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ASSESSMENT 2 – RESEARCH & DESIGN ESSAY

FM3627 - GAME STUDIES III STUDY OF GAMES DESIGN

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HISTORICAL REVISIONISM: DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS FOR REPRESENTATIONS OF HISTORY AND THEIR ROLE IN SHAPING CULTURAL MEMORY

INTRODUCTION

“‘What is history?’ our answer, consciously or unconsciously, reflects our own position in time, and forms part of our answer to the broader question what view we take of the society in which we live.”

E.H. Carr, 1962, p.8

In his seminal work ‘*What is History?*’, historian E.H. Carr posed the above question and suggests that our answer to this question reflects our own subjective position in time and our broader perspective on society. As will be explored in this essay, this idea is particularly relevant in the context of historical video games, where the representation of history and its revisions can play a significant role in shaping cultural memory. Designers of video games have a responsibility to consider the ways in which their representations of history may be received and interpreted by players, as well as how they may contribute to broader societal and ideological narratives.

As argued by Chapman in his work on ‘Digital Games as History’ (2016) video games have become an increasingly important medium for shaping cultural memory, particularly in regard to representations of historical events and conflicts. Through interactive simulations and narratives, video games offer a unique perspective on historical revisionism, which involves reimagining past events and rewriting historical narratives based on new evidence, perspectives, or ideological agendas. However, in order to fully understand the role of video games in shaping cultural memory and historical revisionism in game design, it is necessary to consider alternative perspectives on history as a concept.

This essay will therefore incorporate the works of Derrida (1994, 2017), Žižek (2009), and Baudrillard (1988) to provide this alternative, metaphysical perspective and its representation in video games. Additionally, this essay draws on a range of sources, including Chapman (2016), Li (2021), Kapell and Elliott (2013), and Schut (2007) with the aim of creating a comprehensive academic backdrop for understanding the complex relationship between video games and history, and how revisionism is manifested within their design. This will be achieved by grounding this theoretical work through a textual analysis of the video games *Valiant Hearts: The Great War* (Ubisoft Montpellier, 2014), and *Valiant Hearts 2: Coming Home* (Ubisoft Montpellier, 2023).

UNDERSTANDING REVISIONISM

Revisionism. The word itself has seen its own meaning changed from its original meaning to review or examine, in the context of revising or correcting texts. Later it would become prominent in Marxist circles where revisionism came to mean a re-evaluation or re-interpretation of established beliefs, doctrines, or theories. Outside of politics, revisionism has been used to challenge established styles, genres, and forms of expression, such as the works produced during the Dada movement¹ following the horrors of World War I (1914-1918). This movement challenged and rejected traditional values and conventions in art and society and is embodied in Duchamp's art piece titled *Fountain* (1917).

¹ *Dada Movement* – An artistic and literary movement characterised by its rejection of traditional values and conventions in art and society, and its emphasis on irrationality, absurdity, and anti-bourgeois sentiment.

Through artistic revisionism, Duchamp's piece creates an alternate/opposing view through which subjective presuppositions may be deconstructed in relation to objective or 'real' art. Similarly, through historical revisionism, one may create alternative perspectives of historical events which encourage players to think critically about the assumptions they may have regarding a particular time period or event.

This same sentiment is found in Chapman's work (*Digital Games as History*, 2016), wherein he challenges the assumption that the current practice of written history is the only way to understand the past and that the written medium mirrors reality (p.7). For Chapman, history is not inert and sacrosanct² but rather something that requires the active process of remembering, to be performed by both the public and professional historians in order to be fully realised (p.6). This position leads Chapman to argue the importance and legitimacy of digital games as a historical form, particularly digital historical games and their influence on what Chapman terms 'popular history'. This term separates the 'official' history found in academic literature and the 'popular' history which is presented and consumed by the general public through popular media such as literature, film, and video games. The more popular the source media, the larger the potential influence on popular history. Additionally, Chapman notes the similarities between the process by which game developers represent the past through games and the processes of historians (p. 12-15).

² *Sacrosanct* - Thought to be too important or too special to be changed.

Similar notions are echoed in Li's work relating to the role of video games in the formation of the historical consciousness of its players (2021, p.1). Specifically, Li focuses on the ergodic and hypertextual nature of video games as a key element to the way in which they allow for history to be engaged with through a 'digital-ludic re-enactment'³, leading to the potential for historical video games to go beyond individual learning and contribute to the shaping of collective historical consciousness (p.746-747).

Additionally, it is argued in this work that historical video games can disseminate historical knowledge to a wider audience, and alternative (possibly conflicting) perspectives and narratives can be introduced (p.748-749). These characteristics of historical video games as outlined by Chapman and Li not only highlight video games as a distinct historical medium but also how one's understanding of historical representations may be uniquely influenced by historical revisionism in video games.

REVISIONISM IN GAMES

In order to analyse the design of revisionism within historical video games like *Valiant Hearts: The Great War* (*Valiant Hearts*) and *Valiant Hearts 2: Coming Home* (*Valiant Hearts 2*) historical materialism as outlined by Žižek (2009, p.6) may be used as an academic backdrop. This approach considers not only the representation of historical events but also the underlying ideological and social assumptions that inform them. By applying this backdrop, one can gain a more nuanced understanding of the 'ghosts'⁴ that may haunt one's history (1987, p.10). Thus, taking into account the social and cultural structures that shape historical video games and how they may contribute to popular history and historical consciousness.

³ *Digital-Ludic Re-enactment* – “engage the exploratory challenge, which changes the course and outcome of the whole event, with the competitive uncertainty of ludonarrative outcome can present some of the tension between contingency and causality that is inherent to the fragmentary process of lived experience. “(Chapman, 2016: 203, 205).

⁴ *Referring to Derrida's Hauntology* - history is haunted by the 'ghosts' or 'specters' of the past, which continue to influence and shape the present.

Ubisoft Montpellier is a French-based games development studio that designed and developed *Valiant Hearts* with the intention of creating a historical game that focused its narrative on the trials and tribulations of soldiers during the war (*Valiant Hearts: The Great War* developer interviews, 27th May 2014), with less emphasis being placed on violent content. The game is set during World War I, primarily along the French and Belgium frontlines, and follows the story of four fictional characters (and a dog) whose lives are impacted by the war. The game's primary villain, Baron von Dorf, is a German officer who is responsible for the bombing raid which kills the wife of Freddie, one of the game's playable characters. The Baron is used as an overt (near satirical) representation of the whole German offensive.

Initially, von Dorf is portrayed as a ruthless and brutal officer who revels in his acts of violence. He is responsible for many of the game's most harrowing moments, including the use of chlorine gas attacks. However, as the game progresses, von Dorf's character becomes more nuanced and complex. This once one-dimensional villain is later shown struggling with his own sense of duty and honour, due to the discomfort brought about by orders he is receiving from his superiors. In the end, Baron von Dorf, much like the game's four main characters, is just another victim of the horrors of war. The portrayal of von Dorf exemplifies the game's revisionist approach to World War I. Instead of resorting to a subjective binary of good versus evil, *Valiant Hearts* acknowledges the objective complexities of the war and the effects it had on those that had no decision in its participation. By doing so, the game challenges the traditional portrayal of Germans as the one-dimensional, reprehensible villains of World War I and instead offers a more nuanced perspective on the conflict.

The setting for this game, its narrative, and the representation of characters like Baron von Dorf may all relate to the developer's location, the quality of research in terms of historical accuracy, and pre-existing assumptions regarding the representation of World War I in media.

GAMES BETWEEN SIMULATION AND SIMULACRA

The representation of historical places and events in video games, such as the example explored above, and how it may influence one's understanding of history and the real world is explored in the works of Kapell & Elliot (2013, pp.213-231). Specifically, these authors bring attention to two key considerations for the representation of history in video games. Firstly, the role of players and video game developers in the culture of remembrance (p. 2016). This involves the examination of information that is selected and omitted for inclusion in terms of historical places and events, as well as who is responsible for making those selections. Secondly, Kapell & Elliot discuss games as simulacra and simulations based on the work of Jean Baudrillard (p. 216).

More specifically, it may be argued that video games as they are understood today, closely relate to Baudrillard's third-order simulations (1988, pp.171-174), whereby the simulation no longer imitates reality but replaces it. This is not to say that video games are false representations of reality but are themselves part of what Baudrillard terms the 'hyperreal' where reality and simulation become indistinguishable.

This can be seen in the inclusion of historical photographs and trinkets in Valiant Hearts, each relating to the lives and stories of those who were affected by the conflicts of the war (figs 1 & 2). The inclusion of these historical artefacts serves to emphasise the reality of the events being explored in the game. A reality through which the playable *fictional* characters are subject to the same reality being emphasised.



Figure 1: Historical facts relating to the surrounding simulated environment of the game. Valiant Hearts: The Great War (Ubisoft Montpellier, 2014)



Figure 2: Collectables relating to historical artefacts with both personal and technological significance. Valiant Hearts: The Great War (Ubisoft Montpellier, 2014)

This is further exemplified in *Valiant Hearts 2: Coming Home*. Following the United States' entry into the war in 1917, James (Freddie's brother) enlists with the very real American 369th infantry regiment known as the *Harlem Hellfighters* (fig. 3). It is believed that the Harlem Hellfighters were initially 'loaned' to the French and placed on the front lines as the primarily African American regiment was seen as more dispensable than other regiments, though this is omitted from the game (*The Harlem Hellfighters | HISTORY, 2018*). James and the Harlem Hellfighters are sent to fight along the Entente lines against the advancing German Spring Offensive. During this battle, the Harlem Hellfighters were able to fend off the advancing German forces but sustained massive losses. Following this, the game takes pause to reflect on not only those who died but those who survived and had their lives forever changed (fig. 4) as well as the championing of the Harlem Hellfighters following their role in this victory. However, it is ultimately down to the actions of James, and by extension the player, that allows for this victory to be realised within the context of the game. The inclusion of James within these events creates a permeable boundary between the game as a simulation and the game as simulacra, through which the player is able to move freely. On the one hand, the game attempts to simulate the historical battle in which the Harlem Hellfighters fought in reality. On the other hand, the inclusion of fictional characters and actions from the player which in reality did not play a role in the Harlem Hellfighters' victory blurs the line between *Valiant Heart's* representation of reality and the production of its own. A singular, unified reality designed and developed by Ubisoft Montpellier.



Figure 3: 'James' depicted on the front cover following the battle on the Entente lines. *Valiant Hearts 2: Coming Home* (Ubisoft Montpellier, 2014)



Figure 4: Stylised photographs simulating real photographs taken during the war. *Valiant Hearts: The Great War* (Ubisoft Montpellier, 2014)

Similar notions of reality and representations of reality are discussed in Derrida's concerns regarding Heidegger's discourse on art. During this discourse, Derrida notes that works of art (such as video games) may present historical events and places in a way that presupposes a certain unity or meaning, when in fact the reality may be more complex and multifaceted (1987, pp.26-27). Derrida's critique identifies an assumed, singular meaning or representation of history that is accepted as 'correct' (logocentrism⁵). This assumption may influence the way in which historical video games like *Valiant Hearts* depict their own reality. Similar to a person who may try to fit the pieces of a puzzle together according to their own assumptions about how they should fit and inadvertently force them into place.

This is echoed in the work of Schut (2007, pp. 213-235). As Schut notes, video game makers are like writers of historical fiction, they may bend events and appearances in order to balance the game. The accuracy of the game is of little importance; it is still an effective model of history (p.219). Additionally, Schut also points out the inherent bias within video games (2007, p.213), where aspects of the game design may be informed by underlying social and ideological assumptions.

⁵ *Logocentrism* - the idea that words and language have an inherent, unified meaning and represent an absolute truth.

CONCLUSION

In an attempt to better realise Carr's answer to the question "What is history?", this essay has explored *Valiant Hearts: The Great War* and *Valiant Hearts: Coming Home* with regards to their representation of historical events and implementation of revisionism. Developers of such games must navigate the hyperreal space of video games, where reality and simulation become indistinguishable, and decide what to include and omit from historical representations. This is an important consideration, as previously highlighted, based on these representations and the popularity of the game, this will contribute to the historical consciousness of the game's players and broader societal and ideological narratives. However, this is not to say that these factors alone are to be considered in isolation. Understanding these concepts is important for critically examining how historical events are represented in video games and their impact on one's understanding of history and the real world.

The works of Derrida, Žižek, and Baudrillard have provided alternative understandings of history and its representation in video games. While the academic backdrop provided by Chapman, Li, Kapell, and Elliott, and Schut has helped to create a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between video games and history, and how revisionism is manifested in their design. While also outlining how the historical representations are by nature affected by ideological and social assumptions regarding historical events.

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