entertainment' with 'documentary' media, or simply believed video games about the Holocaust were in 'bad taste'. However, there were more commenters who expressed approval of multiple perspectives in historical media, the use of interactive technology to educate, and the power of the video game medium to address serious issues including trauma and violence.

The case study of *Imagination Is The Only Escape* shows that despite persistent misconceptions, there has historically been less resistance towards Holocaust games than is commonly believed. As early as 2008, gamers were optimistic that the medium could be used for a purpose as serious and important as Holocaust education. The following section examines

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[62] Pfister, '"Man Spielt Nicht Mit Hakenkreuzen!"', 275.

Holocaust-themed video games that were received much more poorly by the general public and gaming media, and explores how they differ from *Imagination Is The Only Escape*.

Sonderkommando Revolt: A Revenge Fantasy

If *Imagination Is The Only Escape* was considered the *Life is Beautiful* of games, then *Sonderkommando Revolt* was an ill-fated *Inglourious Basterds* (2009). Unlike the Tarantino film, however, *Sonderkommando Revolt* elicited much more unambiguous opposition than the comparatively wholesome *Imagination Is The Only Escape*. As a gory retro-styled action game, *Sonderkommando Revolt* divided gamers and commenters, sometimes bitterly. The story of this game's creation and cancellation, and the subsequent discourse surrounding it, reveals similar public negotiative processes to *Imagination Is The Only Escape*. However, they are of a different and more fraught nature, covering issues regarding violence, exploitative imagery, historical counterfactuals, and revenge fantasy.

Sonderkommando Revolt first began development in 2007 as a fan-made mod for *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992). The game's archived description on the moddb.com website described it as a 'realistic, moody, challenging and detailed' experience inspired by the real-life 1944 Sonderkommando uprising in Auschwitz-Birkenau. The project promised to feature recreations of 'Crematoriums, Block 11, Gas Chambers, execution, interrogation and torture areas ... most of which are ripped/based off real pic [sic] from the real site'.[63] Early screenshots show an armed character traversing the pixelated recreation of Auschwitz, aiming their reticule at the dead, bloodied corpses of camp guards. One screenshot shows three prisoners lined up against the wall, covered in bullet holes and surrounded by guards, presumably freshly executed by firing squad.

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[63] doomjedi, 'SonderKommando Revolt', *ModDB,* last updated December 13, 2010, https://www.moddb.com/mods/sonderkommando-revolt/.

Despite the promises of the game being realistic and detailed, the screenshots are in the early 1990s style of the *Wolfenstein 3D* MS-DOS game. They are quite well-rendered considering the limitations of the technology, but are nevertheless still fairly crude and stylized pixels, rather than the hyper-realistic graphics of more recent shooters. Early comments on the game's page from 2007-2010 are positive. Many were looking forward to the scale and complexity of the mod, and some appreciated the historical wish-fulfilment fantasy angle of a vengeful Auschwitz uprising. The game appeared to be popular on the ModDB site, but its reach remained limited to the relatively small audience of *Wolfenstein 3D* modding enthusiasts.

In December 2010, however, a video trailer for the game was released and subsequently covered by *Kotaku*, leading to a genuine media firestorm and condemnation by several Jewish groups. The trailer released on December 10, 2010, begins with a black-and-white image of Auschwitz prisoners overlaid by text: '1944. Zalmen Gradowski, 31, Jewish, Ukraine. To be executed by firing squad.'[64] The use of documentary and archival footage is a familiar technique in works of historical fiction. What follows here, however, is a compilation of footage from *Sonderkommando Revolt* accompanied by sombre and dramatic choral music.[65] Despite its crude and simplistic pixel graphics, the trailer is extremely gory and graphic. One image shows a large pile of dead prisoners, bloody and mutilated, stuffed into a cage. Another shows a prisoner being eaten by a dog. After the montage of massacred prisoners, text appears reading 'Escaped from the execution …'. The video then moves into a fast-paced montage of the player character gunning down large numbers of guards and SS officers. The trailer establishes the game's narrative premise: the player character escapes a brutal mass execution of prisoners and blasts

[64] 'Trailer', December 10, 2010, https://www.moddb.com/mods/sonderkommando-revolt/videos/trailer.
[65] The song used for the trailer is 'Escape' by Craig Armstrong, originally written for the film *Plunkett & Maclean* (1999). It has since been commonly used for sports team entrances and movie trailers.

their way through the Nazi camp personnel for revenge and liberation. A website for the game described this narrative in slightly more detail: a planned assassination attempt of a high-ranking official is foiled, leading to mass public executions of the prisoners involved, and triggering the revolt.[66]

There is something jarring and uncanny about the trailer. The viewer is initially primed with traditional Holocaust audiovisual tropes, including the ubiquitous black-and-white camp photographs and dramatic orchestral music. However, the game's visuals then appear as cartoonish blocky pixels with highly saturated colours. Garish red sprays and rivulets of blood stand out against the scenery. It is an odd juxtaposition of 'serious' Holocaust documentary conventions and the whimsical retro stylisation of an early 1990s 'shlock' shooter. The resultant effect is unsettling. As I will discuss shortly, the visual style of the trailer likely had much to do with the game's poor reception.

After the trailer's release, *Kotaku* generated controversy by covering the game in an article titled 'The Concentration Camp Video Game'. The article described the game as 'exploitative revenge fantasy', but made it clear that, according to the creators, the game has 'no political statement and has no agenda. It's "blast the Nazis fun."' Creator Maxim 'Doomjedi' Genis and his team stated that they were developing *Sonderkommando Revolt* 'only for the challenge, for the fun, to entertain a singularly focused community of homebrew game creators'. Although Genis is a Ukrainian-born Jew living in Israel, he claimed that personal views or political agendas were kept strictly out of the mod. It was intended to be just 'another [Wolfenstein 3D]mod, nothing more'. In sharp contrast to the stated goals of *Imagination Is The*

[66] 'SonderKommando Revolt', *Wolfsource*, December 11, 2010, accessed via the Wayback Machine, https://web.archive.org/web/20101215123007/http://wolfsource.dugtrio17.com/wiki/index.php?title=SonderKommando_Revolt.

Only Escape, *Sonderkommando Revolt* was ‘never designed to teach anyone [anything]regarding the real camp or the real events’. However, Genis also told *Kotaku* that, according to his belief in reincarnation, he lived a former life as an imprisoned Sonderkommando in a concentration camp who died before 1944. He was partly inspired to make the mod to ‘change the outcome to [a]more optimistic one to the character I was there’.[67]

Negative reactions were swift. *Kotaku* sought comment from Rabbi Abraham Cooper of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre. Despite acknowledging the best intentions of the creator, Cooper argued that a video game could never adequately communicate the horrors of the Holocaust: ‘This is not an issue that should be reduced to a game.’[68] Kotaku also reached out to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) for comment, who unequivocally condemned the game. Their comment read:

> Perhaps well intentioned in its creation, its execution and imagery are horrific and inappropriate …The Holocaust should be off-limits for video games. We hope the developers will reconsider and abandon the game.

The ADL also singled out the violent retro-stylized visuals for critique:

> This rudimentary video game is an offensive portrayal of the Holocaust … With its unnecessarily gruesome and gratuitous graphics, it is a crude effort to depict Jewish resistance during this painful period which should never be trivialized.[69]

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[67] Michael McWhertor, ‘The Concentration Camp Video Game’, *Kotaku,* December 9, 2010, https://kotaku.com/the-concentration-camp-video-game-5710328.
[68] Michael McWhertor, ‘Concentration Camp Game Was Meant To Be “Fun”’, *Kotaku,* October 12, 2010, https://kotaku.com/concentration-camp-game-was-meant-to-be-fun-5711317.
[69] Brian Crecente, ‘Anti-Defamation League Slams “Fun” Holocaust Video Game As Horrific And Inappropriate’, *Kotaku*, December 11, 2010, accessed via the Wayback Machine, https://web.archive.org/web/20101213192740/http://kotaku.com/5712163/anti+defamation-league-slams-fun-holocaust-video-game-as-horrific-and-inappropriate?skyline=true&s=i.

Despite these few notable opposing statements, the game does not appear to have gained as much press notoriety overall as *Imagination Is The Only Escape*. The comparatively few mainstream news outlets that picked up the story merely briefly recapped *Kotaku*'s reporting.[70] Jewish news outlets covering the game were more numerous, but again mostly recapped *Kotaku*.[71] *Kotaku* were responsible for the majority of the reporting and analysis of the game, with at least four separate articles published in a few days, ranging from a couple of short paragraphs to several pages long.[72] One editorial from *GamesAbyss* stands out for being more scathingly negative towards the mod, calling Genis an 'imbecile' who 'should have had the common sense to realize that making a game about the Holocaust was just not a good idea'. (It is worth noting that the first comment on the article is a lengthy diatribe against the author for this stance.)[73]

Kotaku writer Stephen Totilo published a roughly 900-word, largely positive opinion piece about the game on the day of the trailer's release (December 10). On *Kotaku,* it was titled 'The Ugly Fantasies of Revenge', but the same article also appeared on *NBC News* under the title: 'Is bloody Auschwitz game cathartic or sick?'[74] In this article, Totilo admitted the game may be 'exploitative'. However, he also connected it to a broader body of media that uses violent

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[70] 'Auschwitz video game Sonderkommando Revolt blasted by Jewish groups', *The Mirror*, December 17, 2010, https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/auschwitz-video-game-sonderkommando-revolt-269858; Michael McWhertor, 'Creator cancels Auschwitz shooter game', *NBC News*, December 23, 2010, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/40783708/ns/technology_and_science-games/t/creator-cancels-auschwitz-shooter-game/#.XZ6Ti_kzaUk.
[71] 'Holocaust game is cancelled', *The Jewish Chronicle*, December 16, 2010, https://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/holocaust-game-is-cancelled-1.20095; 'Jewish groups criticize new Auschwitz video game by Israeli programmer', *World Jewish Congress,* December 17, 2010, https://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/news/jewish-groups-criticize-new-auschwitz-video-game-by-israeli-programmer.
[72] Crecente, 'Horrific and Inappropriate'; McWhertor, 'Camp Video Game'; McWhertor, 'Meant To Be "Fun"'; Stephen Totilo, 'The Ugly Fantasies Of Revenge', *Kotaku*, December 10, 2010, https://kotaku.com/the-ugly-fantasies-of-revenge-5710755.
[73] Steve Haske, 'Wolf 3D Auschwitz Mod Creator Is An Idiot', *Games Abyss*, December 23, 2010, accessed via the Wayback Machine, https://web.archive.org/web/20110128025613/http://www.gamesabyss.com/wolf-3d-auschwitz-mod-creator-is-an-idiot/.
[74] Totilo, 'Ugly Fantasies'; Stephen Totilo, 'Is bloody Auschwitz escape game cathartic or sick?', *NBC News*, December 15, 2010, https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna40666980.

revenge fantasy as a way of coping with oppression and traumatic historical events. He likened the game to pornographic 'Stalag' comics that show victims turning abuse back onto their female SS captors, and to Tarantino's violent hunt-the-Nazis film *Inglourious Basterds*. Totilo was not the only commentator to compare the game to *Inglourious Basterds.* Tarantino's film became a common reference point for the game in the media and blogosphere.[75] A sceptical piece on the game posted on the *IFC* blog, for example, was titled: 'The 'Inglourious Basterds' of Video Games?'[76] Jewish pop culture website *The Schmooze* went as far as to call the ADL's comments 'blatant hypocrisy given their hugely positive reception of *Inglourious Basterds*'.[77] *Heeb Magazine* mentioned the ADL's inconsistent stance to Genis in their interview, who responded that Tarantino was better-equipped to deal with press controversy than he was.[78] As seen in the online discourse surrounding *Imagination Is The Only Escape*, a sense of public injustice can be perceived in the cry that if other media can address such topics and be lauded for it, then why not video games?

Nevertheless, the negative media attention was upsetting enough to the creator to cause him intense emotional distress. On December 21, Jewish grassroots zine *Heeb Magazine* interviewed Genis. He declared the project cancelled indefinitely, only a few weeks away from the stated release date of January 1, 2011. Genis described the stress he experienced: 'it just killed me emotionally … I can't eat, barely sleep, can't work or function, cry ten times a day …

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[75] Dovbear, 'In defense of *Sonderkommando Revolt*', December 22, 2010, http://dovbear.blogspot.com/2010/12/in-defense-of-sonderkommando-revolt.html; Theodore, 'Auschwitz Video Game Goes Kaput!' *DadWagon*, December 22, 2010, accessed via the Wayback Machine, https://web.archive.org/web/20130706104514/http://www.dadwagon.com/2010/12/22/auschwitz-video-game-goes-kaput/.
[76] Evan Narcisse, 'The "Inglorious [sic] Basterds" of Video Games?' *IFC*, December 10, 2010, https://www.ifc.com/2010/12/the-inglorious-basterds-of-vid.
[77] Josh Tapper, 'ADL's Take on Holocaust-Themed Video Game', *Forward*, December 13, 2010, https://forward.com/schmooze/133895/adls-take-on-holocaust-themed-video-game/.
[78] Jonathan Poritsky, 'Auschwitz Video Game Cancelled, ADL Overjoyed', *Heeb*, December 21, 2010, http://heebmagazine.com/auschwitz-video-game-cancelled-adl-overjoyed/21538.

The project is cancelled because I cannot stand media exposure of any kind. I'm in deep emotional trauma (very deep), and need time to recover.' Genis stated that his team were surprised by the criticism. They 'didn't think there would be such controversy, as you play a Jew against Nazis, not the other way around … As it's a primitive pixellated mod of an 18-year-old game we didn't expect much exposure … This was totally out of proportion.' *Heeb*'s interviewer was sympathetic towards the mod, calling those who took offence to the trailer 'humourless' and saying they would 'love to take Sonderkommando Revolt for a spin'.[79]

In the months following the December news coverage, a number of supportive comments were posted on the game's ModDB page and continued to appear sporadically up until 2016. Many condemned the ADL for their comments and expressed outrage or intense disappointment at the game's cancellation. For example, one user wrote: 'If people play your mod and decide to learn about the historical event it is based upon, that's not trivialization, that's a GOOD THING! If someone considers a game about killing NAZIS to be offensive, their sensibilities are completely backwards.'[80] This comment encapsulates several themes that will emerge elsewhere in internet debates about the game, including the educational value of the game and the valorisation of the revenge fantasy.

Some of Genis' comments on the ModDB page revealed more about the motives and reasons for cancellation. 'I KNOW I'm right. And not ADL,' Genis responded to one commenter. 'This is not why I cancelled the public release. My real and personal life suffered because of this overexposure ... that's the only reason.' It appears he was especially affected in the workplace and concerned about career repercussions. One comment explained how he feared

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[79] Poritsky, 'ADL Overjoyed'.
[80] Phoenix9000, 'I registered on this board specifically to address this issue', ModDB, January 15, 2011, https://www.moddb.com/mods/sonderkommando-revolt/page/5#comments.

losing his job due to excessive media attention: ‘My whole workplace had to protect me from the media (even my Boss was getting emails with interview requests, whole press-department was busy protecting me).’ A revealing comment from Genis also debunked the belief that the game was intended to be educational. In a lengthy comment, he asserted that it ‘it doesn’t depict 1944 revolt in any way’ and ‘is not a historic learnware or any kind’. (By ‘learnware’, Genis was presumably referring to ‘edutainment’ software created primarily for educational purposes.) He once again said it was never intended or claimed that the mod would be educational or based on any real camp map. Furthermore, he stated that people should never have expected the mod to be anything other than fun Wolf3D gameplay, and that ‘high expectations (and historic references) of this mod support my decision not to release it to general public’. In the end, it appears this was not a battle Genis was willing to fight. He stated many times that he was not a ‘Holocaust activist’. One comment reads: ‘I’m not a martir [sic] - I’m just a Wolf3D modder :)’[81]

Why the backlash?

Why did *Sonderkommando Revolt* provoke opposition when the violent revenge fantasy film *Inglourious Basterds* received praise, in some cases from the same people who condemned the game (i.e. the ADL)? Kansteiner has pointed out this inconsistency, observing that ‘apparently, violent counterfactual Jewish revenge fantasies are intriguing and prize-worthy on the big screen in, for instance, *Inglourious Bastards*, but unacceptable in the allegedly low-brow cultural environment of video game coding and modding’.[82] Analysing media statements and online user discussions can provide some insight and help account for this inconsistency.

[81] doomjedi, various comments, *ModDB*, https://www.moddb.com/mods/sonderkommando-revolt#comments.
[82] Kansteiner, ‘Transnational Holocaust Memory’.

It has been suggested that the graphic images of concentration camp victims were the main source of controversy.[83] There is a vast body of literature debating the validity and appropriateness of representing the Holocaust through visual images, especially through confronting images of death and suffering. Nobel Prize-winning author and concentration camp survivor, Elie Wiesel, called the spectacle of visual re-enactment 'obscenity' and 'insensitivity'. Wiesel famously wrote that 'no one can now retell Auschwitz after Auschwitz'.[84] There are ongoing public debates about the ethics of viewing graphic Holocaust images and the possible risk of dehumanising the victims through oversaturation of graphic content.[85] Upon viewing the gruesome and crudely rendered images of mutilated victims in *Sonderkommando Revolt*, it is understandable that the game elicits such criticisms. Such images trigger the common sentiment that depicting exaggerated, fictionalised renditions of concentration camp victims is disrespectful to the real-life victims. One Reddit user who took offence to the game, for example, described it as '8-bit torture porn with a Holocaust theme', and several other users concurred that the graphics were too crude and gruesome to be taken as a serious engagement with Holocaust history.[86] A cartoon-ified version of a murdered victim may be considered inaccurate trivialisation at best or deeply insulting at worst due to the visual style's association with lighthearted entertainment, caricature, and non-serious subject matter. Furthermore, the visual depiction of gore sets *Sonderkommando Revolt* apart from other cartoon-styled Holocaust works such as *Maus* and even *Imagination Is The Only Escape*. Where a cartoon-like visual style can be

[83] 'Holocaust FPS Blasted', *Champions Games*, December 14, 2010, https://championsgames.wordpress.com/2010/12/14/holocaust-fps-blasted/.
[84] Elie Wiesel, 'Art and the Holocaust: Trivializing Memory', *The New York Times*, June 11, 1989, https://www.nytimes.com/1989/06/11/movies/art-and-the-holocaust-trivializing-memory.html?auth=login-facebook.
[85] Paul Morrow, 'Is it ethical to show Holocaust images?', *The Conversation*, January 22, 2020, http://theconversation.com/is-it-ethical-to-show-holocaust-images-128846.
[86] u/notjawn, 'Well I would agree the subject matter wasn't anymore offensive', Reddit, December 22, 2010, https://www.reddit.com/r/gaming/comments/epbgs/auschwitz_wolfenstein_mod_sonderkommando_revolt/.

acceptable as a deliberate design choice in otherwise sensitive and educational works, the same cannot be said to apply to *Sonderkommando Revolt*'s unrepentantly violent schlock content.

The creators also seemed conflicted about the goals of the game in relation to history and accuracy. Genis and his fellow developers often flipped back and forth on the intended educational value and historical accuracy of the mod. On one hand, they claimed it was merely 'blast the Nazis fun'. On the other, they said it would be 'realistic' 'moody' and 'detailed', with images pulled from real camp photos.[87] In some circumstances, Genis denied that the game was intended to have any educational value, commitment to accuracy, or political purpose. Distancing the game from reality and the constraints of the historical record appears to be one way that creators try to dodge controversy. If the depiction of real-life events is what causes a negative reaction, then detaching the work from history evades this critique. However, Genis also repeatedly deflected criticism about the game's inaccuracy by invoking the historical research behind its creation.[88] He also hinted at the real political implications of remembering that Jews did fight back against the Nazis. Despite frequent assertions elsewhere that the game had no political agenda and was not intended to be historically accurate or educational, Genis told *The Escapist*: 'I did a lot of research for the game. I wanted to show the Jews really did fight back against the Nazis. I wanted to honour them.'[89] Elsewhere, he wrote: 'Jews got used seeing themselves as victims (only) and use it for many goals, including when they lack a valid political argument or justification — so it's important not to forget such revolts.'[90] Genis clearly saw historical value and contemporary relevance in the subject matter he chose to represent, despite

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[87] 'SonderKommando Revolt', *ModDB*.
[88] Bullock, 'Concentration Camp Game'.
[89] Scott Bullock, 'Concentration Camp Game Canceled Due to Backlash', *The Escapist*, December 17, 2010, http://www.escapistmagazine.com/news/view/106222-Concentration-Camp-Game-Canceled-Due-to-Backlash.
[90] 'SonderKommando Revolt', *ModDB*.

prior claims it was 'just a mod' with 'no political agenda'. Ultimately, without a strong and consistent commitment to either counterfactual fantasy or historical accuracy, *Sonderkommando Revolt* left itself open to criticism from all sides. Here, we see epistemological and ethical tensions between history and entertainment especially in relation to a traumatic event like the Holocaust, a major theme in user discourses that we will return to shortly.

Although *Sonderkommando Revolt* drew a notable amount of criticism, it is important to acknowledge that it had many supporters in the press. Totilo's *Kotaku* article expressed some positive sentiment towards the game, and Jewish publications *The Schmooze* and *Heeb Magazine* were openly favourable towards it. A guest blog post for the *Jerusalem Post* written by Dr Andre Oboler (Director of the Community Internet Engagement Project at the Zionist Federation of Australia) pointed out that thus far, the genocide of the Jews has been 'painted out' of the history of the Second World War as imagined in video games. For Oboler, the cancellation of *Sonderkommando Revolt* was a 'loss for Holocaust education' that shows 'we have the wrong attitude and are asking the wrong questions'. Oboler championed the use of 'every available medium', including games, to educate and spread awareness of the Holocaust.[91] Even for a game that elicited vehement opposition, there still emerged many who were open to unconventional avenues of informal Holocaust education.

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[91] Andre Oboler, 'Commandment 614: Learning about the Holocaust may not be fun', *The Jerusalem Post*, January 27, 2011, https://www.jpost.com/Blogs/Guest/Commandment-614-Learning-about-the-Holocaust-may-not-be-fun-367820.
Although interviews were outside the scope of this project, interviews with significant commentators such as Oboler would be an interesting future study.

Popular discourses: a Reddit case study

A Reddit thread from the subreddit r/gaming provides an illuminating snapshot of video game audiences' historical values and attitudes.[92] The post from December 22, 2010, shared news of the game's cancellation, which prompted a debate about the value and appropriateness of a game about the Holocaust. Out of 71 relevant comments, 49 were positive, 20 were negative, and two were ambivalent, which means that the majority of commenters (69%) were in favour of the game. Much like for *Imagination Is The Only Escape*, major themes included the educational value of the game and justification of its existence based on other Holocaust media. However, in this instance, discussions also prominently debated the value of revenge fantasy to provide audience catharsis.

The most common theme evident by far (18 comments) was the idea that video games should be just as able to tackle difficult subjects as other media, especially mainstream film. Much like in the media coverage discussed above, *Inglourious Basterds* was a common cultural touchstone in audience discourses. The thematic and visual resemblance between *Inglourious Basterds* and *Sonderkommado Revolt* did not go unnoticed by commenters, nor did the fact that the film was singled out for praise by the ADL. One commenter quoted the ADL's critique and wrote: 'This could easily be applied to *Inglourious Basterds*, which the ADL praised.' (u/U731lvr) Another said: 'I still don't get why the ADL opposes this after endorsing Inglorious [sic] Basterds.' (u/richmomz) Yet another read: 'How hypocritical. You mention Inglorious Bastards [sic], but this isn't ok? If a movie can touch the subject I see no reason for why a game

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[92] u/poritsky, 'Auschwitz Wolfenstein Mod Sonderkommando Revolt Cancelled After International Attention Proves Too Much for Team', Reddit, December 22, 2010, https://www.reddit.com/r/gaming/comments/epbgs/auschwitz_wolfenstein_mod_sonderkommando_revolt/.

can't.' (u/RageX) Many wondered why the Holocaust was considered a suitable topic for film but not for games. Several commenters believed that if films and books were accepted as a medium for Holocaust engagement, 'it makes no sense to have a problem with a game' (u/RageX). One commenter astutely remarked that 'if television had been invented a little later, they [sic] ADL would be complaining that, "the holocause [sic] should be off-limits for television"' (u/aeturnum). This commenter may or may not have been unconsciously aware of the debates sparked by television miniseries *Holocaust* (1978). Another comment was plainly phrased to highlight the apparent double-standard: 'movies about the holocaust: yup. games about the holocaust: nope.' (u/deleted)

Commenters displayed awareness of the degraded status of video games within media hierarchies of taste and prestige. One claimed that *Sonderkommando Revolt*'s cancellation happened because '"video games" are perceived as a lesser medium, and one therefore prohibited from examining the darker aspects of human history and humanity in general' (u/worff). Another observed that the negative sentiment towards *Sonderkommando Revolt* 'breaks down to "your form of expression is not good enough"' (u/aeturnum). Some commenters expressed frustration that video games were not viewed as a serious form of artistic expression capable of tackling serious subjects. One wrote: 'This is why video games will never be viewed as a serious art form, movies and books can do what ever they want regarding the Holocaust but as soon as a video games [sic] does it its over the line and canceled [sic].' (u/permanenttrowaway) Another commenter replied to this statement with: 'Correction: This is why video games *need* to be viewed as a serious art form.' (u/soviyet) There is a notable sense of injustice expressed in these sentiments, as well as urgency for video games to be elevated to the same cultural status as books and films. It is evident from these discussions that video game

audiences are aware of media hierarchies of taste, the perception of their medium as 'lowbrow', and the subsequent restriction of artistic expression and permissible subject matter in the gaming medium.

A handful of comments provided a counter-opinion, arguing that the form of a game (alongside other lowbrow media) is inappropriate for delivering material about the Holocaust. One commenter argued that 'it's disrespectful to take a tragic event and turn it into a device for amusement' (u/notjawn), and another claimed *Sonderkommando Revolt* 'turns the Holocaust into a comic book' (u/zulubanshee). Yet another commenter used the term 'game' with the implication that the word itself would be interpreted as a synonym for trivialising and demeaning. 'I think the outcry is that they are making a game of it … Yes this should be remembered, but not as a game where the victims get revenge. This was an incredibly horrific event in human history that shouldn't be turned into a game. I think making light of the Holocaust will only serve to desensitize us to genocide.' (u/RobIsTheMan)[93] For these commenters, *Sonderkommando Revolt* would trivialise the Holocaust by turning it into a game. This was attributed to the specific nature of its titillating revenge fantasy gameplay, as well as the nature of the gaming medium.

This discussion revealed an important aspect of public discourse around the suitability of video games to tackle traumatic historical events. Alongside historians and cultural critics, gamers also debated whether video games were a lowbrow and inherently trivialising entertainment medium. They meaningfully questioned whether games were inappropriate or incapable of certain types of historical engagement and education. The 'against' viewpoint often assumed that games must necessarily be 'amusement', and were thus at odds with serious

[93] u/poritsky, 'Auschwitz Wolfenstein Mod'.

historical discourse or representations of trauma. These comments recall Kansteiner's view that *Sonderkommando Revolt* drew criticism for being a work of a supposedly 'lowbrow' medium that was considered inappropriate for serious engagement with a traumatic historical event.[94] However, a much larger portion of gamers in this particular snapshot of the debate were defensive about the perception of games as a lesser medium of amusement. Such commenters instead argued that they '*need* to be viewed as a serious art form' in order to fulfil their potential for historical engagement.[95]

Another point of contention in user discourse concerned the accuracy and historical validity of the scenario depicted in *Sonderkommando Revolt*. Some opposed the game because of the invented nature of the scenario. They felt the fictionalised revenge tale disrespected the victims by misrepresenting what happened. One particular user went into great detail about their stance on the game in this regard:

> there was no concentration camp prisoner who went on a killing spree and freed the camp and killed Hitler singlehandedly (I'm assuming that's the story in the game). I think we honour the victims by retelling their stories … by reenacting the Holocaust in such an inaccurate way, they aren't honouring the ones who died in the concentration camps. … I guess most of my problem with this is that it's inaccurate. And by inaccurate I mean completely rewriting history. I think it trivializes what actually happened at those camps. (u/RobIsTheMan)[96]

This user argued it was 'tasteless' for a work to present an alternative world where it was possible to escape death in a concentration camp through the mastery-based 'running and gunning' of FPS games. Such commenters believed depicting this behaviour as a solution to imprisonment and genocide would be disrespectful to the real-life victims who did not have such

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[94] Kansteiner, 'Transnational Holocaust Memory', 312.
[95] u/poritsky, 'Auschwitz Wolfenstein Mod'.
[96] u/poritsky, 'Auschwitz Wolfenstein Mod'.

an option. Here, we see the expression of a belief that absolute fidelity to the facts of genocide is a requirement for respectful communication and media depiction.

Meanwhile, other users praised the game for the virtual catharsis it might offer as a counterfactual opportunity for revenge. These arguments echoed thoughts shared by Totilo's *Kotaku* article and *Heeb Magazine*. One user admitted: 'I can't think of [anything] much more cathartic than killing Nazis in a concentration campe [sic].' (u/deleted) Other users argued in favour of the use of fantasy, and saw power in the subversion of tragic historical events. One wrote: 'some people see this as a fantasy. An alternate history where the captors got what they deserved, what they wished would have happened and that's why they were looking forward to playing this.' (u/RageX) Another similar comment argued: 'You're criticizing a video game for being fantastic and unlikely to occur in reality, to me that's kind of the point here. Not that this could have or did happen, but that it's an amazing, cathartic, and dramatic happening.' (u/deleted)

For these defenders of *Sonderkommando Revolt*, the inaccuracy of the game's scenario was precisely what made it appealing. Much like *Inglourious Basterds*, it was a seductive and gratifying revenge fantasy that allowed the empowered audience to imagine rising up and triumphing over the existential threat of the Holocaust. In this group, there were also some gamers who appreciated the commemoration of Jewish resistance during the Holocaust. These commenters acknowledged that despite being an invented scenario, the narrative of *Sonderkommando Revolt* could function as a fantastical allegory for real-life Jewish resistance and escape. Such a narrative could convey a sort of metaphorical historical truth even though the particulars were exaggerated and invented.

In the debate over *Sonderkommando Revolt*, much like in that of *Imagination Is The Only Escape,* we see two opposing sets of historical values play out in the negotiation of appropriate engagement with the Holocaust. In those who criticised the game for its fantastical nature, we see a subset of players who value accuracy and faithfulness to the historical record above all else. For them, truthfulness is the primary way of respecting and paying tribute to the victims of historical tragedy. On the other side of the debate, we see those who value the existence of counterfactual revenge fantasy in historical fiction. For this group, digital media becomes a way of rewriting the past to earn justice for the victims and to experience catharsis for themselves.

Debates around educational value, truthfulness, and appropriateness echoed those that took place around *Imagination Is The Only Escape*, but some key themes differ between the two games. The invocation of other Holocaust fictional media as justification for a Holocaust game was strongly present in each case. Each game garnered comparisons to a key Hollywood blockbuster: the melodramatic historical epic *Schindler's List* for *Imagination Is The Only Escape,* and campy revenge fantasy *Inglourious Basterds* for *Sonderkommando Revolt*. However, whereas Bernard was consistent about the educational goals of *Imagination Is The Only Escape*, Genis vacillated on how historically accurate, well-researched, and educational *Sonderkommando Revolt* was intended to be. As a result, there were fewer commenters defending the educational value of the game (although some people positively viewed the game's representation of Jewish resistance as educational). Instead, commenters either praised or criticised the game's non-adherence to a factual historical account. *Sonderkommando Revolt*'s concentration camp setting, gory visuals, and blatant wish-fulfilment of the game's action crossed more lines of taste and appropriateness than did *Imagination Is The Only Escape*. It therefore drew more genuine criticism. However, both of these games still placed players in the

role of Holocaust victims and/or survivors. This left room for defenders to argue in favour of the games' attempts to create empathy and engage with their perspectives. As the next case study will demonstrate, it can be much more difficult to find defenders when this line of appropriateness is crossed.

The Cost of Freedom: playing as a perpetrator

So far, the games examined in this chapter featured Jewish protagonists. In both *Imagination Is The Only Escape* and *Sonderkommando Revolt*, the player was intended to inhabit the historical role of victim or resister, not of perpetrator. Very few games have elicited the level of revulsion caused by those that offer the possibility of re-enacting historical cruelties in a ludic space. Games that allow the player to inhabit the role of the perpetrator trigger what Adam Chapman and Jonas Linderoth call the 'fear of the antagonistic playable position', a concept introduced in Chapter Three.[97] Games have often been harshly condemned for allowing players to inhabit the role of the 'bad guys'.[98] Nazis are commonly considered the 'ultimate bad guys' in popular culture and I would argue that they are therefore especially taboo as playable characters. The idea of a game that allows one to play as a Nazi is reprehensible to most people. Almost no commercially released games feature playable, explicitly Nazi characters. Whenever a game (generally those in the military strategy genre) allows the German side to be playable, all signs and symbols of Nazism, including swastikas and SS emblems, are removed. This may partially be due to the necessity of censorship in German releases, but the ethical considerations of emblazoning the player with Nazi symbolism also play a key role.[99] The playable position

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[97] Chapman and Linderoth, 'Exploring the Limits', 138.
[98] Chapman and Linderoth, 'Exploring the Limits', 139.
[99] Pfister, 'Imaginations of the Holocaust'.

therefore is 'whitewashed' into the 'clean Wehrmacht' myth of German postwar memory. Such design choices propagate the fallacy that the Wehrmacht were innocent of war crimes, and thereby obscure the fact that the player is fighting on the side of the perpetrators.[100]

An unreleased game called *The Cost of Freedom* (cancelled 2018) provided an example of what can happen when video games attempt to simulate the role of the perpetrators of the Holocaust. Developed by a Ukrainian company named Alien Games, *The Cost of Freedom* was originally set in a concentration camp in Poland. It intended to allow players to choose the role of either prisoner or guard and re-enact life in the camp. The game's now-defunct official website read:

> The gameplay of Cost of Freedom is based on the confrontation of two sides – the prisoners and the guards (aka overseers). The players are given the opportunity to dispose of others' lives as cruel overseers, or to survive and carry on an escape plan as prisoners.[101]

A trailer for the game was first uploaded to YouTube in August 2018. In the version still viewable on YouTube, we see several scenes from the virtual concentration camp.[102] Crowds of prisoners are shown standing in mud and crowded into bunks, overseen by threatening guards in SS uniforms. One scene shows a group of prisoners facing a firing squad. In some clips, prisoners have obtained arms, and one is shown shooting and killing a guard. The final section shows droves of prisoners running to escape the camp, a scene reminiscent of the film *Escape from Sobibor* (1987). Over this footage, words appear on the screen that advertise the gameplay goals and capabilities: 'subordinate,' 'tolerate', 'survive', 'help other', 'punish', 'watch', 'join

[100] Chapman and Linderoth, 'Exploring the Limits', 147.
[101] 'Cost of Freedom', November 3, 2018, accessed via the Wayback Machine, https://www.cof-game.com/.
[102] Cost of freedom, 'Short teaser of game THE COST OF FREEDOM', Youtube Video, 1:58, August 24, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1uQR2mra6a4.

the team', 'revenge', 'prepare escape', 'run', 'and save other'. Much like in *Sonderkommando Revolt*, it is possible to stage an armed uprising, kill camp guards in retribution, and successfully escape the camp. [103]

However, it is also possible to play on the side of the camp guards, and the game does not whitewash the gruesome actions available to them. The trailer advertises that the player can choose to play as the 'brutal killers, or prisoners'.[104] The 'brutal killers' title card is followed by in-game clips of SS soldiers firing at prisoners standing in front of a large pit. Actively murdering prisoners is therefore evidently a viable gameplay choice in the game. The trailer shows off a range of other in-game capabilities of the playable position of SS guard. In the footage, a marker (presumably controlled by the player) selects a large group of prisoners. A menu then appears on the screen titled 'Orders', with a list of actions the player can choose from. They include 'send disinfection', 'to send into the pit of death', 'send to factory', and 'forced to kneel, to eat grass, jump on the spot, to get to pray, to dig a hole'. In this footage, 'send disinfection' is selected. The player directs the group of prisoners to walk into what appears to be a gas chamber. The doors ominously close, and the screen fades to black. Then, an image of a pile of dead virtual bodies appears on screen. The footage directly shows the inside of the gas chamber – gas pours out of pipes and fills the room as prisoners scream and collapse. The shaky, disorienting camera moves through the crowds and finally pans onto one prisoner who has managed to obtain a gas mask and is standing, unharmed, in the smog. We can assume that the gas mask is a gameplay mechanism that allows the player-as-prisoner to outsmart the guards, beat 'disinfection', and begin the process of escape. It is quite possible that this is the first and

[103] Cost of freedom, 'Short teaser of game', Youtube Video.
[104] Cost of freedom, 'THE COST OF FREEDOM v3 ENG Reload', Youtube Video, 3:00, August 24, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MWIaJ63G8uQ.

only time the inside of a gas chamber has been shown in a video game (excepting the 90s mini-epidemic of neo-Nazi concentration camp simulator 'homebrews' distributed underground mostly in Germany, a phenomenon I will examine more closely in Chapter Five).

The distressing virtual recreation of the camp shown in the trailer footage drew media attention. Over the following months, *The Cost of Freedom* was covered by a number of media outlets, including several sensationalist tabloids. Most of these news reports emphasised the fact that players could assume the role of SS camp guards with the ability to kill and torture prisoners. *The Sun* called it 'sick' and 'twisted'. Their coverage quoted Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial spokesman Bartosz Bartyzel, who asserted that 'using the tragedy of the victims of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp is outrageous'. He stated that the game 'made entertainment out of human suffering and showed a total lack of respect for the memory of holocaust victims'.[105] *The Mirror* called the game 'offensive' and 'disrespectful'. English-language Polish news site *The First News* called it 'horrifying'.[106] An *Israel National News* headline read 'Computer game mocks sending Jews to gas chambers'.[107] Australian radio talk show *3AW* called it 'tasteless' and said it 'went beyond the pale'. *3AW* included a quote from Anti-Defamation Commission chairman Dr Dvir Abramovich: 'Just when I thought I saw everything, I felt like I was kicked in

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[105] James Cox, 'Sick Cost of Freedom video game that lets players kill prisoners in "Auschwitz" death camp is scrapped', *The Sun*, November 6, 2018, https://www.thesun.co.uk/tech/7667465/cost-of-freedom-game-ss-guards-auschwitz-scrapped/.

[106] Stuart Dowell, 'Horrific death camp computer game where players are SS guards murdering inmates comes under investigation', *The First News*, October 31, 2018, https://www.thefirstnews.com/article/horrific-death-camp-computer-game-where-players-are-ss-guards-murdering-inmates-comes-under-investigation-2989; Mark Morris, '"Offensive" and "disrespectful" Auschwitz video game scrapped after public outrage', *The Mirror*, November 5, 2018, https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/offensive-disrespectful-auschwitz-video-game-13537726.

[107] Mordechai Sones, 'Computer game mocks sending Jews to gas chambers', *Israel National News*, October 30, 2018, http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/254022.

the stomach … For me to learn there's a game out there that literally turns people into Nazi murderers, is emotionally distressing, indecent and disgusting beyond description.'[108]

The Cost of Freedom's harsh public condemnation stemmed largely from its decision to allow players to re-enact the crimes of the Holocaust virtually. The antagonistic playable position crossed a hard line of taste and appropriateness, resulting in an emotionally charged and highly politicised controversy. Although not explicitly stated in the discussions, I would suggest that the competitive online multiplayer format of the game contributed to the public sense of its trivialization of the Holocaust. Such formats generally focus on fun, sports-like competitiveness between friends. *The Cost of Freedom* gave no indication that the game would attempt to present its disturbing historical content as anything other than a vehicle for a particularly transgressive mode of competitive gameplay. It is difficult to know whether the creators might have thought including both prisoner and guards as playable sides of the conflict would dampen the outrage. Ultimately, collective disgust at the playable SS officer role completely overwhelmed the prospect of playing as rebelling prisoners. This is an interesting contrast to discourses around *Sonderkommando Revolt*, where some audiences found value in the prospect of assuming the role of prisoner and re-enacting a camp uprising. Regardless of the surrounding game content, allowing a player to engage in virtual acts of historical atrocity disqualified *The Cost of Freedom* from any of the same support offered to *Sonderkommando Revolt*.

Unlike *Sonderkommando Revolt* and *Imagination Is The Only Escape*, *The Cost of Freedom* attracted few supporters. The small number of positive comments from Internet users did not engage in the same sort of nuanced historical discourse that was seen in *Sonderkommando Revolt* and *Imagination Is The Only Escape's* public debates. Some comments

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[108] 'Anger over tasteless video game based on Nazi-style death camps', *3AW,* October 31, 2018, https://www.3aw.com.au/anger-over-tasteless-video-game-based-on-nazi-style-death-camps/.

in support of the game were blatantly anti-Semitic. Many others displayed the 'anything goes' attitude of Internet 'edgelord' culture. Those engaging in this culture typically express offensive, disturbing, or otherwise socially unacceptable views (and consume related content) as a form of nihilistic societal rebellion and/or to gain social capital in certain internet circles. 'It's a f------ game. Get over it,' read one such comment from the appropriately named user LORD KILLOZA666.[109] The view that 'it's just a game' and therefore has no relationship to real-life historical or ethical issues was predominant among the game's few defenders. In a sense, this total rejection of discourse around historical values represents a value system in itself: one that detaches media representations from any sort of historical, social, or ethical responsibility, depoliticising and decontextualising them from a place of relative privilege.

By the time most of the English-language coverage gained steam in November 2018, news outlets were reporting that the game had been put on hold and was set to be reworked into a less offensive format. Earlier that month, developer Alexey Kutischev announced that they had been 'forced' to stop development on the game due to 'wide spread [sic] misinformation' in the media.[110] An update on the game's Facebook page announced that the game had been changed to a Soviet GULAG labour camp in Siberia, featuring conflict between prisoners and NKVD guards.[111] In 2019, the website for the game had no references to Auschwitz, Nazis or concentration camps, and screenshots instead showed a snowy location with Russian text.[112] The

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[109] LORD KILLOZA666, 'It's a f------ game. Get over it.', Youtube comment, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MWIaJ63G8uQ.
[110] 'Ukraine developers forced to scrap Auschwitz-themed video game after outcry', *The Times of Israel,* November 3, 2018, https://www.timesofisrael.com/ukraine-developers-forced-to-scrap-auschwitz-themed-video-game-after-outcry/.
[111] 'Cost of Freedom', Facebook group, accessed January 18, 2023, https://www.facebook.com/groups/CostFreedom/.
[112] 'Cost of Freedom', https://www.cof-game.com/.

Facebook page has not been updated since April 2019 and the official website has since been taken down, suggesting the project was quietly abandoned.

Conclusion

By examining the debates and discourses around these three cancelled games, this chapter has revealed some of the factors that affect whether a game might be accepted by audiences as a valid historical engagement with the Holocaust. These factors include perceived educational value, the trivialisation of the gaming medium, the antagonistic playable position, concentration camps as settings, violent imagery, and values around truth and accuracy. Most significantly, this investigation discovered that the commonly repeated belief that *Imagination Is The Only Escape* was deemed unacceptable and cancelled by Nintendo was a falsity generated by inaccurate media coverage. Although many people expected a controversy, there were very few real detractors. However, the idea that a family-friendly company like Nintendo would not permit a game about a serious and traumatic historical event to be released sounded likely enough that it took hold as fact in the public imagination.

Holocaust games are frequently defended by the public for their potential educational outcomes. Specific themes include the memorialising of Jewish survivors, victims, and resisters, and representing perspectives of the Second World War that are rarely seen in gaming. Within these arguments, there is frequently an acknowledgement that new technologies must be used to advance Holocaust education, particularly with younger generations who have grown up immersed in digital interactive media – an argument echoed by academics in recent years.[113] As the most explicitly educational effort, *Imagination Is The Only Escape* drew the most support in

[113] Kansteiner, 'Transnational Holocaust Memory', 305-343; Rich and Dack, 'Forum', 201-211.

this fashion. Meanwhile, the ambivalently educational *Sonderkommando Revolt* received a similarly ambivalent response, although its attempt to memorialise Jewish resisters drew a reasonable amount of support. *The Cost of Freedom* had no stated or implied educational aim, and thus found no defenders in this regard. These examples suggest that the nobly perceived goal of Holocaust education in a society frequently criticised for forgetting the Holocaust could provide a buffer against criticism of ludic Holocaust representation.

In their own respective ways, *Imagination Is The Only Escape* and *Sonderkommando Revolt* both triggered discussions around the validity of using fiction and fantasy to engage seriously with history. There were supporters and detractors on both sides. Interestingly, these discourses indicated that audience members can understand, and recognise value in, the use of metaphorical historical argument in fiction. Their ideas resonate with Rosenstone's paradigm of 'true invention' in film, where a detail or plot point may be fictional but remains within the bounds of plausibility and valid historical argument.[114] A segment of game audiences can understand and apply this framework to a range of media works, including video games. This is a promising sign for those wishing to utilise invention, metaphor, and fantasy to engage the public in historical thinking. However, there remains a significant portion of commenters that conceptualise documentary conventions and 'just-the-facts' representation as equivalent to historical truthfulness. These commenters demonstrate scepticism towards the use of invention and fantasy. Greater understanding of public values and historical philosophies will continue to be important in creating, implementing, and evaluating ludically interactive digital works of history.

[114] Rosenstone, *Visions*, 21; Rosenstone, *History on Film*, 8-9.

Finally, the idea of a 'game' as an inherently trivialising form of representation was present in discourses around all three case studies. The importance of this topic endured across the three very different games. This suggests there is a deeper public reaction to the formal properties of a 'game' itself that goes beyond the subject matter of individual projects. As seen in the discussions around *Imagination Is The Only Escape* and *Sonderkommando Revolt*, passionate debates emerge about the validity of games as an expressive art form capable of dealing with serious historical topics in the same way other popular media are permitted to. Gamers particularly demonstrate a high degree of awareness about the degraded status of their medium of choice. They express a strong desire to see games taken more seriously as a form of expression. On the other hand, the action-based gameplay of *Sonderkommando Revolt* and the competitive player-versus-player format of *The Cost of Freedom* are perceived to strive for gratification and quick thrills at the expense of reverence for historical victims. There is clearly an enduring incompatibility between games that intend to be 'fun' and serious engagements with traumatic histories, despite a widespread belief that games can be an elevated art form.

One could conclude from the case of *The Cost of Freedom* that the antagonistic playable position – assuming the role of a Nazi – would inevitably be considered far beyond the pale of appropriateness. Mortensen has suggested that dark play can indeed be fair play – 'if the story of the game demands conflict, then somebody must step into the playing field on the side of the antagonist'.[115] However, it is unlikely this sense of fairness can be extended to real-life historical perpetrators responsible for reprehensible historical crimes. This would seem to pose a problem for the hypothesis outlined in Chapter Three: that video games can interrogate cases of bystandership and complicity in periods of historical violence and atrocity. However, the case

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[115] Torill Elvira Mortensen, 'Keeping the Balance: Morals at the Dark Side', in *The Dark Side of Game Play*, eds. Mortensen et. al., 160.

study detailed in the next chapter, that of *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream*, suggests that the antagonistic playable position could potentially be represented in a culturally acceptable way. As we will see, there are a number of other influencing factors that could enable the video games industry to cross this final barrier of historical engagement. Games might thereby someday aid in the creation of self-critical digital cultures around bystandership, collaboration, and complicity.

CHAPTER FIVE

I HAVE NO MOUTH AND I MUST SCREAM: THE FORGOTTEN HOLOCAUST GAME

Chapter Outline

In Chapter Five, I continue the Holocaust theme by engaging in a close analysis of a game neglected by the scholarly field up until now: the 1995 PC adaptation of Harlan Ellison's 1967 short story *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream*. This game is significant as it appears to challenge many of the conclusions that might be drawn about where, when, and what can be considered appropriate for representing the Holocaust. It defies taste and convention by depicting a concentration camp and graphic Nazi atrocities, and by letting the player play as a Nazi war criminal. However, unlike the games discussed in Chapter Four, it was praised on release and continues to be held in high esteem today. In this chapter, I discuss how the game's framing as a 'highbrow' work, the role of 'auteur' author Harlan Ellison, and its literary provenance impacted its reception. I then engage in a close analysis of the game itself, revealing how its depiction of Nazi doctor Nimdok engages with my thesis' major themes of empathy, choice, complicity, and critical historical consciousness. I discuss how the horror genre can be used to explore historical trauma, and finally evaluate the implications of this game's presentation and reception for digital Holocaust representation in the future.

I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream: a literary legend's ludic legacy

It has been argued that custodians of Holocaust memory and general public opinion have 'deemed unfit' video games as a medium for engagement with the subject. Controversial games such as *Sonderkommando Revolt* (cancelled 2011) have been used as evidence that it is too

inflammatory, inappropriate, and difficult to create a game about the Holocaust.[1] Chapter Four investigated some of these controversies. However, almost all academic arguments about the Holocaust in games have excluded a game that graphically tackled Holocaust themes over a decade before *Imagination Is The Only Escape* attempted it. In 1995, video game publisher Cyberdreams released point-and-click adventure game *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream*. Examining this game leads us to several of the key issues in Holocaust gaming discussed in this thesis: fun, entertainment and 'winning' in games, trivialisation, complicity, and the anxiety of the antagonistic playable position.

'Framing' a work as 'a game' instead of 'art' can change whether the Holocaust content is viewed as acceptable. Adam Chapman and Jonas Linderoth's chapter on Holocaust gaming offers a compelling analysis of how the 'ludic frame' can affect reception by creating a perception of trivialisation. They also observe, however, that 'when deliberately placing some problematic themes in a ludic frame it seems to be rather small things that stand between being perceived as brilliant or tasteless'.[2] Nobody yet has offered any detailed investigation of what these 'small things' that influence the perception of a game's appropriateness might be. Nor has it been determined how they might subsequently be navigated in order to break new ground in the field of interactive digital Holocaust memory. This chapter examines *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* in depth as a game that engaged with the Holocaust and was perceived as brilliant,

[1] Wulf Kansteiner, 'Transnational Holocaust Memory, Digital Culture and the End of Reception Studies', in *The Twentieth Century in European Memory*, eds. T. S. Andersen and B. Törnquist-Plewa (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 311; Eugen Pfister, '"Man Spielt Nicht Mit Hakenkreuzen!" Imaginations of the Holocaust and Crimes against Humanity During World War II in Digital Games', in *Historia Ludens: The Playing Historian*, eds. Pat Cullum, Katherine J. Lewis, Benjamin Litherland, and Alexander von Lünen (New York: Routledge, 2019), 275.
[2] Adam Chapman and Jonas Linderoth, 'Exploring the Limits of Play: A Case Study of Representations of Nazism in Games', in *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments*, eds. Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderoth and Ashley M.L. Brown (Routledge, 2015), 145.

not tasteless, for doing so. Through this case study, I investigate what factors can affect a game's perceived ability to engage with the Holocaust.

I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream is an adaptation of the Harlan Ellison short story of the name same first published in 1967. It was co-designed, written, and voiced by Ellison himself in conjunction with Cyberdreams writer David Sears and producer David Mullich. The game takes the form of a classic point-and-click adventure game where the player must solve puzzles in order to progress. Most of these puzzles involve interacting with characters and finding and using the right items in the right places. The game expands the backstories of the original five human survivors in the short story: Nimdok, Benny, Gorrister, Ellen, and Ted. The story explores the question of why rogue omniscient supercomputer AM specifically chose those five to torment. Each chapter in the game explores a different character's inner demons as they are forced through AM's surreal, disturbing 'games'. AM aims to punish these characters for their failings in life and make them relive their traumas. For example, Ellen must explore a bizarre pyramid and ultimately come face-to-face with her rapist. Benny has been transformed into a grotesque ape-like creature who is perpetually starving yet unable to eat – a punishment from AM for killing his own men in war. Although AM wishes to torment them, there is an opportunity for these characters to find some sort of closure, healing, or redemption, provided the player makes choices that allow them to achieve this. The game is known for tackling dark themes most other games shy away from, including rape, suicide, mental illness, cannibalism, and, in the section we will discuss here, the Holocaust.

The chapter of *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* that presents Nimdok's story portrays aspects of the Holocaust in a vivid and confronting way that no other commercially released game has done before or since. Nimdok is an elderly ex-Nazi doctor who was once an

assistant to Josef Mengele, performing heinous medical experiments on imprisoned Jews. Now in advanced age, his memory has deteriorated, along with his awareness and understanding of his terrible past. At the start of his chapter, AM calls him a 'kindred spirit', and tells him he's 'constructed an adventure … to revive your failing memory'. He is instructed to find 'the Lost Tribe' (the game's euphemism for Jewish people) and continue his 'eminent scientific research'. AM also wishes to torment Nimdok by forcing him to remember the actions in which he was complicit as a Nazi scientist during the Holocaust. Nimdok's chapter begins in a concentration camp, just outside the hospital building that hosts Dr Mengele's experiments. It is not immediately evident to the player that Nimdok was a perpetrator of the Holocaust; it a 'reveal' later in the story. There are no immediately obvious swastikas or Nazi paraphernalia, although the red and black 'AM' symbol seen at the start is strongly suggestive of Nazi iconography. Later, a propaganda poster of a blonde youth with '1945' underneath clues the player further into the era and setting.

The player as Nimdok must navigate the camp hospital and surroundings while attempting to recover his memory and understand who he was in his former life. Nimdok is given the opportunity to operate on a prisoner, help other prisoners escape, and re-encounter his own research experiments. These experiments include the reanimation of a folkloric Jewish 'golem' the Nazis intended to reappropriate for genocidal purposes. The interactive, malleable narrative built around player choice provides several possible ways Nimdok may deal with the revelation of his terrible past. In a 1995 interview, Ellison suggested that there may be 'salvation for him within the confines of [the] game', although in a limited form.[3]

[3] DOS Nostalgia, 'Harlan Ellison "I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream" interview', Youtube Video, 15:38, June 30, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9dBap0UfQ_U.

Where is the backlash?

One of the most fascinating things about *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* is that it appears to have stirred no controversy regarding its confronting depiction of Holocaust perpetration. Nimdok's chapter is the section of the game that has attracted the most attention, but most commentary is in the tone of glowing admiration or grim respect. As established in the previous chapter, there are Holocaust-themed games such as *Imagination is the Only Escape* (cancelled 2013) which have not evoked much criticism. However, this is arguably because *Imagination is the Only Escape* did not place the player in an antagonistic playable position, visually depict graphic atrocities, or use a concentration camp as its setting. Games that have done these things, such as *Sonderkommando Revolt* (cancelled 2011) and *The Cost of Freedom* (cancelled 2018), have been sharply criticised. *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream* firmly falls into the latter category. It is set in a concentration camp. It depicts atrocities graphically, and the player character, a Nazi doctor, actually performs them. In light of all other similar instances being roundly condemned, one would expect *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream* to elicit similar condemnation. The developers themselves certainly anticipated such a reaction. In a 2018 interview, producer David Mullich recalled: 'What I most remember about Nimdok is waiting for the controversy that never came about his story involving the Holocaust.'[4]

The controversy never did come, and over 25 years later it has still not arrived. Instead, critics and audiences have singled out Nimdok's segment of the game for praise. A 1996 review from magazine *MACweek*, for example, is very positive about Nimdok's storyline. It stated that 'Nimdok's psychodrama embodies the most disturbing and brilliant aspects of the game'.[5]

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[4] Jeff Cork, 'Classic GI: I Have No Mouth, And I Must Scream', *Game Informer*, June 29, 2018, https://www.gameinformer.com/b/features/archive/2016/01/14/classic-gi-i-have-no-mouth-and-i-must-scream.aspx.
[5] Steven Roback, 'I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream', *MACweek* 10, no. 46 (December 2, 1996): 32.

Another 1996 review from *PCGamerOnline* says that although Nimdok's storyline is 'bound to be the most controversial path', the game's 'moments that challenge and disturb' give its characters 'much more psychological depth than we've seen in any computer game to date'. The review concludes that although the game's darkness 'isn't for everyone', it's a 'thoughtful' and 'intriguing' game that ultimately earns an 87% positive score.[6] The few negative reviews that can be found criticise its technical flaws and illogical puzzles, but still praise the storyline and darker themes.[7] It won several awards from gaming publications upon release, including *Digital Hollywood*'s 'Best Dark Game of 1996' and *Computer Gaming World*'s 'Adventure Game of the Year'. These accolades are a testament to its positive critical reception.[8]

One might be tempted to conclude that the developers were able to 'get away' with such taboo content due to the different nature of the games industry in the mid-1990s. Point-and-click adventure games of the period tended to be more textual and narrative-heavy, and therefore able to contain more sophisticated storylines. Cyberdreams had already had success with *Dark Seed* in 1992, a horror game based on H.R. Giger's famous surreal artworks. Moreover, development studios tended to be smaller and more independent in this period. They were potentially more willing to take risks in an era where the medium was still in its early days of experimentation. Mullich seems to agree with this theory, stating that 'at the time, we were still on the frontier. The industry was still small enough where publishers would take crazy chances on stuff and see

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[6] T. Liam McDonald, 'I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream', *PCGamerOnline*, January 1996, accessed via the Wayback Machine, https://web.archive.org/web/19991222073058/http://www.pcgamer.com/reviews/548.html.
[7] Richard Cobbett, 'I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream, a game censorship made unfinishable', *PC Gamer*, July 04, 2021, https://www.pcgamer.com/au/saturday-crapshoot-i-have-no-mouth-and-i-must-scream/; Aleksi Kesseli, 'I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream (PC) Review', *Playlab!*, October 18, 2016, https://www.tuni.fi/playlab/i-have-no-mouth-and-i-must-scream-pc-review/; Daniel Kurland, '"I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream": The Most Disturbing, Nihilistic Video Game of All Time?', *Bloody Disgusting*, April 20, 2018, https://bloody-disgusting.com/editorials/3494603/remember-harlan-ellison-made-nihilistic-horror-game-time/.
[8] Peter Tieryas, 'How Harlan Ellison's Most Famous Short Story Became An Amazing Video Game', *Kotaku*, April 7, 2018, https://kotaku.com/how-harlan-ellison-s-most-famous-short-story-became-an-1827327887.

if it stuck'. He comments that, if the same game were to be made now, it would require a different approach: 'we would spend a lot more time defining the lines we wouldn't cross, careful presentation of this character'.[9]

One might therefore assume that such a game could not be made today. However, *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* has been re-released several times over the last decade, and it has continued to draw praise for its Holocaust chapter. Cyberdreams and The Dreamers Guild both closed for business in 1997, leaving the rights in limbo and the game out of print. In 2013, the rights were acquired by Night Dive Studios. This enabled its release first on GOG.com and shortly thereafter on Steam, where the game would find new, larger audiences.[10] These re-releases are surprising, given the fact that the game was a commercial failure upon its initial release. It is evident that its critical reception, 'cult' status, and significance have incentivised companies to keep it on the market. As of April 19, 2021, it has a 'Very Positive' aggregate rating on Steam across 1036 user reviews.[11] Similarly, its GOG.com average user rating is 4.3/5.[12] Critics still commend its Holocaust content. For example, an article from *PopMatters* praises its examination of real-world horrors in a sci-fi setting and the philosophical implications of its depiction of the human capacity for evil.[13] It is clear that even beyond its original release

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[9] Cork, 'Classic GI'.
[10] Jonathan Anson, 'I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream Released On GOG', *Gaming Illustrated*, September 9, 2013, accessed via the Wayback Machine, https://web.archive.org/web/20130929163134/http://gamingillustrated.com/i-have-no-mouth-and-i-must-scream/; 'NOW AVAILABLE - I HAVE NO MOUTH, AND I MUST SCREAM', Steam, October 18, 2013, https://store.steampowered.com/oldnews/11650.
[11] 'I Have No Mouth, And I Must Scream', Steam, accessed March 9, 2022, https://store.steampowered.com/app/245390/I_Have_No_Mouth_and_I_Must_Scream/.
[12] 'I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream', GOG, accessed March 9, 2022, https://www.gog.com/game/i_have_no_mouth_and_i_must_scream.
[13] Eric Swain, 'A TRUTHFUL EXECUTION OF HORROR: 'I HAVE NO MOUTH AND I MUST SCREAM', *PopMatters*, October 22, 2013, https://www.popmatters.com/176000-the-mirror-of-i-have-no-mouth-and-i-must-scream-2495714488.html.

during the industry 'frontier' of the mid-1990s, the game has been able to transcend the boundaries of what is normally considered acceptable ludic Holocaust representation.

Transcending the taboo

There are a number of possible reasons *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* was able to overcome barriers of taste and appropriateness in order to depict the Holocaust. Firstly, it is arguable that Harlan Ellison's involvement in the game lent it a level of 'auteur' prestige, giving it increased credibility and cultural capital that protected it from criticism. Wulf Kansteiner has suggested that one of the reasons for the Holocaust taboo in digital gaming is that the medium 'lacks auteur figures such as Lanzmann, Spielberg or Tarantino who can more easily transgress limits of historical taste'.[14] This might imply that a game may be able to broach Holocaust-related topics if it has a trusted auteur-like figure at the helm. One could likely imagine a towering industry figure such as Hideo Kojima of *Metal Gear Solid* fame being able to pull off such a project. For *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream*, it is possible that Ellison was able to fill the role of 'auteur' needed in order to give the project a perception of trust, authenticity, and elevated cultural status. Ellison's involvement with the game was significant. He co-wrote the game with Sears and Mullich and provided the voice of AM. The PC box art featured his name and face, and he wrote the preface and character biographies for the original strategy guide. Ellison adapted the game from his already seminal work of speculative fiction that was highly critically acclaimed, winning a 1968 Hugo Award for 'Best Short Story'.[15] The game therefore originated from a well-regarded literary work by an acclaimed author, and the fact that Ellison himself adapted his own story deepened its respectable literary provenance. Mullich recalled that

[14] Kansteiner, 'Transnational Holocaust Memory', 313.
[15] 'Harlan Ellison's Awards', accessed March 9, 2022, http://harlanellison.com/awards.htm.

their goal in making the game was to create ‘not just interactive fiction, but interactive literature’.[16] The use of the term ‘literature’ as opposed to ‘fiction’ is likely intended to elevate the project’s status above the seemingly lowbrow nature of other game stories.

Ellison was famously disparaging towards computers and video games, despite agreeing to adapt his short story into one. His comments surrounding the development of the game make it clear that he wanted the *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream* project to fall outside the realm of what a ‘game’ was expected to be. For example, he asserted that he did not want the game to be ‘a shoot-’em-up or an arcade kind of thing’.[17] In a 1995 interview with *Interactive Entertainment*, in response to the question: ‘Are you much of a game player?’ Ellison replied: ‘the word game bothers me. Games are what you use to while away your time. Games are what divert you from the important things in life.’[18] This association between games and time-wasting recalls Chapman and Linderoth’s concept of the ‘trivialization of the ludic frame’. They argue that the context of how media is presented to us heavily influences our reception of it. A media work can be contextualised, or ‘keyed’, in various ways. According to their theory, there are limits on what can be keyed as ‘playful’ in a ludic context. They argue that framing or presenting something as a ‘game’ seems to have an ‘inherently trivializing quality’, creating the perception that the work is encouraging a ‘playful’ or frivolous approach to a serious and sensitive topic.[19] Ellison seemed to agree, calling *Wolfenstein*’s (1981-2019) shoot-’em-up gameplay ‘certifiably demented’ and its cartoonish villains ‘McNazis’.[20] In contrast, Brenda Romero’s *Train* (2009), discussed in Chapter Three, is an example of how re-keying something can ‘allow’ it to engage

[16] Tieryas, ‘Harlan Ellison’s Most Famous Short Story’.
[17] DOS Nostalgia, ‘Harlan Ellison’.
[18] DOS Nostalgia, ‘Harlan Ellison’.
[19] Chapman and Linderoth, ‘Exploring the Limits’, 140-143.
[20] DOS Nostalgia, ‘Harlan Ellison’.

in controversial themes such as the Holocaust. *Train* takes the form of a board game but is 'keyed' as an art piece in various ways: it is labelled as an artwork, only one copy exists, it cannot be purchased, and it is often shown in museums. Distancing *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream* from the category of 'game' and reframing it as 'interactive literature', as Mullich did, seems to be a similar attempt to re-key the game as something more 'worthy' of portraying the Holocaust.

As discussed in the previous chapter, there is a widely perceived tension between the apparent requirement for a game to be 'fun' and the depiction of the Holocaust. Both the creators and reviewers of *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* have emphasised that the game is not intended to be 'fun', or even conventionally 'entertaining'. One review, for example, comments that it is 'debatable as to whether or not this is an entertaining game' and admits it 'may not exactly be many people's idea of a fun diversion'.[21] Another described it as 'less a game than an ethical obstacle course'.[22] Instead, reviewers emphasise the game's 'senseless dread and misery', and how it 'depresses players to the point of inspiring powerlessness'.[23] A review from *The Courier* argued that the game 'isn't easy playing. It is frustrating, mentally taxing, sometimes pretentious and even distressing'.[24] It is important to note that these comments are in the context of positive reviews. The lack of traditionally 'fun' features is seen as an advantage for a game that attempts to deal with some of the darkest elements of the human experience. 'Keying' the

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[21] Kevin Hoelscher, 'Review for I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream', *Adventure Gamers*, October 30, 2002, https://adventuregamers.com/articles/view/17464.
[22] Kurland, 'The Most Disturbing'.
[23] Jonathan Guillen, 'I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream – Retro Review', *Survivethis,* March 11, 20017, https://survivethis.news/en/i-have-no-mouth-and-i-must-scream-review/; Josh Nichols, 'Retro Review – I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream: A Spark of Humanity Somewhere', *Bago Games*, 2017, https://bagogames.com/retro-review-i-have-no-mouth-must-scream-spark-humanity-somewhere/.
[24] Gerry Hart, 'I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream - Exploring a Forgotten Adventure Game Classic', *The Courier Online*, May 14, 2018, https://www.thecourieronline.co.uk/i-have-no-mouth-and-i-must-scream-exploring-a-forgotten-adventure-game-classic/.

game as being 'not fun' seems to be another way of deemphasising the ludic frame, decreasing the chances of the game being seen as trivialising or making light of a serious issue. It is therefore perceived as more capable of engaging with Holocaust memory. If games are fun diversions, and the Holocaust cannot be portrayed as a fun diversion, then *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* must not be a fun diversion, and certainly not a 'typical game', for it to be accepted as a depiction of the Holocaust.

Unwinnable games

Removing the win state of a game is another way to mitigate its potentially problematic ludic playfulness. Ellison seemed to perceive the fact that a competitive game with a win/loss state – a game you could 'succeed' at – would not be the most appropriate and effective way of exploring the murky ethical waters of the Holocaust. In the *Interactive Entertainment* interview, he recounted telling Sears: 'I want a game that you cannot possibly win.' When Sears responded that such a game might 'frustrate' the player, Ellison asserted that inducing such frustration would be 'a noble endeavour'.[25] He expresses similar sentiments in an interview for publisher Night Dive Studios upon the game's 2013 re-release. Ellison hurled some of his typically abrasive insults at people who spend their time 'sitting at home jerking their thumbs'. He then claimed he wanted to 'create a game from which you cannot escape', much as the characters cannot escape their fate in the original short story.[26]

Sears did ultimately convince Ellison that 'there probably should be a point to it', and that the game would require some sort of progress for the player. An interactive experience with

[25] DOS Nostalgia, 'Harlan Ellison'.
[26] 'Interview with Harlan Ellison', Nightdive, September 10, 2013, https://www.nightdivestudios.com/interview-harlan-ellison/.

no goal or aim would likely not incentivise players enough to continue engaging deeply with the work. As a result, there is one achievable 'better' ending to the game's narrative. In this ending, the protagonists defeat AM and awaken 750 humans cryogenically frozen on the Moon, who then prepare to reinhabit Earth. However, it is difficult to achieve this ending, and all the main characters still die in the process – except, ironically, for Nimdok. In this ending, Nimdok's consciousness is uploaded to AM and tasked with watching over the Earth until the planet is recolonised. One could view this ending as a continued punishment for Nimdok. If, as in the original short story, the characters desire death as a release from their infinite torment by AM (Ellison described their deaths as an 'act of great mercy'), then even this 'better' ending denies Nimdok such an outcome.[27] The denial of a win state is compounded by the fact that without a guide or external walkthrough, it is virtually impossible to attain this 'good' ending. Instead, most players will reach the same ending as in the original short story: being turned into a 'great, soft jelly thing' to be tormented eternally by AM.[28] Furthermore, due to the removal of Nimdok's chapter of the game in the German and French versions (a topic I will return to below), it is literally impossible to achieve the 'good' ending in these regions.

Sears recalled that Ellison did not object to the possibility of a more positive ending. The inclusion of a slightly more optimistic result did not seem to compromise Ellison's insistence on an 'unwinnable game' too much.[29] Despite the possibility of achieving this outcome, the game does not have a clear or obvious win state. Since the characters can never be freed from torment except in death, the traditional way to 'win' at a game is absent. Furthermore, for the Nazi war criminal Nimdok, the best possible outcome denies him even the release of death.

[27] 'Interview', Nightdive.
[28] Tieryas, 'Harlan Ellison's Most Famous Short Story'.
[29] Tieryas, 'Harlan Ellison's Most Famous Short Story'.

A game that teaches ethics

Why, then, did Ellison decide to create a game at all? It seems a surprising choice for a man who famously despised computers. It becomes even more puzzling when one considers that *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* was, and remains, his most famous story, one he admitted he was 'reluctant to option out' and had 'held … fairly close, waiting for the right offer'.[30] How was it that the point-and-click adventure game proposed by Cyberdreams became 'the right offer'? In his typically flippant manner, Ellison explained his reasoning as, 'somebody asked me to do it … it seemed like a good idea at the time'.[31] Meanwhile, the official guidebook begins with a preface titled 'Apologia for Temptation', in which Ellison spins a humorous story about 'human toads in silk suits' from Cyberdreams first offering him money, and then taunting him for being incapable of writing a game. The temptation to prove them wrong was apparently too great. Ellison concludes: 'the scaldingly dopey truth is that I wanted to see if I could do it. Create a computer game better than anyone else had created a computer game.' Other sources support this notion, suggesting it was the only medium he had not yet tried, and that he was curious about whether he could tackle it.

Despite his dislike of computer games and his seemingly flippant approach to creating one, he must have seen some genuine creative potential in them. In the *Interactive Entertainment* interview, he stated: 'what I wanted was a game that taught ethics. If in fact you could not win this game at least you could lose better. The more ethically you played, the better choices you made as a human being, the better you could wind up.'[32] The element of player choice therefore emerges as the key to what Ellison wished to achieve. Ellison envisioned a game that invited

[30] 'Interview', Nightdive.
[31] DOS Nostalgia, 'Harlan Ellison', Youtube Video.
[32] DOS Nostalgia, 'Harlan Ellison', Youtube Video.

people to attempt to act as ethically as possible within a nightmarish scenario (in this case, the Holocaust is one of these nightmarish scenarios). The interactive nature of the narrative is essential to this goal. Much like the games discussed in Chapter Three, *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* presents the player with a multitude of constraints and affordances, and challenges them to make the best choices possible within the established system. These ludic systems hold up a mirror to real-life historical situations, grappling with complicity, collaboration, and the historical problem spaces of those involved. For Ellison to have believed that the game could teach ethics, he must have believed in what Kansteiner calls the 'extraordinary didactic potential' of the medium that 'remains untapped' in Holocaust memory culture.[33]

The game's major mechanic for measuring the moral progression of the player is the 'spiritual barometer'. The ethical standing of the character is reflected in the background colour of the character portrait in the on-screen heads-up-display (HUD). The background colour changes from black through to dark green, light green, and then white, depending on how ethically the player behaves. Whenever the player makes a decision that the game considers unethical, the background will darken, and vice-versa. The spiritual barometer has some bearing on the narrative outcome of the game – it is easier to achieve the 'best' ending if the characters' spiritual barometers are white (meaning they made the best ethical decisions possible). However, it is still possible to achieve this ending without perfect spiritual barometers. This means that the barometers are not intended to be perceived as a precise metric for winning or losing the game. As Ellison hoped for, the game's focus is more on 'losing better', or dying having come to terms with one's past crimes and mistakes, rather than ethics as a pathway to winning or losing outright.

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[33] Kansteiner, 'Transnational Holocaust Memory', 314.

In Nimdok's scenario, altruistic or anti-Nazi actions have positive effects on the spiritual barometer. These include efforts to resist Mengele's experiments, assistance or mercy for his Jewish victims, and remorse for his crimes. For example, early in his chapter, a prisoner who attempted to escape is trapped on barbed wire. The player must free the prisoner with pliers, but can choose whether to give the prisoner ether to dull their pain as they are freed. There are other opportunities to give victims of experimentation ether in order to show them mercy. The most important moment of ethical choice is arguably the decision of whether to operate on a child. Upon entering the hospital, Nimdok is presented with the body of a small child on an operating table. He is told by an anaesthetist that he is to perform an operation to remove the child's spinal cord whilst he is still alive. The player must first pick up a bloodied scalpel next to the operating table. The most obvious choice is to then perform the surgery. However, the player can also select the 'use' option on the anaesthetist, killing him with the scalpel and sparing the child. The player can be killed by guards after this, which ends the chapter. However, if the player escapes quickly enough, they may continue to progress once having made this positive moral decision. Such an act increases the spiritual barometer significantly.

It is important to note that the spiritual barometer mechanic is not overtly stated or made clear to the player in the game. Decisions that affect the barometer are not clearly signposted. The player is thus not always aware that their decisions are being ethically judged and evaluated by the game. This means that the player will not necessarily try to attain the most ethical status (to 'win', in a sense), as they may not be aware of the barometer on an initial playthrough. Therefore, the game is likely attempting to measure the players' instinctive responses, rather than their calculated decisions, at least on a first playthrough. This links back to the nature of choice and agency inflation discussed in Chapter Four. Since the player must use critical thought and

creativity to discover many of these more ethical options, it more accurately reflects the nature of historical choice, wherein all the available options and their consequences are not necessarily apparent at the time.

The choice to operate on the child takes advantage of medium-specific expectations and assumptions to make a statement about agency and conformism. In most video games, the game itself instructs players about what to do and what their goal is. This information can be delivered through extradiegetic text and audio. It is frequently also delivered by diegetic non-player-characters (NPCs) telling the player character, and by extension the player, what they need to do next. Since this is such a widespread gaming convention, players are primed by their prior experiences to obey the directions of NPCs. This convention is so ingrained that it has been subverted to great acclaim, most famously in the game *Bioshock* (2007).[34] Therefore, when the anaesthetist tells Nimdok to operate on the child, it is likely that players will follow the NPC's instructions by default. It may be assumed that taking such an action is the only way to progress through the game. Players who have experience with games in *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream*'s specific niche, or who are unusually rebellious and curious, may decide to 'mess about' and see what other actions can be taken. However, it is possible that many players will simply follow the anaesthetist's direction without considering that they might 'disobey' the game. As mentioned above, the option to attack the anaesthetist is not signalled or indicated to the player in any way, so it is likely that players will remain ignorant to the possibility of taking another action. *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream*'s approach here recalls Brenda Romero's *Train*, which takes advantage of board game conventions to comment on authority and social

[34] *Bioshock* (2007) famously deconstructed this convention by revealing the protagonist of the game was programmed with a mind-control phrase to obey the NPC giving them instructions over the radio. Players would obey the voice without questioning their alliance up until the plot reveal, in line with game conventions.

conformity in the Holocaust. Much like *Train*, *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream*'s player decision to operate functions as a sort of ludic Milgram experiment, which highlights the relationship between atrocity and obedience to authority. It echoes explanations of why so many people conformed in Nazi society: they were ordered to, they were doing their job, they could not see an alternative. Appropriately, then, the game's guidebook describes Nimdok as 'one of the good people who did not object', one who excused his crimes with the cliché of 'I was just doing my job'.[35]

As with many early ventures into moral choice in games, *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* is an imperfect exploration of these issues. Some reviews of the game point out that the spiritual barometer's implementation is too simplistic. It reduces choice to a simple 'good/bad' binary, rather than the complex and nuanced ethical decision-making of games like *Papers, Please*.[36] As one reviewer points out, this is a 'detriment to what the game seems to be trying to do – the whole concept of a moral grey area is that there is no right or wrong answer, but here it's obvious'.[37] The obviousness of the moral choices is most evident in the final decision Nimdok can make. At the end of his chapter, Nimdok discovers the Nazis' secret project: a 'Golem' built as the ultimate weapon to destroy the Lost Tribe. This weapon is deliberately based on Jewish folklore as a malicious act of cultural corruption. The player as Nimdok must decide what command to give to the Golem once it awakens. Nimdok can order the golem to destroy the Lost Tribe, or hand it over to Mengele to do the same. If these options are selected, Mengele admirably calls Nimdok 'unredeemable', and AM invites him to carry on his 'evil'

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[35] Mel Odom and Harlan Ellison, *I Have No Mouth, And I Must Scream: The Official Strategy Guide* (Rocklin: Prima Publishing, 1995), 214.
[36] Hoelscher, 'Review'; Kesseli, 'Review'.
[37] Kurt Katala, 'I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream', *Hardcore Gaming 101*, July 11, 2017, http://www.hardcoregaming101.net/i-have-no-mouth-and-i-must-scream/.

research. On the other hand, Nimdok can hand control of the Golem over to the Lost Tribe. An escaped Jewish prisoner then immediately orders the Golem to fulfil 'the purpose for which it was created' and kill Nimdok. It is also possible to order the Golem to kill Mengele. If either of these latter two options are chosen, AM laments Nimdok's 'wretched little spark' of humanity. This option ends Nimdok's story with AM proclaiming that since Nimdok can now 'identify with his victims', he will be subject to the same torture. Nimdok is thus kept in a burning furnace for the rest of eternity. In this final decision, it is blindingly easy to know that aligning with Mengele is the monstrous choice, and choosing instead to help the Lost Tribe is morally right. One could easily imagine the ethical decision-making of the game holding much more weight if it were more nuanced along the lines of *Papers, Please*'s zero-sum ethical dilemmas.

Decisions that have little to no bearing on the gameplay or narrative trajectory – in other words, choices that appear to have no consequences – are also frequently criticised by players and gaming media. In this vein, *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* has been criticised for generally killing the player character no matter what decision is made.[38] For some critics, this may make it seem like the decision-making is ultimately irrelevant or lacking in narrative weight. Although this is frustrating from a gameplay and story perspective, I argue it is part of Ellison's intention to make an 'unwinnable game'. As mentioned above, Ellison set out with a deliberate goal of 'frustrating' the player. By making the game 'unwinnable' no matter what decisions are made, the game sends the message that even ethical decisions can lead to punishing outcomes for the historical actor. Changing the trajectory of history may not be an achievable outcome in the game. Instead, the player must make decisions according to their likely ethical, spiritual and existential consequences, rather than material ones.

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[38] Katala, 'No Mouth'.

The fact that you cannot 'win' is a key thematic cornerstone of Nimdok's story. The best Nimdok can do is attain some small semblance of atonement for his crimes. No matter what actions the player may take, Nimdok does not reach a happy ending. Even in the game's 'good ending', Nimdok's consciousness must eternally watch over the Earth, forced to exist forever with the full knowledge of his past atrocities. Ellison is careful not to allow a Nazi doctor guilty of crimes against humanity to attain full redemption. Nimdok can achieve ethical and moral realisations and reckon with his crimes, but he cannot undo the past or escape the consequences of his actions. This is where the 'unwinnable' nature of the game plays an important role in discourses of Holocaust memory and representation in media. In Jeff Hayton's words, 'it is difficult to imagine how a game featuring the Holocaust can be won in an unproblematic manner'. The argument for avoiding Holocaust gaming thus becomes the fact that 'games, on a fundamental level, are meant to be won', and 'an unwinnable game, is, in the end, an unplayable game'.[39]

What *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* shows us is that this is not necessarily true. Furthermore, other 'unwinnable' games aside from *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* are more numerous than Hayton's analysis suggests. For example, *Silent Hill 2* (2001), *Shadow of the Colossus* (2005), and *Braid* (2009) offer tragic endings for their protagonists. *Trench Warfare* (no longer available) was a First World War game deliberately created to be unwinnable in order to present arguments about the choices of generals and the nature of trench warfare itself.[40] These games demonstrate that it is possible to make an 'unwinnable' game in order to engage ludically with subjects that would be inappropriately portrayed through competitiveness,

[39] Jeff Hayton, 'Beyond Good and Evil: Nazis and the Supernatural in Video Games,' in *Revisting the 'Nazi Occult': Histories, Realities, Legacies*, eds. M. Black and E. Kurlander (Rochester: Camden House, 2015), 261-262.
[40] For a detailed discussion of *Trench Warfare,* see Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games,* 31-61.

triumph, and happy endings. Likewise, *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* gives us a model for a game that is not meant to be 'won' in a traditional sense, as doing so would be historically and perhaps morally unimaginable in almost all circumstances. It is therefore capable of exploring some of the most troubling aspects of the perpetration of the Holocaust without trivialising them. As one review of the game phrases it: 'Nimdok can never escape his hell, but by facing his crimes against humanity you can lead him to a more courageous death.'[41]

The antagonistic playable position

I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream is likely to be unique as a commercial game that allows the player to control a Nazi. We have seen that Chapman and Linderoth have dubbed games that allow the player to control a historical 'bad guy' as placing the player in the 'antagonistic playable position'.[42] As discussed in Chapters Three and Four, the antagonistic playable position has traditionally been considered problematic and drawn controversy. This is especially notable in the case of Holocaust video game fiction. Chapman and Linderoth's analysis of Second World War games found that, when the Axis side is playable (such as in multiplayer games), developers tend to 'erase' Nazism from the story. They largely achieve this by depicting only the Wehrmacht armed forces instead of the SS, and by removing all swastikas and other Nazi imagery and symbolism. These games therefore whitewash the player position into the 'clean Wehrmacht' to make it more 'thematically suitable for play'.[43] It is much more morally permissible for a player to assume the role of an 'ordinary German' enlisted in the Wehrmacht than an active and proud Nazi. The former role could give the player plausible deniability of

[41] Roback, 'No Mouth'.
[42] Chapman and Linderoth, 'Exploring the Limits', 138.
[43] Chapman and Linderoth, 'Exploring the Limits', 147.

involvement in war crimes and atrocities of the Nazi regime, even though the 'clean Wehrmacht' myth has been disproved. Historians have established the Wehrmacht's involvement in the Holocaust and other war crimes, alongside a pervasive ideological sympathy with Nazi Party ideals.[44] As such, Kempshall has asserted that 'it would be a brave computer game designer that tried to cast the player in the role of a Nazi'.[45]

There are valid reasons to raise concerns over the depiction of playable Nazis in video games, particularly after the mini-epidemic of homemade neo-Nazi propaganda games in the late 1980s and 1990s. These 'homebrew' games largely proliferated in Germany and Austria, although some reports indicated English translations had reached the United States. With titles like 'Aryan Test', 'Clean Germany' and 'KZ Manager', the games had explicitly racist, anti-Semitic, and neo-Nazi ideologies and permitted the player to recreate elements of the Nazi genocide.[46] In 'KZ Manager', the player assumed the role of the commandant of Treblinka managing the day-to-day operations of the death camp. The player had to earn money to buy gas and build gas chambers by extracting gold from the teeth of victims, or selling human remains for lampshades and dog food. In 'Aryan Test', the game rates the player's 'Aryan Credentials' and quizzes them to discover whether they are a 'wretched Jew'.[47] In these games, the explicitly genocidal and racist text on screen often quoted speeches by Adolf Hitler and Heinrich Himmler, praising the player for 'free[ing] Germany of these [Jewish] parasites'.[48] Some iterations of the games replaced Jews with Turks, who comprised a substantial proportion of the immigrant

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[44] For more on this topic, see Wolfram Wette, *The Wehrmacht: History, Myth, Reality* (Harvard University Press, 2007) and Waitman Wade Beorn, *Marching into Darkness: The Wehrmacht and the Holocaust in Belarus* (Harvard University Press, 2014).
[45] Chris Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), 99.
[46] Murray J. Laulicht and Eileen A. Lindsay, 'First Amendment Protections Don't Extend to Genocide', *New Jersey Law Journal,* December 9, 1991, 15.
[47] Joel Achenbach, 'Neo Nazi Games Lead To Protest', *The Washington Post*, 9 May, 1991, 10.
[48] Achenbach, 'Neo Nazi Games'; Laulicht and Lindsay, 'First Amendment'.

population in Germany at the time.[49] Other versions targeted homosexuals and Communists.[50] Although the Simon Wiesenthal Centre acquired eight of these titles for investigation, some reports claimed there were up to 140 different neo-Nazi games in circulation. They were available on platforms including the Amiga, Commodore 64, and MS-DOS home computer system, and were distributed via word-of-mouth, electronic post, and under-the-counter sales.[51] A survey in one Austrian school reported that 22% of its students had personally encountered the games. Law journals in the United States debated whether these games should be banned or subject to protections on freedom of speech.[52] 'KZ Manager' was later recreated and re-released as 'KZ Manager Millennium' sometime around the year 2000, demonstrating a persistent underground interest in these neo-Nazi propaganda games.[53]

Given this phenomenon of hateful neo-Nazi games, there is understandable anxiety over the existence of technology that facilitates interactive, immersive Nazi propaganda in video game form. The power of the gaming medium for reaching young audiences and the efficacy of learning via interactive media make these fears particularly salient.[54] However, as elaborated in Chapter Four, the justified fear of allowing players to engage in the antagonistic playable position makes it difficult for games to explore issues of historical complicity and collaboration. To reap the benefits of interactivity and oscillated immersion outlined in this thesis, the player

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[49] Achenbach, 'Neo Nazi Games'.
[50] 'West Germany: nazi video games', *Off our backs* 19, no. 3 (March 1989): 11.
[51] Linda Rohrbough, 'Racist computer games distributed by Nazis - KZ Manager and similar games exploit antisemitism - neo-Nazis circulating computer games with concentration camp theme', *Newsbytes News Network*, May 3, 1991, https://web.archive.org/web/20070311043800/http://calbears.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0NEW/is_1991_May_3/ai_10692247; 'Video Game Uncovered in Europe Uses Nazi Death Camps as Theme', *New York Times* May 1 1991, 10.
[52] Laulicht and Lindsay, 'First Amendment'.
[53] TheCrazyEven, 'Contentious Content: KZ Manager - *Sigh*', Youtube Video, 13:15, August 18, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iPOzseE-LJI.
[54] Laulicht and Lindsay, 'First Amendment'.

may need to inhabit the role of a historical antagonist and be given the opportunity to enact (or at least be complicit) in historical crimes. This raises the difficult question of how to create a video game that can place the player in a problematic historical role while still being accepted as an ethical, tasteful, and appropriate method of historical engagement.

I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream may be unique in that it is the only game thus far that has been able to place the player in the role of a Nazi and yet escape criticism for it. What is it that makes this game different from the others? Some of the traits outlined in this chapter – the not-so- 'small things that stand between being perceived as brilliant or tasteless', to borrow Chapman and Linderoth's expression – point towards the answers.[55] We have seen that *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* has literary provenance and a respected 'auteur' author at its helm. It is consciously 'not fun', markets itself as 'unwinnable', and aims to teach ethics. These traits make it more acceptable for the game to engage in the antagonistic playable position in a Holocaust context. Therefore, the player as Nimdok can remove a child's spine in a concentration camp without the game being condemned as inappropriate, exploitative or trivialising. This is a significance feat for *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream*. Its success points towards potential avenues for future engagement with Holocaust complicity and perpetration in video games.

<u>Horror and historical trauma</u>

I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream's representation of the Holocaust cannot be understood without discussing the consciously *non-historical* elements of the game and how they function. The world of the game is surreal, twisted, and fantastical. Its framing story is a horror-

[55] Chapman and Linderoth, 'Exploring the Limits', 145.

speculative fiction nightmare revolving around an insane supercomputer with reality-bending powers at the end of humanity itself. Nimdok's scenario contains many ahistorical and unbelievable elements, such as the folkloric Jewish golem, the immortality serum, and the mirror of self-revelatory truth. These elements of the game stem from its nature as a fantastical science fiction story. AM's ordeals are of its own creation and subject to its own whims, and are not intended to be a versimilitudinal depiction of historical reality. However, the advantage of this form of historical fictional representation is twofold. Firstly, the game functions as an example of how the horror genre can be used to explore historical trauma and perpetration of atrocity. Secondly, the nature of Nimdok's scenario as a fictionalised construction functions as a metaphor for the process of using interactive media and simulation to come to terms with dark episodes of human history.

The role of the horror genre in exploring societal anxieties and traumas is a familiar theme in literary criticism. Horror has been used for this purpose since the birth of the gothic horror novel of the nineteenth century. Contemporary criticism has analysed gothic fiction's preoccupation with social anxieties surrounding race, gender, sexuality, and womanhood among other themes. Popular film has been subject to similar analysis which has traced shifting trends in the horror movie genre as responses to shifting socio-economic and political conditions. More recently, two books specifically on horror film and historical trauma have been published: *The Wounds of Nations: Horror Cinema, Historical Trauma and National Identity* by Linnie Blake (2008), and Adam Lowenstein's *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema and the Modern Horror Film* (2005).[56] Blake's work is particularly relevant to the discussion of

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[56] Linnie Blake, *The Wounds of Nations: Horror Cinema, Historical Trauma and National Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008); Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema and the Modern Horror Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

historical video games, as her study is intended as a 'response to the longstanding occlusion of popular cultural forms … from contemporary theorisations of the cultural legacy of trauma'. In other words, Blake seeks to restore the 'lowbrow' cultural form of the horror film to academic discussions of culture and trauma. Blake accuses the interdisciplinary field of trauma studies of frequently ignoring popular cinema in favour of high modernist cultural works. As a result, the ability of horror cinema to provide a psychic outlet for collective historical trauma as a medium consumed by millions of people across the world has been overlooked. This is despite the rich tradition of film criticism focusing on horror films as the 'most traumatic and traumatised of film genres'.[57] There are obvious strong parallels between the exclusionary treatment of popular film and video games by trauma studies literature. Both are considered 'lowbrow' cultural forms, an issue discussed at length in the previous chapter that greatly affects the perceived ability of games to tackle the Holocaust in public discourse. Blake and Lowenstein's analyses provide a welcome remedy to the exclusion of cultural works considered to be 'lowbrow' in trauma studies. They therefore open an avenue for video games to likewise be considered as viable cultural responses to historical trauma.

According to Blake and Lowenstein, horror is a key avenue for the exploration of the otherwise suppressed trauma and violence associated with the historical perpetration of atrocity. Lowenstein's book posits the concept of the horror film as an 'allegorical moment'. Horror film becomes a 'collision of film, spectator and history' wherein historical traumas erupt from their suppressed state to viscerally confront the viewer.[58] An instrumental example of this can be seen in German film. Blake argues that while mainstream German post-Second World War films steadfastly avoided addressing the perpetration of atrocity, German body horror films 'shattered'

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[57] Blake, *The Wounds of Nations*, 3-5.
[58] Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation*, 2.

this silence as the 'unquiet dead cinematically return in a variety of victim, perpetrator and witness positions to apportion blame, exact retribution, offer testimony and atone'.[59] Blake explains how the 'disgusting viscerality' of the mass murder of millions in the Holocaust was deemed unacceptable for depiction, even as New German Cinema in the 1970s tackled the 'Die Unbewaltigte Vergangenheit' – the unresolved Nazi past. This gap left an enduring unresolved psychosocial tension in a society haunted by bloodshed on a mass scale.[60] The shocking, repulsive gruesomeness of body horror in German films such as *Nekromantic* (1988), Blake argues, presents the opportunity for a 'powerful and potentially cathartic engagement with otherwise unrepresentable aspects of the German past'.[61] Although Jörg Buttgereit's *Nekromantic* films have been dismissed as exercises in base disgust and shock value, Blake argues the films are a continuation of Buttgereit's tradition of grappling with Germany's fascist past and legacy of trauma in his work.[62] The graphic necrophiliac horror-porn depicted in *Nekromantic* is explicitly Nazi-coded. The film's gruesome erotic encounters with corpses represent a literal and metaphorical reanimation of the dead, a de-aestheticisation and resensititation to the horrors of the Nazi past.[63]

Blake's conclusions about Buttgereit's film are reminiscent of the creative intentions behind Nimdok's chapter in *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream*. This likeness suggests that horror video games may be a similar avenue for the exorcism of cultural spectres of historical trauma and perpetration. Much like the films analysed by Blake and Lowenstein, Nimdok's chapter leans into the viscerality of its historical horrors. The environments of his chapter are

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[59] Blake, *The Wounds of Nations,* 10.
[60] Blake, *The Wounds of Nations*, 23-24.
[61] Blake, *The Wounds of Nations*, 24.
[62] Blake, *The Wounds of Nations*, 26-27.
[63] Blake, *The Wounds of Nations*, 27-41.

marked with blood and mutilated bodies, particularly the operating theatre and hospital – the locus of Nimdok's crimes. The operating theatre is splattered with red covering the walls, furniture, and curtains. On the table lies the boy, the victim of the operation, similarly bloodstained, emaciated, and helpless. Nimdok remarks that the boy could not be more than eight years old, intensifying the pitiful state of the victim. In the 'recovery room' behind the curtain, more mutilated victims lay in agony, permanently disfigured by their ordeals. If they are examined, Nimdok comments: 'it is difficult to see what purpose this surgery serves other than to mutilate the patient'. He concludes that these patients will 'never recover'. At one point, Nimdok must remove a patient's eyeballs and keep them with him in a box. The gruesome image of the eyeballs recalls the specimen jars littering the necrophilic protagonist's apartment in *Nekromantic*. Blake argues this body horror symbolism is emblematic of the discourses of Nazi racial science.[64]

The shocking nature of this bodily violence is key to how the game confronts Holocaust trauma. Artists have long used shock effects to attempt to catalyse socio-political change and self-critical reflection, most notably in the performance art tradition stemming back to the early twentieth century. Early movements such as Dadaism and Futurism used performance 'as a shock mechanism to catapult the public out of complacency', challenging the traditionalism and commodification of art.[65] The progression of the twentieth century saw more artists using shock to grapple publicly with cultural and historical trauma. The 1991 performance *Sally's Rape* was one prominent example of such a work, in which African American artist Robbie McCauley displayed her naked body on stage and encouraged audiences to bid on her. The performance

[64] Blake, *The Wounds of Nations,* 33.
[65] Gaye Leigh Green, 'The Return of the Body: Performance Art and Art Education', *Art Education* 52, no. 1, (1999): 7-8.

was intended as an exploration of the interracial sexual violence suffered by her formerly enslaved great-great-grandmother.[66] Shock can likewise be used in video games to explore historical trauma and violence. In his comments about *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream*, Ellison repeatedly expressed his conscious desire to shock and unsettle the player with the game's graphic Holocaust content. In response to the suggestion that a focus group might be disturbed by the Holocaust content, Ellison replied: 'Oh, that's wonderful. I'm delighted ... They were intended to be disturbed by it. If they were not disturbed by it, I would not be doing my job.'[67] The *Interactive Entertainment* interviewer asked Ellison, 'do you deliberately write to shock your readers?' to which Ellison answered:

> I put things in everything I do that are intended to rattle the cage, stir the soup. People say, 'well, you only write to shock.' Duh! Yeah, okay. That is a noble endeavour, to shock. There are already enough people in the world that will put you to sleep with their assurances: 'no, no, don't worry about it, don't worry about skinheads, don't worry about fascism, don't worry about the Ku Klux Klan, don't worry about the far Right, none of these things really matter, everything is fine.' Hmmmmmm. That is not the way the world runs.[68]

When asked why he included references to the Holocaust in the game, Ellison replied:

> I use the trope of the Holocaust frequently in my work, and when someone says 'well it's gonna trivialise it 'cause it's in a game'… nothing, *nothing*, can trivialise the Holocaust. I don't care whether you mention it in a comic book, or bubblegum wrappers, in computer games, or write it in graffiti on the wall. Never forget. Never forget. And putting it in this game is intended to annoy people, to shock people, to upset people.[69]

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[66] Green, 'The Return of the Body', 8; Jennifer Griffiths, 'Between Women: Trauma, Witnessing, and the Legacy of Interracial Rape in Robbie McCauley's *Sally's Rape*', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 26, no. 3 (2005): 1-23.
[67] Odom, *Official Strategy Guide,* 214.
[68] DOS Nostalgia, 'Harlan Ellison'.
[69] DOS Nostalgia, 'Harlan Ellison'.

These quotes reveal Ellison's disdain for suppressing the trauma of the violent past, and the importance he places on using art to shock people out of their historical and political complacency. There is a palpable sense of concern in his words that fears of trivialisation or discomfort will instead leave a gaping cultural silence around the traumatic wounds of genocide. The motivation for the disturbing horror conventions of *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream*, then, is very similar to those of the horror films like *Nekromantic* analysed by Lowenstein and Blake. Both authors concur with Ellison's implication that the shocking excesses of horror can, in Blake's words, 'circumvent Trauma Studies' self-defeating tendency to respectfully silence testimonies of trauma deemed so horrific as to be "unspeakable"'.[70]

Instead, Ellison and the development team aimed to use the game's 'interplay of shocks and countershocks' as a 'homeopathic enterprise' that provides a 'profane illumination' of modern history, much as Lowenstein argues horror film has done.[71] The shocking visual depictions of intercourse with a rotting corpse in *Nekromantik* and of mutilated children in *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* both strive for this same purpose. They attempt to 're-sensitise' the viewer into acknowledgment of the violent, horrifying past.[72] It is also fascinating to note that Ellison resolutely asserts that the traumatic weight of the Holocaust can transgress the boundaries of high/low culture and taste. Ellison's statements stand in sharp contrast to popular views of games as inherently trivialising,

Although the earlier part of this chapter discussed the positive critical response to the game's Holocaust content, it must be noted that this was limited to the Anglosphere. In Germany and France, the game was banned according to censorship laws that limited the depiction of the

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[70] Blake, *The Wounds of Nations,* 4.
[71] Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation,* 48.
[72] Blake, *The Wounds of Nations*, 27.

Holocaust in media. This censorship aligns with the representational silence in film criticised by authors such as Blake and Lowenstein, where 'a well-intended respect for trauma enables a reductive legislation of representation itself'.[73] Ellison criticised the ban as counter to his intention of confronting the trauma of the Holocaust. He is quoted as saying that the game 'got us in trouble in Germany, where they very much want to forget the Second World War and the Nimdok experiments on children [in the] Holocaust, and I, being a Jew, don't feel content with letting that part of history go unremembered'.[74] Without the ability to complete Nimdok's chapter, it is impossible for players to achieve the game's 'best ending' in the French and German versions. Although not an intentional design feature, it seems appropriate that human salvation is not able to be achieved in the game without reckoning with humanity's past crimes in the Holocaust. This appears to drive home the centrality of reckoning with historical trauma and the crimes of the past in the game's narrative, and indeed, in historical media more broadly.

Positive negative experiences and abusive game design

The concept of 'abusive game design' can be seen as an extension of the horror genre's usefulness as a historical representational form. Abusive game design is defined by Miguel Sicart as a game built with 'contrived technological resistance'. In other words, it is a game that itself resists being played, preventing an easy or comfortable experience for the player.[75] These games can thereby establish a dialogue between player and designer. Abusive game design is not limited to the horror genre. Games that are extremely difficult to succeed at, games that trick or deceive the player, or games that cause social embarrassment are examples of abusively designed

[73] Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation,* 85
[74] 'Interview' Nightdive.
[75] Miguel Sicart, 'Darkly Playing Others', in *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments*, eds. Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderoth and Ashley M.L. Brown (Routledge, 2015), 100.

games.[76] One example is the satirical game *Desert Bus* (1995), which requires players to complete a real-time simulation of the eight-hour long bus drive from Tucson, Arizona, to Las Vegas, Nevada without stopping or pausing the game.[77] Sicart and Douglas Wilson give a horror genre example in *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* (2002). The game plays extradiegetic tricks on the player, including pretending that the television has turned off, or that the game data has been deleted. Sicart and Wilson observe that such tricks are used to intensify the game's horror experience. With roots in Dadaism, Fluxus, 'happenings' and performance art, abusive play has the potential for a powerful critical socio-political function.[78] Sicart and Wilson argue that abusive game design is meant to create 'cracks in the seamless experience of play'.[79] As outlined in Chapter One, these moments of rupture and alienation can provoke critical thinking.

We have seen that one reason *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* is an 'acceptable' ludonarrative of the Holocaust is that it is resolutely not 'fun' or 'entertaining' in a traditional sense. Abusive game play is another strategy used by *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* in order to evoke negative emotions. It can thus create the 'positive-negative experience' needed to engage with Holocaust content without being 'fun'. Ellison's comments on video game players border on abusive themselves, saying he 'doesn't give a sh--' about the people who play his game.[80] It is clear that he intends for his game to resist easy playing, as he claims that the game is 'supposed to frustrate the crap out of the people who play it.'[81] Playing the game reveals that it is indeed frustrating. As noted earlier, reviewers have criticised the game for its overly obtuse and

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[76] Douglas Wilson and Miguel Sicart, 'Now It's Personal: On Abusive Game Design', *Proceedings of the International Academic Conference on the Future of Game Design and Technology*, ACM, 2010, 40–47.
[77] Simon Parkin, 'Desert Bus: The Very Worst Video Game Ever Created', *The New Yorker,* July 9, 2013, https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/desert-bus-the-very-worst-video-game-ever-created.
[78] Sicart, 'Darkly Playing Others', 100.
[79] Wilson and Sicart, 'Now It's Personal', 45.
[80] 'Interview', Nightdive.
[81] 'Interview', Nightdive.

difficult puzzles. At one point, for example, the player must flush a toilet three times in order to unlock a hidden room. There are no hints or clues given to indicate this is the path forward. Such seemingly random solutions to a puzzle, traditionally considered 'poor design', are here reframed as deliberately abusive to the player. The 'unwinnable' nature of the game's ending is also designed to be 'unfair' to the player, and the disturbing content itself is intended to be unsettling. The game lives up to Ellison's comment in the guidebook interview: 'there is not one aspect of this thing ... that is easy. See, I don't think art should be easy.'[82]

The horror and abusive game design elements of *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* evoke what Heidi Hopeametsä and Markus Montola have called 'positive negative experiences'. Chapter Three alluded to this concept in the context of complicity and perpetration in gaming. The concept was coined by Hopeametsä after a study of the extreme role-playing game scenario *Ground Zero*, which placed players in a simulated bomb shelter for a 24-hour period. Hopeametsä's study found that, although players experienced intense negative emotions such as crying, fear, claustrophobia, distress, and loneliness, they later reported that they enjoyed the experience. Players found it a positive catalyst for self-reflection, learning, and growth.[83] The concept of positive negative experience is useful for evaluating how games that are 'not fun' can nevertheless be constructive, valuable, and even enjoyable experiences. Montola argues that games are not only capable of providing gratification through fun and competitiveness, but can also tap into a 'broader expressive repertoire' that includes 'hopelessness, horror, and tragedy'.[84] These emotions, taking place in the 'magic circle' of a game which is simultaneously real and

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[82] Odom, *Official Strategy Guide,* 219.

[83] Heidi Hopeametsä, '24 Hours in a Bomb Shelter: Player, Character and Immersion in Ground Zero', in *Playground Worlds: Creating and Evaluating Experiences of Role Playing Games*, eds. Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros (Helsinki: Solmukohta, 2008), 195-197.

[84] Markus Montola, 'The Positive Negative Experience in Extreme Role-Playing', in *DiGRA Nordic '10: Proceedings of the 2010 International DiGRA Nordic Conference: Experiencing Games: Games, Play, and Players*, 9 (2010): 1.

fictitious, create a safe place for these distressing emotions to be experienced, processed, and reflected upon post-game. Kristine Jørgensen has applied the concept of positive negative experience to *Spec Ops The Line* (2012). She argues that the game successfully creates a distressing yet meaningful experience that catalyses insight into American military action and complicity.[85] This concept provides a schematic for how Holocaust games could be designed. It counters critics' claims that games must inherently be fun and therefore inappropriate for discussing dark, traumatic, and distressing elements of the past.

The concept of 'abusive design' could also be applied to the horror films analysed by Blake and Lowenstein. Horror films resist easy viewing, much as horror games like *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* resist easy playing. They intend to unsettle and distress the audience. Graphic body horror films like *Nekromantic* especially fit this definition, testing the audience to see how much they can handle, daring them to look away or else to confront the horror in full. Blake and Lowenstein argue that making an audience look upon horror and experience discomfort can be part of an author's effort to remind people of collective historical trauma, violence, and perpetration that has been suppressed. *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* uses similar techniques to try and achieve the same purpose: it confronts the buried violence of the past through visceral discomfort in the present. Ellison's desire to shock players out of their complacency is the impetus behind his abusive game design in *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream*. What he calls his 'noble endeavour' to frustrate players is an attempt to force them to confront the darkness and trauma of historical crimes. The use of the horror genre as a framing mechanism for themes of guilt, trauma, and atrocity in games therefore emerges as a 'missing piece' of the gaming-the-Holocaust puzzle. It reveals a potential avenue for games to engage

[85] Kristine Jørgensen, 'The Positive Discomfort of Spec Ops: The Line', *Game Studies* 16, no. 2 (2016).

with such historical themes. *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* is an example of 'the power of horror … to effect a certain productive re-engagement with the traumas of national history, their cultural legacy and the possibility of being (and narrativising) otherwise'.[86]

We cannot currently make conclusions about how often and to what extent audiences successfully confront historical traumas through works like *Nekromantic* and *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream*. To understand what audiences gain from these works, one would need to conduct studies to collect data on audience reception, a task beyond the scope of this thesis. Such a study would likely yield mixed results. It is reasonable to assume, for example, that some audience members will merely seek to be titillated by graphic content and will not engage deeply with historical themes. However, we can still analyse these works according to their authorial intent, their use of techniques to engage in historical discourse, and their assessment by critics such as Blake and Lowenstein. The creation of art is as important an avenue for the negotiation of trauma as the consumption of art. It is evident that for creators such as Ellison and Buttgereit, their works have emerged as attempts to confront the legacy of the Holocaust for themselves personally as Jewish and German artists, as well as, potentially, for their audiences.

The shock of self-critical memory

Kansteiner has observed that Holocaust memory culture is frequently burdened with the task of preventing future genocide. However, he argues that mainstream Holocaust memory culture has thus far 'taught consumers the virtues of remembering the victims … but provided little meaningful guidance in self-critically engaging with legacies of perpetration and preventing large scale victimization'. *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* points towards possibilities for

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[86] Blake, *The Wounds of Nations*, 187.

fostering the sort of self-critical digital Holocaust memory that Kansteiner urges we must adopt if we are to ‘resurrect’ Holocaust memory as a relevant element of contemporary memory culture.[87] It is clear from Ellison’s comments that he intended to use the ‘shock value’ of the Holocaust content to jolt people out of complacency. Ellison’s work may have thereby planted a seed for the future of self-critical digital Holocaust memory.

I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream’s potential for revelatory self-critical experience goes beyond the positive negative emotions elicited by its horror and shock elements. The game’s narrative is a self-reflexive allegorical tale that attempts to explore how confrontations with the traumatic past might function in the real world. Nimdok’s presence and actions in the AM-constructed scenario are counterfactual, fantastical, and ahistorical. AM literally creates a ‘reanimation of the deeply repressed historical past’ for Nimdok in the same way that Blake argues German body horror films aim to do.[88] For us, therefore, Nimdok’s chapter is not a straightforward simulation of the actions of a Nazi doctor conducting Mengele’s experiments in the Second World War. It is a depiction of a man engaging with a metaphorical and symbolic recreation of the crimes of his past. He must traverse a construction built within the diegetic world for the very purpose of self-reflexive, self-critical exploration of his role in the Holocaust. Nimdok’s chapter thus functions as a metaphor for the process of encountering past trauma and reckoning with complicity through media. It highlights the sort of self-critical remembering that Ellison emphasised in his discussion of the intention behind the game’s narrative.

Through this narrative framing, we can see the oscillation of immersion and distance that Chapter One established as being important to historical critical thinking. Nimdok’s scenario is immersive, affecting, and thick with atmospheric dread. It is also a self-reflexive, non-

[87] Kansteiner, ‘Transnational Holocaust Memory’, 19.
[88] Blake, *The Wounds of Nations,* 27.

verisimilitudinal construction of Nimdok's past. Rather than actual concentration camp images or real-life, historically specific victims and locations, the visceral violence in *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* is largely metaphorical and allegorical. The non-literal nature of the shocking images helps them to remain within the realm of acceptability, while still being historically potent enough to trigger a reckoning with the traumatic past. Distancing is intensified by the game's use of the dementia trope – the fact that Nimdok cannot remember his past self or his crimes. This device gives the player some welcome distance from inhabiting the psychological state of the perpetrator, whilst still being made to experience and acknowledge the gravity of Nimdok's past actions.

It is appropriate, then, that eyes, seeing, and vision are major motifs in Nimdok's chapter. The golem that Nimdok animates at the end of the chapter is initially found dormant, lifeless, and without eyes. In order to bring the golem to life, the key item needed is the set of eyeballs extracted from the Jewish patient in the hospital earlier in the chapter. It is possible to lose these eyeballs in the chapter if the player makes a mistake. Nimdok is thus barred from the 'best' ending if he cannot retain this symbol of sight. Once the golem is brought to life by inserting the eyes, it can be instructed to punish Nimdok for his crimes. Nimdok also comes across a Nazi-engineered mirror that purports to reveal the true nature of whatever it reflects. The mirror, called project PERFECT IMAGE, catalyses Nimdok's self-critical reflection – it forces him to see himself with perfect objectivity and clarity. It is also possible to force Mengele to look into the mirror himself, prompting a reaction of horror at his own reflection. These pervasive images of seeing and vision convey the main theme of Nimdok's chapter – his need to look directly upon the crimes of his past, to see them with a new clarity and confront them directly. The game therefore draws a parallel between Nimdok's need to look clearly upon his past and Ellison's

insistence that the world look truthfully at the ongoing legacies of fascism and genocide. In this way, the game functions similarly to Buttgereit's shockingly graphic horror films. As works of horror, they represent a 'tearing-away of all obfuscatory bindings to engage in a form of truthful looking' at the horrors of the Nazi past.[89]

Conclusion

The creation, reception, and success of *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* was and continues to be remarkable in a number of ways. An author who professed to hate video games optioned out his most celebrated work for a game adaptation, a work whose rights he had closely guarded. The game represents the earliest and, likely, only commercially released video game with a professed goal of shocking audiences out of their complacency about the Holocaust. It is the only commercially available game in which the player can control a Nazi war criminal in a concentration camp setting, witnessing and even participating in Nazi horrors. The antagonistic playable position, camp setting, and graphic content should have provoked significant backlash, as it did for *Sonderkommando Revolt* and *The Cost of Freedom* – and yet it did not. *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* was specifically praised for its disturbing Holocaust content and continues to be admired for its narrative and themes today. As this chapter has suggested, reasons this game was able to transgress the limits of ludic Holocaust representation may include its literary provenance, Harlan Ellison's authorship, the 'auteur' effect, and the not-fun, unwinnable nature of the gameplay and narrative. Combined, these factors were part of an extremely unlikely scenario: a video game that was socially and culturally 'permitted' to

[89] Blake, *The Wounds of Nations*, 35.

confront some of the darkest elements of Holocaust memory, to tear them wide open and insist on remembrance – and to critically succeed in doing so.

The past two chapters have been dedicated to exploring how the Holocaust might be represented in video games. *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* demonstrates that Holocaust gaming is not only possible, but potentially powerful as a medium for self-critical memory and education. German cultural scholar Anton Kaes argued in 1989 that we sorely need 'films that deal with Nazism and the Holocaust in ways that challenge the narrowly circumscribed Hollywood conventions of storytelling and not only reflect self-critically on the limit and impasse of film but also utilize its specific potential in the representation of the past'.[90] One could argue that *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* does for video games what Kaes calls for in film. The game is a self-critical exercise in revealing the unquiet past. It is rich with images and themes of looking, remembering and forgetting, forgiveness, trauma, and the mediation of historical memory itself. It defies traditional limitations of the video game form such as 'fun' gameplay and triumphant outcomes. Yet, it utilises other aspects of its specific potential, such as horror genre conventions, choice and interactivity, and the oscillation of immersion in and distance from Nimdok's story. As a result, it is able both to transcend cultural perceptions of the video game form and take advantage of its nature in order to create a ludic Holocaust experience that has not yet been replicated. *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* provides an example of how gaming might answer Kansteiner's call for Holocaust memory to build a more powerful and more culturally salient self-critical 'never again' memory through digital popular culture.[91] The potential that Harlan Ellison saw in the much-maligned medium of video games – the potential

[90] Anton Kaes, *From Hitler to Heimat: the Return of History as Film* (Harvard University Press, 1989), 208.
[91] Kansteiner, 'Transnational Holocaust Memory,' 310.

to craft an interactive story that forced the player to confront complicity in the Holocaust – remains potent yet underutilised.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has evaluated some ways video games could be a tool for mass public engagement in scholarly history. I have focused on the effectiveness of games for encouraging historical thinking skills, and on determining what forms this ludo-historical thinking might take. I have also evaluated the potential breadth of topics for historical engagement through games. I specifically focused on the capability of games to represent and teach about traumatic events such as the Holocaust. Underlying this thesis is an assumption that commercial video games form part of twenty-first century learning ecologies and can become important tools for informal learning.[1] By playing games designed with sound historical discourses in mind, audiences may be able to comprehend arguments about the past that approach the sophistication of academic historical work. Furthermore, through the potential of games for 'historying', audiences can begin to understand and interrogate the processes behind the construction of history itself. I have analysed some of the ways games might orient themselves towards the potential achievement of these outcomes.

I structured the first part of this thesis around key conceptual issues that remain contentious in the adoption of games as a sophisticated tool for historical communication. By looking in turn at the questions of immersion and distance, linearity and multiplicity, and agency and complicity, we obtained a clearer picture of the epistemological and philosophical implications of digital games as history. My investigations showed that despite some concerns

[1] Donatella Persico, Marcello Passarelli, Francesca Pozzi, Jeffrey Earp, Francesca Maria Dagnino and Flavio Manganello, 'Meeting players where they are: Digital games and learning ecologies', *British Journal of Educational Technology* 50, no. 4 (2019): 1688; John Seely Brown, 'Growing Up: Digital: How the Web Changes Work, Education, and the Ways People Learn, *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 32, no. 2, 18-19.

that games may inhibit critical historical thinking skills, they can instead promote such skills through their epistemological strengths, including immersion, flexibility, and player choice.

Chapter One argued that games can achieve an oscillation of immersion and distance that effectively facilitates critical historical engagement. This chapter drew on Alison Landsberg's theory that historical media should 'oscillate' between immersing and distancing the audience from the historical subject(s) being portrayed.[2] I argued that games can use their narrative and formal elements to move between immersing players and making them aware of the mediated nature of their experience in turn. By doing this, games can create suitable conditions for a critical, engaged form of historical empathy to emerge.

Chapter Two argued that games can potentially engage with postmodernist and deconstructionist historical epistemologies due to their flexible, multivalent capabilities. Such engagement might be a way games can channel academic discourses of historical philosophy and practice. Interactive digital media can present multiple different narratives, perspectives, and interpretative frameworks. Utilising this style of historical communication could allow for the presentation of multiple different and even conflicting histories without needing to reconcile them into one story. In this way, games can engage in a historical philosophy that directs scepticism towards Grand Narratives and hegemonic interpretations. Case studies demonstrated how interactive mechanics could allow players to do their own 'historying' and gain closer access to the practices of professional historians.

Chapter Three examined the implications of player choice in historical games. I argued for choice-based simulation games as a potential way of reducing agency inflation and exploring complicity. Games can simulate the complex web of affordances, limitations, and resources

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[2] Alison Landsberg, *Engaging the Past: Mass Culture and the Production of Historical Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 121-140.

facing a historical actor. Interacting with such a simulation can encourage evaluation of a past subject's actions within their particular historical contexts. By creating a work in which constraining historical forces can be made salient, players are less likely to exaggerate the options available to past actors.[3] I also discussed how Peter Seixas' moral dimension of historical thinking can be invoked in games that present the player with difficult moral dilemmas.[4] I then moved onto the issue of complicity in the Holocaust as a key case study for moral dimensions in historical gaming. My discussion of *Papers, Please* (2013) demonstrated how complicity, conformity, and implication can be engaged with via digital gaming.

The second part of this thesis closely investigated the issue of Holocaust representation in gaming. This section examined the reception and discourses surrounding cancelled Holocaust games, and compared them with a game that was able to engage successfully in supposedly 'taboo' Holocaust representation. Through these comparisons, I determined some of the ways in which games can be perceived by the public as 'acceptable' Holocaust representations.

Chapter Four examined audience and media discourses surrounding cancelled Holocaust-themed video games. By focusing on the Holocaust as a pressing case study of an extremely violent historical event, I aimed to establish an argument for how video games could (or could not) engage with episodes of historical violence and trauma. This chapter investigated three cancelled games that attempted to depict the Holocaust in some way: *Imagination is the Only Escape*, *Sonderkommando Revolt* and *The Cost of Freedom*. Similar discursive themes and historical values emerged across the three games' reception. Many commenters valued the ability of video games to educate people about history, while others found the concept of a 'game' antithetical to the standards of documentary realism and truth. Some found it insensitive or

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[3] Vesna Drapac and Gareth Pritchard, *Resistance and Collaboration in Hitler's Empire* (London: Palgrave, 2017),
[4] Peter Seixas, 'A Model of Historical Thinking', *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 49, vol. 6 (2017): 601.

inappropriate to depict the Holocaust through a medium primarily created for 'fun'. Others lamented the perception of games as 'lowbrow'. This latter segment argued for games to be considered 'art' capable of depicting and educating about historical events like other historical media. A common sentiment justified the creation of a Holocaust game by invoking films and historical fiction novels. Commenters also debated the value of fantasy and counterfactualism. Some valued the ability to 'rewrite history' through gaming. Others believed a sensitive topic such as the Holocaust should be presented with 'just the facts'. There was also a widespread negative reaction to graphic visual content, concentration camp settings, and playable Nazi characters. Overall, this research found that there was much more public and institutional support for the idea of a Holocaust game than commonly claimed. This was particularly true if such a game aimed to educate, provide catharsis, or privilege and honour Jewish perspectives.

My final chapter investigated the case study *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream*, a game that depicted the Holocaust in a uniquely subversive yet unexpectedly acclaimed manner. *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* belies some of the conclusions one might have been tempted to derive from Chapter Four. These included the ideas that no game could ever acceptably depict a concentration camp setting, feature a playable Nazi, or graphically show genocidal violence. This chapter sought to determine why this game was able to evade public criticism for its Holocaust content and, instead, become an enduring, critically praised cult classic. My analysis suggested some reasons its reception differed markedly from the games in Chapter Four. These included the literary provenance of the game's original short story source, the involvement of respected author Ellison lending the adaptation credibility and 'auteur' status, its framing as 'art' and 'interactive literature' rather than a game, its deliberately 'not fun' and 'unwinnable' design features, and its usage of horror genre conventions. My discussion delved more deeply into this

final point and examined the artistic tradition of using horror genre conventions and modes as a way of exploring historical trauma and violence.

The major themes of the previous chapters re-emerged in the discussion of *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream*. The metafictional elements and framing narrative in the game evoked ideas from Chapter One's discussion of immersion and critical distance. The game emphasizes a self-reflexive metahistoricity that foregrounds its status as a mediation and enhances the narrative theme of confronting traumatic pasts. By including elements of player choice, multiple outcomes, and the spiritual barometer, the game engages with moral dimensions of history and the role of human agency as outlined in Chapter Three. Casting the player as a former Nazi doctor who, according to the paratextual materials, was 'just doing his job', invokes themes of complicity and conformity. 'Dark play', guilt, and positive-negative experiences combine to make Nimdok's chapter a potentially gratifying opportunity for self-critical reflection on complicity, atrocity, historical choice, and the nature of historical representation itself. The lessons learnt from this case study could help us rethink the limits of representation and historical thinking in video games.

These discussions addressed some lingering questions about the capability of video games to engage in historical discourses of similar sophistication, depth, and complexity to that of academic history. A major original contribution of this thesis brings together Seixas' work on historical thinking with the historical game theories of scholars including Adam Chapman and Jeremiah McCall. I have argued for games as a possible way to 'bridge the gap' between academic and popular history via the fostering of critical historical thinking in a mass audience. Historical games could take advantage of their formal features and associated epistemological implications, as outlined in this thesis. They could then engage with history in a more nuanced

way than is often seen in popular media and historical fiction. This thesis has demonstrated that games can be a compelling venue for historical argument in several ways. They can allow players to interact with multiple historiographies, simulate historical decision-making fields, interrogate the nature of historical fact and fixity, and follow complex chains of cause and consequence. As I have indicated throughout this thesis, games can draw attention to the practice of history itself and how historians construct narratives. Games can even involve players in dramatized versions of these practices themselves.

This thesis has shown that many of the same epistemological approaches taken by professional historians can and should be integrated into ludic history. We do not need to view video game histories as simplified versions of academic historical practice. The historical discipline is well on its way to embracing games as a form of historical communication. However, this thesis has demonstrated that we can push the historical capability of the medium even further than is currently the case.

The conclusions drawn here can prove instructive for historians, heritage professionals, and game designers working to translate histories into a ludic format. Throughout my work, I have offered examples of the possibilities opened up by the concepts I cover. Chapter Two speculates about how a game like *Paradise Killer* (2020) could become even more reflective of the experience of historical research. Chapter Three suggests how the stories of Holocaust bystanders might be translated into a compelling educational game like *Papers, Please* (2013). These are only a few of the springboards presented in my work. The ideas I propose here can inform those working in the public history space to delve deeper into the opportunities offered by the medium. Games for entertainment and educational purposes alike can be designed with sophisticated historical insights in mind. Careful design choices could enable such games to

engage a large audience in rigorous historical thinking skills. This could become a method of facilitating access to historical practice for those who may otherwise not be exposed to it. My research suggests that, with a strong historical foundation and some inspiration, games can become a powerful medium for fostering a critically engaged historical consciousness in the public sphere.

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APPENDIX I: GLOSSARY

Agency inflation

Refers to the ‘exaggerated sense of the options that were available to people in Hitler’s Europe’.[5] Coined by Timothy Snyder and further developed by Vesna Drapac and Gareth Pritchard. This theory proposes that contemporary perspectives tend to erroneously assume ordinary people had a plurality of viable choices available and visible to them. The choice not to actively resist is therefore often seen as a choice to collaborate or be complicit. However, these beliefs underestimate the powerful effect of constraining factors such as lack of knowledge and state violence. See Vesna Drapac and Gareth Pritchard, *Resistance and Collaboration in Hitler’s Empire* (London: Palgrave, 2017), 94.

Antagonistic playable position

A term referring to the player controlling the antagonist or villain. Contrasts with traditional games in which the player controls the hero. Often controversial, especially when in historical settings or featuring ‘real-life bad guys’. Examples include *Medal of Honor* (2010) and *1378(km)* (2010). See Adam Chapman and Jonas Linderoth, ‘Exploring the Limits of Play: A Case Study of Representations of Nazism in Games’, in *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments*, eds. Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderoth and Ashley M.L. Brown (Routledge, 2015), 138.

Augmented reality game (ARG)

[5] Vesna Drapac and Gareth Pritchard, *Resistance and Collaboration in Hitler’s Empire* (London: Palgrave, 2017), 94.

An interactive, fictional game that uses a combination of digital and real-world elements. Often requires using digital technology (apps, websites, message boards etc.) in conjunction with physical tasks such as visiting real-world places, solving physical puzzles, or attending events. Frequently collaborative or involving mass participation, but not always.

Fallacy of ethical immersion

Argues that since players are always aware of the unreality of the game, they will never feel true guilt about negative in-game actions. This concept builds on what Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman call the 'immersive fallacy': the fallacy of the belief that games will eventually reach the point where they will become indistinguishable from reality. See Torill Elvira Mortensen, 'Keeping the Balance: Morals at the Dark Side', in *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments*, eds. Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderoth and Ashley M.L. Brown (Routledge, 2015), 158 and Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play – Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 443.

First-person shooter (FPS)

A video game genre where the player sees 'through' the protagonist's eyes and the core gameplay consists of shooting. Often military or war-themed. The *Call of Duty* (2003-present) series is a popular example.

Heads-up-display (HUD)

Graphical indicators overlaid onto the field of player vision, usually to display things like health level, equipped items, available ammunition, maps, and other player-relevant information.

Ludohistory

History that is constructed through play and/or games. See Adam Chapman's related concept 'historioludicity' described in Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice* (Taylor and Francis: 2016), 22.

Ludohistoriography

An exploration of, or argument about, historiography conveyed through a ludic, interactive form. See my discussion of *Detritus: A History Book* (2019) on pages 127-131.

Oscillation

A theory developed by Alison Landsberg pertaining to fostering critically engaged historical thinking in digital media. 'Oscillation' refers to the alternation between emotionally affecting immersion and critically distanced alienation that Landsberg argues is ideally conducive to critical historical engagement. See Alison Landsberg, *Engaging the Past: Mass Culture and the Production of Historical Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

Self-critical Holocaust memory

A Holocaust memory culture that fosters self-critical awareness of one's own (actual or potential) role in facilitating genocide. It involves both a reckoning with individual and/or national complicity with the Holocaust itself, and a 'never again' vigilance in preventing a reoccurrence of the conditions that allowed the Holocaust to occur, such as racism, authoritarianism, and neo-fascism. See Wulf Kansteiner, 'Transnational Holocaust Memory, Digital Culture and the End of Reception Studies', in *The Twentieth Century in European Memory*, eds. T. S. Andersen and B. Törnquist-Plewa (Leiden: Brill, 2017): 305-343.

Walking simulator

A particular style of video game that largely eschews gameplay mechanics other than movement, and instead emphasises exploration and environmental storytelling.