Engaging with the Second World War through Digital Gaming

Pieter Van den Heede

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Engaging with the Second World War through Digital Gaming

Omgaan met de Tweede Wereldoorlog via Gaming

THESIS

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by

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The dissertation that lies before you is the result of many years of work. In the most direct sense of the word, the project started in the Summer of 2015, when I first entered my newly assigned office at Campus Woudestein (in the building confusingly known as both 'Van der Goot' and 'M'). But its roots are much older. The foundation for the project was laid in the Summer of 2007, when I decided that, upon completing high school, I would study history. The reason for that was twofold. From 2005 onwards, my passion for history was sparked by my high school history teacher, Marnix Cherretté, who taught me everything (so it seemed) about the Habsburg Empire of Charles V, the French Revolution, Eduard Bernstein and Nazi Germany. Marnix, thank you for shaping my life in the most profound of ways. Secondly, it was sparked by a film. People think of *The Thin Red Line* by American film director Terrence Malick as either a three hour long snore-fest or a lyrical masterpiece. For me, it was the latter. The film did not only blow me away visually; it also raised more existential questions than my 17 year old brain could grapple with. Some of those answers, I thought, could be found in the past. That is where I continue to look for them. So thank you Terrence, for your magisterial filmmaking.

Making a bit of a time leap, I want to thank my supervisors, Kees Ribbens, Jeroen Jansz and Maria Grever. All three of you have shaped me as a researcher in foundational ways. Kees, thank you for your kindness and help throughout. If I did not know how to proceed, I could always ask your advice. Your emotional support (and imposed deadlines!) during the final writing stage have also been more important than you realize. Jeroen, thank you for your wisdom and patience. Your advice has elevated all aspects of my work and has made me a better researcher (I think). I also hope my specific strand of workaholism hasn't caused you too much of a headache throughout. And Maria, thank you for your overall support during the project. I could call you at any time if I needed help. It has meant a lot to me, and seeing you leave our department made me realize how big of a part of my trajectory you have been. I hope that, all Covid-matters aside, you can celebrate your departure in a fitting manner. Finally, Kees, Jeroen and Maria: thank you for hiring me. Moving to Rotterdam has transformed me as a person. I am incredibly grateful for it.

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This dissertation builds on the insights of a wide array of scholars: philosophers of history, media researchers, cultural sociologists and many more. That is no coincidence. Working at the Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication (ESHCC, also lovingly known as 'Esjek') brought me into contact with various research traditions, which at first served as a source of confusion, later as a fruitful inspiration. More importantly, ESHCC has felt like a warm home for me as a researcher throughout the entire research project. I especially want to thank my fellow PhD's at the history department, with whom I shared many laughs: Hilde Harmsen and Tina van der Vlies (the members of the, let's call it, 'legacy Rethinking History 1' team), and furthermore, in alphabetical order (when not already mentioned): Anne Heslinga, Bram Hilkens, Dirk Koppenol, Gijs van Campenhout, Hilde Sennema, Jasmin Seijbel, Jesper Schaap, Judith Siegel, Marianne Klerk, Mark Straver, Maryse Kruithof, Piet Hagenaars, Richard Velthuizen and Wesley van den Breul. I also want to thank my other colleagues at the department, including the ones who went to work elsewhere (even if only one floor up). I explicitly want to thank Mirjam Knegtmans and Stef Scagliola for their support and kindness.

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In 2015, I left Belgium to pursue a PhD in the Netherlands; one other person made the reverse move. Lars, thank you for being a great friend and ditto inspiration; your support has meant a lot, and your input has made my work all the better. I also want to thank the many other great game studies friends and colleagues I met along the way, in particular: Joleen Blom, Tessa Pijnaker, Adam Chapman, Emil Hammar, Eugen Pfister, Felix Zimmerman, Holger Pötzsch, Vit Sisler, Stephanie de Smale and the people over at the Historical Game Studies Network, the Arbeitskreis Geschichtswissenschaft und Digitale Spiele, and DiGRA Flanders.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AI	:	artificial intelligence
CODWWII	:	*Call of Duty: WWII*
F2P	:	free-to-play
FPS	:	first-person shooter
GDC	:	Game Developers Conference
GS	:	grand strategy
IPA	:	interpretative phenomenological analysis
MMO	:	massive multiplayer online
NPC	:	non-player character
PC	:	personal computer
PP	:	Papers, Please
PS4	:	PlayStation 4
RTS	:	real-time strategy
TBS	:	turn-based strategy
TPS	:	third-person shooter
WTNO	:	*Wolfenstein: The New Order*

LIST OF FIGURES

War is delightful

to those who have had

no experience of it.

Desiderius Erasmus

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 The Fight Continues!

On May 5, 2020, the Netherlands celebrated the 75th anniversary of the end of its occupation by Nazi Germany. A day prior, on May 4, it held its National Remembrance Day. On this day, the Netherlands annually commemorates all Dutch civilians and members of the armed forces who have fallen victim to violence during wartime or during peacekeeping operations since the outbreak of the Second World War. During the ceremony, Arnon Grunberg, a Dutch novelist who grew up in a family of Holocaust survivors, gave the official 'May 4'-address, to reflect on the broader societal meaning of the notions 'liberation' and 'freedom'. In his address, Grunberg recalled the brutality of the Nazi regime, but he also drew explicit parallels with the present. Following his observations that "the belly that gave birth to the Third Reich is still fertile," Grunberg warned of the dangers of the recent resurgence of antisemitism in the Netherlands and the hateful way in which Dutch politicians talk about minority groups, in particular citizens of Moroccan descent.[1] Grunberg's comments immediately caused controversy, as exemplified by a heated televised debate a few days later. During the debate, Joost Eerdmans, the chairman of a right-wing political group in the city of Rotterdam, blamed Grunberg for inappropriately comparing the persecution and mass murder of the Jews during the Second World War with how members of the Moroccan community are treated in the Netherlands today. Eerdmans found it especially unacceptable that Grunberg did this on a day that, according to the former, should revolve around national unity.[2]

The controversy surrounding Grunberg's speech on Dutch National Remembrance Day is a direct illustration of how, over 75 years after the unconditional surrender of both Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan to the Allied powers, the memory of the Second World War continues to serve as a symbolic battleground in itself. This is the case both in the Netherlands and around the world.[3] In addition, the discussion between Grunberg

1 Arnold Grunberg, *Nee* (speech held on the occasion of National Remembrance Day, May 4, 2020). The document can be consulted here: https://www.4en5mei.nl/media/documenten/4mei-voordracht2020-arnongrunberg.pdf, accessed September 14, 2020. For the quote, see: Ibidem, p. 2. For a video recording of Grunberg's speech, see also: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wT9aBclrB2w (in particular starting from 23:50), accessed September 14, 2020.

2 For the entire discussion, see: NPO Op1, "Arnon Grunberg, Joost Eerdmans en Abdelkader Benali over 4 Mei-Speech van Grunberg," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZQDIZPyQUGQ, accessed September 14, 2020.

3 For the discussion in the Netherlands, see: Frank van Vree and Rob van der Laarse, eds. *De Dynamiek van de Herinnering: Nederland en de Tweede Wereldoorlog in een Internationale Context* (Amsterdam: UItgeverij Bert Bakker, 2009); Madelon de Keizer and Marije Plomp, *Een Open Zenuw: Hoe Wij Ons de Tweede Wereldoorlog Herinneren* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Bert Bakker, 2010). For an analysis of the discussion surrounding National Remembrance Day in the Netherlands, see for example: Ilse Raaijmakers, *De Stilte En de Storm: 4 En 5 Mei Sinds 1945*. For the contested nature of the memory of the Second World War in Europe and around the world, see for example: Richard N. Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner, and Claudio Fogu, eds. *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe* (Durham and London:

and Eerdmans is reminiscent of a second major development. Since 1945, the emphasis of institutionalized memory in Western European countries such as the Netherlands has evolved significantly. In the first two decades after the war, institutionalized commemorative efforts in these countries were centred on an often religiously embedded celebration of national resilience in light of adversity and oppression. This can be understood as a response to the trauma of "unprecedented military defeat, humiliating occupation and liberation by foreign armies" experienced in these countries between 1940 and 1945.[4] However, from the 1960s onwards, a gradually increased emphasis was put on the need to remember the victims of the genocidal violence perpetrated by the Nazi regime and its collaborators, in particular the Jewish victims of the Holocaust, as well as on the importance to learn from the wartime past from a human rights perspective ('never again').[5] Whereas Grunberg urgently called upon the importance of the lessons of the Second World War with an emphasis on human rights, Eerdmans did so by highlighting a national frame of reference.

This shift in memory culture has been identified by many Dutch and international scholars alike. However, the observation also tends to obscure a broader socio-cultural reality. As highlighted by historian Kees Ribbens, the Second World War manifests itself in a wide variety of present-day forms, and (state-driven) institutionalized modes of commemoration and representation, such as commemorations surrounding (national) monuments, historiographical debates and museum exhibitions are only some of those. What has long remained underexplored by historians are engagements with the Second World War through what Ribbens identifies as a 'popular historical culture': a multifaceted set of historical expressions through blockbuster films and television series on Netflix and other platforms;[6] musicals such as the long running Dutch production

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Duke University Press, 2006) (in particupar: 1-39); Daniel Chirot, Gi-Wook Shin, and Daniel Sneider, eds. *Confronting Memories of World War II: European and Asian Legacies* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2014).

4 For the quote, see: Pieter Lagrou, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation: Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in Western Europe, 1945-1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 2.

5 For an in-depth discussion, see: Frank van Vree and Rob van der Laarse, eds., *De Dynamiek van de Herinnering*, 17-40; Pieter Lagrou, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation*, 1-18; Richard N. Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner, and Claudio Fogu, eds. *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe*, 1-39. See also: Aleida Assmann, "The Holocaust - A Global Memory? Extensions and Limits of a New Memory Community," in Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad, eds., *Memory in a Global Age* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 97-117; Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age* (Philadelpha PA: Temple University Press, 2006). In the Netherlands, the phrase 'never again' ('dat nooit meer') served as the title for a (heavily criticized) study by historian and journalist Chris van der Heijden: Chris van der Heijden, *Dat Nooit Meer: De Nasleep van de Tweede Wereldoorlog in Nederland* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Contact, 2011).

6 Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1995). For an analysis of Dutch film productions tackling the wartime occupation of the Netherlands between 1962 and 1986, see: Wendy Burke, *Images of Occupation in Dutch Film: Memory, Myth, and the Cultural Legacy of War* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017).

Soldaat van Oranje;[7] comic books and graphic novels;[8] and re-enactments,[9] which often operate as entertainment-oriented cultural manifestations characterized by distinct (genre) conventions that are also produced and enacted for commercial gain and aimed at transnational publics. What Ribbens furthermore emphasizes when discussing these popular cultural expressions is that they are not so much experienced by passive consumers but rather by people as active participants, who exert a significant level of autonomy when appropriating these cultural expressions and giving meaning to their engagements with them.[10] In this dissertation, I adopt this notion of a 'popular historical culture' as a central starting point.

A cultural phenomenon that is often identified as a central part of this popular (historical) culture, especially in today's digitized and networked world, is digital gaming. The roots of digital gaming can be traced back to the 1950s and 1960s, when scientists and computer engineers in state-funded and private research laboratories in the United States and United Kingdom started to experiment with the potential of their mainframe computers to run rudimentary games. One of those pioneers was Stephen Russell, a computer scientist at the Massachusetts Institute for Technology, who together with a few colleagues programmed the game *Spacewar!* for their DEC PDP-1 computer in 1962.[11],[12] However, it was only in the 1970s that digital games became commercially

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7 For a discussion of the musical *Soldaat van Oranje*, see: Laurie T. Slegtenhorst, *'Echte Helden': De Popularisering van de Tweede Wereldoorlog in Nederland Sinds 2000* (PhD dissertation, Erasmus University Rotterdam, 2019), 41-118.

8 See for example: Joseph Witek, *Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar* (Oxford MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1989); Nina Mickwitz, Ian Horton, and Ian Hague, eds. *Representing Acts of Violence in Comics* (New York and London: Routledge, 2019); Laurike in't Veld, *The Representation of Genocide in Graphic Novels: Considering the Role of Kitsch* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

9 Vanessa Agnew, "History's Affective Turn: Historical Reenactment and Its Work in the Present," *Rethinking History* 11, no. 3 (2007): 299-312; Vanessa Agnew, Jonathan Lamp, and Julianne Tomann, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies: Key Terms in the Field* (New York and London: Routledge, 2020); For a discussion of digital gaming as a form of reenactment, see also: Pieter J.B.J. Van den Heede, "Gaming," in Vanessa Agnew, Jonathan Lamb and Julianne Tomann, eds., op. cit., 84-88.

10 For the entire paragraph, see: Kees Ribbens, "Strijdtonelen: De Tweede Wereldoorlog in de Populaire Historische Cultuur," *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 127, no. 1 (2014): 85-106. For a more elaborate discussion, see for example: Kees Ribbens, *Een Eigentijds Verleden: Alledaagse Historische Cultuur in Nederland 1945-2000* (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2002); Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (2nd edition) (London and New York: Routledge, 2016); Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Maria Grever and Karel Van Nieuwenhuyse, "Popular Uses of Violent Pasts and Historical Thinking," *Infancia y Aprendizaje – Journal for the Study of Education and Development* 43, no. 3 (2020): 483-502.

11 When referring to digital games in this dissertation, I will adopt the following format: *game title* (name developer(s), year). When referring to a game series, I will refer to the involved game publisher(s) instead of the developer: *game series title* (pubisher(s), year).

12 For a more elaborate discussion of these early game initiatives, see: Mark J.P. Wolf, *Before The Crash: Early Video Game History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012), 1-9; Mark J.P. Wolf, *The Video Game Explosion: A History from Pong to PlayStation and Beyond* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 2008), 28-34; Steven Malliet and Gust de Meyer, "The History of the Video Game," in Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein, eds., *Handbook of Computer Game Studies* (Cambridge MA: MIT

available to wider publics, in the form of gaming consoles for households such as the Magnavox Odyssey made by German-American engineer Ralph Baer; arcade machines such as the ones introduced by electronics company Atari founded by American engineer Nolan Bushnell; and later, personal computing devices such as the Apple II, made in 1977.[13] In addition, the emergence of digital gaming as the prominent cultural expression it is today, is also a relatively recent phenomenon. As rightfully observed by game scholar Aphra Kerr, it is often difficult to obtain reliable information about the growth of the global gaming industry, since most of the available data is unclear and not easily accessible, and researchers have to rely on free summaries provided by market research firms.[14] Nevertheless, these reports point to a clear trend: since the last two decades in particular, the global games industry has grown to become one of the most important sectors of the global entertainment industry. According to data provided by consultancy firm Newzoo, approximately 2.5 billion people on a total world population of 7.7 billion played games in 2019.[15] In addition, Newzoo reports that the global games industry generated a total revenue of 148,8 billion US dollars worldwide in 2019,[16] whereas other consultancy firms give estimates of approximately 136,5 billion US dollars for the same year.[17] Most of this revenue is generated in the Asia-Pacific region (in particular China, Japan and South Korea) and North America (both in the US and Canada). However, also Europe is a significant market, with an estimated total revenue of 21,6 billion euros in 2019. This revenue is primarily generated in Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Italy and Spain, but also the Netherlands, the country where the current study was carried out, constitutes a significant market. Here, both the sale of PC-

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Press, 2005), 23-25; Tristan Donovan, *Replay: The History of Video Games* (Lewes: Yellow Ant, 2010), 3-14.

13 Mark J.P. Wolf, *Before The Crash*, 1-9; Steven Malliet and Gust de Meyer, "The History of the Video Game," 25-27; Michael Z. Newman, *Atari Age: The Emergence of Video Games in America* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2017).

14 Aphra Kerr, *Global Games: Production, Circulation and Policy in the Networked Era* (New York and London: Routledge, 2017), 27-63. Kerr highlights how claims that the gaming industry has become bigger than the global film industry are often skewed, in that this assessment has often been based on a comparison between the total revenue of the global games industry and US theatrical revenues specifically.

15 Tom Wijman, "The Global Games Market Will Generate $152.1 Billion in 2019 as the U.S. Overtakes China as the Biggest Market | Newzoo," https://newzoo.com/insights/articles/the-global-games-market-will-generate-152-1-billion-in-2019-as-the-u-s-overtakes-china-as-the-biggest-market/, accessed October 16, 2020.

16 Tom Wijman, "Newzoo Adjusts Global Games Forecast to $148.8 Billion; Slower Growth in Console Spending Starts Sooner than Expected," https://newzoo.com/insights/articles/newzoo-adjusts-global-games-forecast-to-148-8-billion-slower-growth-in-console-spending-starts-sooner-than-expected/, accessed September 15, 2020.

17 See for example: Alissa McAloon, "Breaking down Nearly 50 Years of Video Game Revenue," Gamasutra, https://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/335555/Breaking_down_nearly_50_years_of_video_game_revenue.php, accessed September 15, 2020.

and console games through retail and digital distribution generated an estimated total revenue of 258,3 million euros in 2017.[18]

Digital gaming is a multifaceted phenomenon. It has been at the forefront of technological innovation since its inception and continues to be, as exemplified by its recent contribution to the development of virtual and augmented reality technologies.[19] A major shadow side of this is that the game industry has come to play an increasingly prominent role in the current global ecological crisis, due to, for example, the energy-intensive nature of the production and consumption of digital games as well as the palpable impact of the global game industry on the production of e-waste.[20] Apart from this, digital gaming has evolved into a prominent and global cultural phenomenon that has led to the emergence of various dedicated gaming communities and (sub-) cultures.[21] More recently, it has given rise to professional e-sports competitions that are competing with regular sports leagues in terms of viewership popularity,[22] and both popular online games such as *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017) and gaming platforms such as Twitch and Steam, which are rapidly evolving into fully developed social media platforms.[23] However, digital gaming also explicitly offers a place for history, as some of the commercially most successful games on the market, including free-to-play (F2P) online games such as *World of Tanks* (Wargaming, 2010) and high-budget ('blockbuster') games such as *Call of Duty* (Activision, 2003-present), *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft, 2007-present) and *Civilization* (MicroProse/2K Games, 1991-present), explicitly aim to ludically represent (fictionalized) (aspects of) the past. They also offer these ludic representations to a potentially global public of players that has become increasingly diverse. Whereas psychologists, communication researchers and other scholars during

18 For the entire paragraph, see: Newzoo, "Top Countries & Markets by Game Revenues," https://newzoo.com/insights/rankings/top-10-countries-by-game-revenues/, accessed September 15, 2020; Interactive Software Federation of Europe (ISFE), "ISFE Key Facts 2020," https://www.isfe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ISFE-final-1.pdf, accessed September 19, 2020; NVPI Interactief, "Marktcijfers Interactief 2017," https://nvpi.nl/app/uploads/sites/4/2020/03/Marktcijfers-Interactief-2017.pdf, accessed September 19, 2020. For the Netherlands specifically, figures for the years 2018 and 2019 are not publicly available.

19 See for example: Samuel Greengard, *Virtual Reality* (MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series) (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2019).

20 Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Richard Maxwell and Tobi Miller, *Greening the Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

21 For a discussion of gaming as a cultural expression and an overview of foundational studies on gaming (sub-)cultures from an anthropological perspective, see for example: Frans Mäyrä, "Culture," in Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), 293-298. For a classic ethnographic study of the culture surrounding massively multiplayer online role-playing games, see: T.L. Taylor, *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2006).

22 See for example: T.L. Taylor, *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2012).

23 See for example: T.L. Taylor, *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2018).

the 1980s and 1990s would emphasize that digital games were predominantly played by children and teenage boys,[24] recent industry reports in both North America and Europe indicate that not only people belonging to all age groups increasingly play digital games, but also that on average, approximately half of all the people playing games are female.[25] A critical observation to make in that respect is that noteworthy gender differences can be identified in relation to the genres that male and female players play, as well as the gaming devices they use to do so. For example, as shown by data provided by market research company Quantic Foundry in 2017, game genres such as the first-person shooter (FPS), in which players explore a virtual world from a first-person perspective while using various firearms and other weapons to fight enemies, are predominantly still played by male players.[26]

Digital gaming cannot only be identified as a central expression of contemporary popular historical culture due to its increased popularity as global cultural phenomenon and its commercial success. It can also be characterized as a central expression of contemporary globalized capitalism, which has fundamentally recalibrated the nature of cultural production in general (and the distinct labour conditions that underpin it).[27] More significantly in light of the current discussion, digital games can be viewed as a format that is directly illustrative of the participatory nature of contemporary popular historical culture highlighted by Ribbens, due to a distinct property of digital games in comparison to other cultural forms. As emphasized by many scholars, the activity of playing digital games is fundamentally interactive in nature: it revolves around a cyclical process in which players perform actions to exert influence on a digital game

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24 Justine Cassell and Henri Jenkins, eds., *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1998); Yasmin B. Kafai et al., eds., *Beyond Barbie & Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2008); Mirjam S. Vosmeer, *Videogames en Gender: Over Spelende Meiden, Sexy Avatars en Huiselijkheid op het Scherm* (PhD dissertation, Amsterdam University, 2010).

25 See for example: Entertainment Software Association (ESA), "Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry," https://www.theesa.com/esa-research/2019-essential-facts-about-the-computer-and-video-game-industry/, accessed September 15, 2020; Interactive Software Federation of Europe (ISFE), "ISFE Key Facts 2020," https://www.isfe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ISFE-final-1.pdf, accessed September 19, 2020.

26 Nick Yee, "Beyond 50/50: Breaking Down The Percentage of Female Gamers By Genre," https://quanticfoundry.com/2017/01/19/female-gamers-by-genre/, accessed September 15, 2020.

27 For two classic studies of the global games industry as an expression of contemporary globalized capitalism from the perspective of political economy, see: Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter, *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003); Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, *Games of Empire*. For a discussion of the sometimes abysmal working conditions in the global game industry, see for example: John Vanderhoef and Michael Curtin, "The Crunch Heard 'Round the World: The Global Era of Digital Game Labor," in Miranda Banks, Bridget Conor and Vicki Mayer, eds., *Production Studies, The Sequel! Cultural Studies of Global Media Industries* (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 196-209.

as an automated system which in turn undergoes changes in response to those actions and communicates those changes back to the player.[28] Norwegian game scholar Espen Aarseth expands on this central observation by stating that digital games should be characterized as 'ergodic texts'. By this he means that, when players play a digital game, they not only directly influence in-game events but also exclude certain possible events and outcomes from occurring, something that does not happen when engaging with, for example, a film or a novel.[29] Analysing digital games as an expression of contemporary popular historical culture therefore highlights the active role that participants play in configuring their understanding of, and meanings attributed to the (wartime) past.

Figure 1.1: 'The Fight Continues!' Screenshot of a loading screen from the game *Medal of Honor: Underground* (DreamWorks Interactive, 2000)

A final aspect of digital gaming as a mode of engagement with history and memory that can be highlighted here is that the activity of playing games is inherently iterative in nature, as symbolized by the screenshot of the FPS-game *Medal of Honor: Underground* (DreamWorks Interactive, 2000) shown in **Figure 1.1**. Institutionalized forms of

28 For a more elaborate discussion of the notion 'interactivity', also specifically in relation to digital games, see: Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2004), 56-69.

29 Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), in particular 1-23.

representation and commemoration, such as those activated on National Remembrance Day by the Dutch government and affiliated third party organizations, are cyclical in nature, in that they, at fixed intervals, give rise to (symbolic) confrontations that are reflective of ongoing political struggles. Concerning digital gaming, this cyclical element is multiplied, as gaming revolves around continued player engagement. This is perhaps best exemplified by the notion 'respawning', first introduced in the FPS-game *Doom* (id Software, 1993), which refers to the ability for players to endlessly restart a game session after they have virtually 'died'.[30] More generally, digital games offer players a quasi-permanent site for engagement with the history and memory of large-scale violent conflicts such as the Second World War, a site that continues to be rather invisible for historians as well as wider publics.

In this dissertation, I study how digital gaming as an entertainment-oriented activity and an expression of a 21st-century popular historical culture allows for engagements with the Second World War. I do so by analysing two central aspects of digital gaming. Firstly, I study how the digital games that are currently available on the market represent the Second World War. As some of the most extensively played and commercially successful digital games today depict this historical conflict, it is significant to analyse which distinct ludified historical representations and forms of mediated action they put forward. Secondly, I study what it means for players to engage with the Second World War through gaming. As people who play games are exemplary representatives of the participants in our contemporary popular historical culture, who actively co-configure the understandings of and meanings attributed to the (wartime) past, it becomes important to study whether or not they engage in conforming, oppositional or other interpretations of the meanings embedded in games. By studying these two central aspects of digital gaming, I aim to shed light into how the latter serves as a primary contemporary venue for a continued engagement with the Second World War. In sum, the two primary research questions of this dissertation are:

(I) How is the Second World War represented through digital entertainment gaming?

(II) How do players reflect on ludically engaging with the Second World War through digital entertainment gaming?

30 This notion is perhaps best discussed by American science and technology (STS) scholar Colin Milburn: "The language of respawn first appeared in *Doom*, explicitly in the command-line parameter "-respawn" (introduced in 1994 with version 1.2 of the software), which would set all dead enemies to rise again after a brief hiatus, and also implicitly through a gameplay feature that the instruction manual described as "eternal life after death": "If you die, you restart the level at the beginning with a pistol and some bullets. You have no 'lives' limit—you can keep restarting the level as often as you're killed. The entire level is restarted from scratch, too. Monsters you killed are back again, just like you."" See: Colin Milburn, *Respawn: Gamers, Hackers, and Technogenic Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 9.

Apart from a focus on ludic representation and player-driven meaning-making, I also aim to reflect on the broader implications of my previous findings, in particular for historical learning. I do so because digital games have the potential to promote understandings of the past that can complement but also undermine the ones put forward elsewhere, for example in formal learning environments. This point of attention is furthermore prompted by the following observation: at a time when the last living witnesses of the Second World War are gradually passing away, mediated forms of engagement with the past become increasingly important, especially for young people, as a site to become acquainted with and develop an understanding of the Second World War. This evolution is rendered explicit by memory scholars Aleida and Jan Assmann, who have introduced a conceptual distinction between communicative and cultural forms of remembrance. Communicative memory is made up of recollections that are "not formalized and stabilized by any forms of material symbolization," that live "in everyday interaction and communication" and that "only [have] a limited time depth [spanning no farther back than] three interacting generations." Cultural memory on the other hand refers to modes of remembrance that involve "external objects as carriers of memory" that are "stable and situation-transcendent." Digital gaming as a contemporary cultural practice to a significant extent resides within the latter realm of cultural memory.[31]

In line with these observations, I also aim to answer the following question, based on my answers formulated to the first two central questions:

(III) Which recommendations can be formulated to foster critical reflection on the Second World War through digital entertainment gaming, in both formal and informal learning environments?

Each of these questions are expansive by themselves and suited for three separate studies. In this dissertation, I therefore opt for an approach that is similar to the one adopted by literary scholar Emy Koopman in her study on reading literary texts on suffering. I present an analysis that provides a general answer to each of the aforementioned questions, rather than one that answers a single question in a detailed manner.[32] More generally, this dissertation both presents general observations about ludic engagements with the Second World War through digital gaming as an expression

31 For the entire paragraph, see: Jan Assmann, "Communicative and Cultural Memory," in Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, eds., *Cultural Memory Studies: An Interdisciplinary Handbook* (Berlin and New York: Wolter de Gruyter GmbH, 2008), 109-118. For the quotes, see: Ibidem, 111. See also: Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

32 Emy Koopman, *Reading Suffering: An Empirical Inquiry Into Empathic and Reflective Responses to Literary Narratives* (PhD dissertation, Erasmus University Rotterdam, 2016), 10-11.

of contemporary popular historical culture, and elaborates on specific aspects of this phenomenon in terms of historical representation, meaning-making and learning. A final observation that can be made here is that this dissertation is firmly embedded within the transnational study of historical culture and memory. It departs from the observation that digital gaming as an expression of a globalized media culture easily travels across (national) borders, while it also acknowledges that these globalized media expressions are used and co-configured by individuals in distinct local environments.[33] It therefore is important to highlight that the current study was carried out the Netherlands as a distinct socio-cultural context, between 2015 and 2020.

In what follows, I further highlight the case studies I carried out for this dissertation. However, before doing so, I discuss the theoretical and methodological considerations that lie at the foundation of this study. Firstly, I discuss how culture as a wider phenomenon can be characterized as a never-ending interplay between 'texts' and positioned 'cultural agents'. Secondly, I discuss how in this dissertation, several distinguishable but closely interconnected aspects of the study of the past as a broader scholarly endeavour, fundamentally come together. Thirdly, I discuss the methodological choices made in this dissertation.

1.2 Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

1.2.1 Culture as a never-ending interplay between 'texts' and positioned 'cultural agents'

In this dissertation, I study digital gaming as a distinct type of 'textuality' in contemporary (popular) historical culture that is actively co-configured by players as positioned and, to a significant extent autonomous, 'cultural agents'. In addition, I argue that digital games as 'texts' and players as 'cultural agents' constantly influence one another, on a quasi-permanent basis.

Concerning texts and textuality, I build on how these notions have increasingly come to be understood since the 1960s. Before that time, in the realm of literature in particular, extensive efforts were undertaken by literary scholars and critics to determine whether or not a written 'text', in the colloquial meaning of the term as a coherent set of written words, could be identified as a canonical 'work' of literature or not. However, this gradually changed from the 1960s onwards, as strict distinctions between what were considered to be 'highbrow' forms of culture, such as classical music and canonical literature, and 'lowbrow' forms of culture, was increasingly questioned and eroded.[34] It

33 See: Chiara De Cesari and Ann Rigney, eds., *Transnational Memory: Circulation, Articulation, Scales* (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2014); Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad, eds., *Memory in a Global Age: Discourses, Practices and Trajectories* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

34 See for example: Mikita Brottman, *High Theory / Low Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). For the argument that distinctions between 'high' and 'low' forms of cultural expression are often primarily a manifestation of existing social hierarchies, in that different groups embrace different tastes to distinguish themselves from other groups, see: Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A*

is perhaps best exemplified by the writings of French literary theorist and semiotician Roland Barthes, who proposed a radical reinterpretation of how the notions 'work' and 'text' should be understood. Not only did he argue that the notion 'text' should be expanded beyond the written word, to include anything from literature to film, television and beyond. He also argued that a 'work' and a 'text' have a distinct relation to one another. According to Barthes, a 'work' can be viewed as a tangible object: books, music records and movie reels (or the data devices carrying digital copies of them today) that can all be held in one's hands. A 'text' on the other hand should be characterized as a broader cultural entity in society, which, according to Barthes, only "exists in the movement of a discourse." By this, he means that a text only comes into existence through an active encounter between a work and a reader.[35]

In this dissertation, I adopt this characterization of 'texts' and 'textuality' to study digital gaming as a distinct historical meaning-making practice. I elaborate on it in two ways. On the one hand, I further emphasize the position of the player as an active cultural agent. I do so by arguing that the ways in which players give meaning to their play activities is strongly determined by their personal biographies, in a twofold but interconnected manner. Firstly, it is determined by the personal lived experiences of players, in line with the observation made by game scholar Alexander Galloway that the extent to which players perceive a game as 'realistic' depends on the level of congruence that exists between the realities expressed in a game and the social realities as lived by the player.[36] Secondly, it is determined by what I identify as a person's 'textual biography', or the ever-evolving repository of appropriated textual expressions that a player consciously as well as unconsciously draws upon when reflecting on their engagements with a game, as a form of cultural capital as defined by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.[37]

On the other hand, I elaborate on the conception of 'textuality' presented by Barthes, by drawing upon theories on 'paratextuality', i.e. everything that 'accompanies' a text, such as marketing trailers and posters, interviews with creators and other expressions. I do so because, as stated by French literary scholar Gérard Genette and American media scholar Jonathan Gray, paratexts serve as an (often inevitable) 'threshold of interpretation'

Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

35 For the entire paragraph, see: Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," in Roland Barthes, *Image/Music/Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Glasgow: Fontana-Collins, 1977). For the quote, see: Ibidem, 157. For the previous two paragraphs, see: Tom Nicholas, "Literary Texts: WTF? Introduction to Cultural Texts and Roland Barthes' From Work to Text," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bMUDGRvVOLg, accessed September 15, 2020.

36 Alexander R. Galloway, "Social Realism in Gaming," *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 4, no. 1 (2004), http://www.gamestudies.org/0401/galloway/, accessed September 15, 2020.

37 Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in John G. Richardson, ed., *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), 241-258.

through which 'readers' of a text pass when engaging with a text and making sense of it.[38] Especially here, I aim to establish a direct connection with the broader (digital) media ecology of which digital games are an inevitable part in our contemporary platformed 'culture of connectivity'.[39] Within the paratextuality that accompanies digital games, for example in the form of promotional materials that are shared on dedicated social media channels set up by game companies, a rich layer of historical expression and narrativity can be identified that can serve as a significant point of reference when players try to make sense of their ludic engagements with the past. In this dissertation, I explicitly study the historicity of this paratextuality, in particular as put forward by the creators of a game, in which digital games are embedded.

1.2.2 Studying digital gaming as an expression of culture, history and learning

As this dissertation offers an analysis of digital gaming as an expression of contemporary popular historical culture, it is embedded in several fields of study. Firstly, it contributes to the interconnected analysis of (historical) culture and memory. Taking into account the observation made by Marxist cultural theorist Raymond Williams that 'culture' is "one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language,"[40] I follow British cultural scholar John Storey in defining it in this context as the "texts and practices whose principal function it is to signify, to produce or to be the occasion for the production of meaning."[41] As I analyse digital gaming as a form of textuality in circulation, my study directly ties in with this definition. Concerning the analysis of historical culture, I adopt the general framework presented by historians Maria Grever and Robbert-Jan Adriaansen. They define 'historical culture' as a "holistic meta-historical concept" that "opens up the investigation of how people deal with the past."[42] As such, it is centred around three mutually dependent and interactive levels of analysis:

(1) *Historical narratives and performances of the past*, which are the "substantive interpretative frameworks" that "relate past and present in various configurations,"[43] as manifested through myths, historiography and many other representational and performative forms of expression – including digital gaming.

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38 Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately. Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2010), 23-46.

39 José van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3-9.

40 For the quote, see: Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1983), 87.

41 John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), 1-2. For the quote, see: Ibidem, 2.

42 Maria Grever and Robbert-Jan Adriaansen, "Historical Culture: A Concept Revisited," in Mario Carretero, Stefan Berger and Maria Grever, eds., *Palgrave Handbook of Research in Historical Culture and Education* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 73-89. For the quotes, see: Ibidem, 77.

43 For the quotes, see: Ibidem, 78.

(2) Material and immaterial *mnemonic infrastructures*, in the form of museums, archives and other institutions directly invested in engaging with the past, as well as annualized rituals and ceremonies. These infrastructures "enable a mediation between past and present,"[44] and the creation of the narrative and performative configurations of the past highlighted in (1).

(3) *Underlying conceptions of history*, or the (explicit or implicit) understandings of how the temporal dimensions 'past', 'present' and 'future' relate to one another.[45]

In this dissertation, I focus on the first and, to a lesser extent, second component of historical culture as conceptualized by Grever and Adriaansen. I do so by analysing digital gaming as a form of narrative *and* performative configuration of the past, produced by distinct contemporary mnemonic infrastructures. I only indirectly investigate the third dimension, as an analysis of it would require a more thorough and expansive reflection. To assess the role that gaming plays in reconfiguring our overarching understandings of how past, present and future relate, an assessment of the impact of digitization on historical culture more broadly would be required, which falls outside of the scope of this study.

Next, apart from being embedded in the study of contemporary (historical) culture, this dissertation also explicitly establishes connections with other dimensions of the study of the past as a broader scholarly endeavour. These dimensions can directly be related to the study of contemporary (historical) culture, but they can also meaningfully be distinguished from it, as separate paradigmatic lenses. Firstly and most significantly, this dissertation also contributes to the study of digital games as a format for history in the more traditional sense of the enquiry into past events. In this dissertation, I not only study how digital games provide representations of the Second World War that are reflective of contemporary sensitivities from a memory perspective. I also reflect on them in light of current historiographical debates about the Second World War as a historical event. Here, I on the one hand draw inspiration from the increasing body of secondary literature that investigates how the 'total wars' of the 20th century, and the Second World War in particular, transformed the (European) societies that were involved.[46] I do so by

44 For the quote, see: Ibidem, 80.

45 For the previous three paragraphs, see: Ibidem, 78-83.

46 This approach to studying the 'total' wars of the 20th century, and the Second World War in particular, is rooted in the study of wartime societies during the Great War, which emerged during the 1990s. A prominent example of this tradition is: Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert, *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin 1914-1919* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) (as well as the broader book series 'Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare' published by Cambridge University Press). Concerning the Second World War, this project builds on the available (comparative) literature about the occupation of Europe by the Nazi regime. See for example: Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire: Nazi Rule in Occupied Europe* (London: Allen Lane, 2008). See also: Isabelle Davion, "European Societies in Wartime," in Thomas W. Zeiler and Daniel M. DuBois, eds., *A Companion to World War II* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 581-602.

analysing how digital games ludically represent wartime occupation and resistance in (Western) European countries. On the other hand, I draw inspiration from the extensive secondary historical and social science literature on the Holocaust and the representation thereof.[47] I do so to, in the words of British historian and game scholar Adam Chapman, gain insight into how digital games as a historical form that is still relatively unfamiliar for many historians, offers "opportunities for engaging with discourses about the past"[48] in relation to the Holocaust as a historical subject in itself. As a result, this dissertation fluidly positions itself between the study of contemporary culture/memory *and* history.

Secondly, this dissertation provides a number of recommendations on how digital games can be adopted to foster historical understanding and learning, as stated above. Here, I do not offer an explicit empirical analysis, as this would require an elaborate additional set-up embedded in the fields of educational science and history didactics. This falls outside the scope of this study. However, I do address two elements. On the one hand, I establish meaningful connections with how engagements with the past in general, and the Second World War in particular, can stimulate the development of historical thinking, as defined in the field of history didactics.[49] On the other hand, I emphasize that formal learning environments, such as schools and universities, only serve as one possible context in which this critical engagement with the past can be promoted – an observation that has only become more poignant in the digital age. Because of this, I reflect on how the development of historical thinking can be promoted in informal, and specifically digital, contexts. This serves as an active invitation for the field of public history to develop further strategies to engage with wider publics in digital, and also specifically gaming-related, platformed spaces.[50]

A final note relates to the interdisciplinary field of game studies. Although this dissertation is primarily aimed at historians, memory scholars and history- and heritage

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47 Significant points of reference from a historical perspective are: Andrea Löw and Frank Bajohr, eds., *The Holocaust and European Societies: Social Processes and Social Dynamics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Doris Bergen, *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009); Christian Gerlach, *The Extermination of the European Jews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). Two key studies on the representation of the Holocaust are: Saul Friedländer, *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); Claudio Fogu, Wulf Kansteiner, and Todd Presner, *Probing the Ethics of Holocaust Culture* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

48 Adam Chapman, "Privileging Form Over Content: Analysing Historical Videogames," Journal of Digital Humanities 1, no. 2 (2012), http://journalofdigitalhumanities.org/1-2/privileging-form-over-content-by-adam-chapman/, accessed September 15, 2020.

49 See for example: Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); Peter Seixas and Tom Morton, *The Big Six: Historical Thinking Concepts* (Toronto: Nelson Education, 2013); Maria Grever and Robbert-Jan Adriaansen, "Historical Consciousness: The Enigma of Different Paradigms," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 51, no. 6 (2019): 814-830.

50 For a compelling reflection on setting up public history projects in digital environments, see: Sharon Leon, "Complexity and Collaboration: Doing Public History in Digital Environments," in James B. Gardner and Paula Hamilton, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Public History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 44-68.

professionals who work in various contexts, it also contributes to the study of digital games as a pursuit in itself. I do so by presenting a series of conceptual tools that enrich the study of digital gaming as a distinct form of textuality and as a unique contemporary cultural practice.

1.2.3 Methodological considerations

In this dissertation, I study digital gaming as a historian who is interested in the Second World War and how its legacy continues to resonate in the present. To do so, I adopt a combination of methods that is both rooted in a hermeneutic historical and a qualitative social scientific approach.

Throughout this study, I analyse three distinguishable but closely interrelated aspects of digital games: the games themselves as distinguishable algorithmic artefacts; the creator-driven marketing paratextuality that accompanies them; and the ways in which players give meaning to their gameplay activities. To study these aspects, I adopt a mixed-methods approach that is centred on three methodologies: (1) a content analysis of more traditional textual and audio-visual source materials, (2) a formal analysis of digital games as a distinct representational and performative textual form, and (3) a study of player-centred meaning-making practices through a focus group methodology. Adopting this mixed approach allows me to gain both a general overview of the historical discourses that can be identified in digital games and the broader digital spaces that accompany them, as well as a more focused, in-depth understanding of games as a historical form and how players engage with it. I elaborate on these methods below, when discussing the overall outline of this dissertation. Furthermore, apart from adopting a mixed-methods approach, I also pursue an additional theoretical goal. Through my empirical analyses, I explicitly aim to engage in 'conceptual innovation': following the efforts of scholars such as French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, French psychotherapist Félix Guattari and American media scholar Alexander Galloway, I aim to offer readers several conceptual tools as "vectors for thought," to motivate them to engage in continued reflection on digital gaming as a contemporary cultural and historical phenomenon.[51]

Finally, given my prior emphasis on players as relatively autonomous cultural agents, it is also important to identify myself as such an agent, and render explicit my positionality as a researcher of contemporary (popular) historical culture. To properly assess the results of this qualitative study into culture, history and, indirectly, learning, it is essential to acknowledge that I as a researcher am inevitably influenced by my "own cultural background, social position, history, moral outlook and interests that drive

51 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). For the quote, see: Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming*, xi.

[my] choice of topics, theoretical framework, epistemological positions and research methodologies."[52]

A first aspect of my personal positionality that requires further interrogation is that I am someone who enjoys gaming as a leisure activity. This on the one hand serves as a significant advantage for this study, as this personal investment in digital gaming allows me to gain a deeper hands-on insight into this cultural phenomenon. However, on the other hand, it also serves as a significant risk, as this personal investment potentially makes me blind to inconvenient observations and findings. Throughout this dissertation, I have attempted to counter this risk by systematically reflecting on whether or not my personal involvement impacted my findings, by actively identifying points of critique, and, more specifically in relation to the conceptual work presented in this study, by subjecting the concepts I identified to repeated empirical and philosophical 'stress tests'. More generally, in relation to the conceptual innovations proposed in this dissertation, I adopt the position formulated by American sociologist Herbert Blumer, who argues that concepts should be seen as tentative and 'sensitizing' in nature, in that they offer a "general sense of reference and guidance" when trying to gain a grasp on the social world. In contrast, Blumer argues, when identifying concepts as 'definitive', they have a tendency to operate as intellectual straightjackets, something that should be avoided at all costs.[53]

Secondly, from the perspective of historical culture and memory, it is significant to mention that I am a Belgian/Flemish scholar studying digital gaming as an expression of a transnational popular historical culture in a Dutch context. This means that my outlook on the Second World War is at least partly shaped by the pluriform discourses and memory conflicts that surround this war in both Belgium and the Netherlands as distinct socio-political contexts. This potentially renders invisible alternative discourses and frames of reference from a memory perspective, which makes it important to highlight this Belgian and Dutch positionality, even when it only serves as an implicit touchstone throughout the dissertation. For example, my choice to study the depiction of occupation and resistance in digital games about the Second World War (see below) is only indirectly, but nevertheless still inspired by the divisive legacy of Belgium's occupation by the Nazi regime, as it has long been, and continues to be, a focal point in

52 For the quote, see: Julian Schaap, *Elvis Has Finally Left The Building? Boundary Work, Whiteness and the Reception of Rock Music in Comparative Perspective* (PhD dissertation, Erasmus University Rotterdam, 2019). Schaap references the work of Bruno Latour and Hilary Putnam: Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1987); Hilary Putnam, *The Collapse of Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

53 For the entire paragraph, see: Herbert Blumer, "What Is Wrong with Social Theory?" *American Sociological Review* 19, no. 1 (1954): 3-10; Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods* (5th edition) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 382-383. For the quote, see: Herbert Blumer, art. cit., 7.

broader public controversies in Belgium as well as in Belgian historiography about the Second World War.[54]

Thirdly, it is significant to highlight my embodied positionality from an intersectional perspective, in particular in terms of ethnicity and gender. I studied digital gaming and contemporary historical culture as a white male researcher living in what is often identified as the 'Global North'.[55] This is significant for my study, as it indirectly played a significant role for the topics I chose to analyse. Throughout this dissertation, I discuss aspects of gender and ethnicity, but only to a limited extent, as my primary focus lies on both a general discussion of the historical discourses circulating in game 'texts' and the way in which gaming allows for engagements with the history of wartime occupation and the Holocaust. This means that a more elaborate discussion of gender, ethnicity, and by extension, class, able-bodiedness and other dimensions of one's embodied existence falls outside of the scope of this study.

Fourthly, I also want to make the following broader observation. As the discussion above only renders explicit some elements that determine my positionality as a researcher, I actively invite the readers of this dissertation to further expand on this effort of positional dissection. I do so by calling upon them to investigate my, what Slovenian philosopher and psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek identifies as, 'unknown knowns': the "horizon of meaning of which we are unaware, but which is always already there, structuring our approach to reality."[56]

1.3 Outline of the dissertation

In the following chapters, originally conceptualized as separate journal articles, I address the two central questions of my study, as well as the implications of my findings for historical learning, the third research question.

In chapter two, the first empirical chapter of this dissertation, I study how digital entertainment games represent the Second World War through their paratexts. I do so by offering an interpretative content analysis of the multimodal marketing materials that

54 For a discussion of the mnemonic conflicts that continue to erode the Belgian state, see for example: Olivier Luminet et al., "The Interplay between Collective Memory and the Erosion of Nation States – the Paradigmatic Case of Belgium: Introduction to the Special Issue," *Memory Studies* 5, no. 1 (2012): 3-15; Bruno Benvindo and Evert Peeters, *Scherven van de Oorlog: De Strijd Om de Herinnering Aan WOII* (Antwerpen, De Bezige Bij, 2011). For a historiographical discussion of Belgium's wartime occupation, in particular in relation to collaboration and resistance, see: Mark Van den Wijngaert et al., *België Tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (2nd edition) (Antwerpen: Manteau, 2015), in particular 45-65 and 153-264.

55 The notion 'intersectionality' was first introduced by lawyer and civil rights advocate Kimberlé Crenshaw. See: Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," University of Chicago Legal Forum 4, no. 1 (1989): 139-167, https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=uclf, accessed September 20, 2020.

56 Slavoj Žižek, "Philosophy, the 'Unknown Knowns,' and the Public Use of Reason," *Topoi* 25, no. ½ (2006): 137-142. For the quote, see: Ibidem, 137.

accompanies games about the Second World War that are distributed commercially in the Netherlands. I carry out this analysis for a double purpose. On the one hand, it highlights how marketing paratextuality of digital games can serve as a relevant site for formulating various historical discourses in the context of a transnational commodity market, as highlighted above. On the other hand, my paratextual analysis also serves as a starting point to identify the companies that are involved in creating these games and where they are located. This sheds light on the mnemonic infrastructures that underpin the identified games. Taken together, this analysis provides a more general insight into the more traditional representational historical configurations that digital games about the Second World War distributed in the Netherlands put forward. In addition, I highlight how we can reflect on these configurations from the perspective of historical learning.

Next, in chapter three and four, I study how the Second World War is represented in digital games by investigating the latter as a distinct form of representational and performative textual configuration. Here, in light of the general findings presented in chapter two, I analyse how three individual digital games, i.e. *The Saboteur* (Pandemic Studios, 2009), *Wolfenstein: The New Order* (MachineGames, 2014) and *Call of Duty: WWII* (Activision, 2017), ludically represent two more specific aspects of the Second World War: the Nazi occupation of Western Europe (in particular France) between 1940 and 1945, including resistance against this occupation, as well as the Holocaust. To this end, I not only develop an extended methodological toolkit to assess the historical discursivity that is embedded in these three games. I also discuss how digital games can be more directly adopted from the perspective of historical learning to contribute to a critical historical reflection on occupation during wartime and genocidal mass violence, in particular during the Second World War in Europe. I do so by presenting a discussion of the game *Papers, Please* (Lucas Pope, 2013) (and by extension games that adopted similar designs). In relation to my analyses of each of the aforementioned games, I also want to make the following observation: throughout my analyses, I primarily focus on games as a distinct cultural form. However, I do again highlight the significance of marketing paratexts to gain insight into the games themselves, while also referring to player reflections, especially in relation to the game *Papers, Please*.

In chapter five, I more directly turn my attention to player-driven meaning-making practices. I do so by analysing how players reflect on playing two of the aforementioned games, *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Call of Duty: WWII* (as well as the games from the *Wolfenstein*- and *Call of Duty*-series centred on depictions of the Second World War in general). I study what players appreciate about playing these two games in general, but also how they reflect on ludically engaging with the Holocaust. Here, since the Holocaust is often still considered to be a sensitive and even contentious historical topic, I furthermore develop a new conceptual toolkit to characterize player reflections on ludic engagements with sensitive and/or contentious historical topics more generally. This new conceptual toolkit is centred on the notion 'gaming fever'.

Finally, in the sixth concluding chapter, I aim to achieve three goals. Firstly, I present the results of my inquiry into how digital entertainment games represent the Second World War, and how players reflect on ludically engaging with this war through gameplay. Secondly, based on this assessment, I present a number of recommendations on how critical engagements with the history of the Second World War can be stimulated through digital gaming, both in formal history education and through forms of public history. Thirdly, I reflect on my theoretical framework, in particular the concept 'popular historical culture'.

Maybe we should always show pictures. (…) Pictures of our wounded service people, pictures of maimed innocent civilians. We can only make decisions about war if we see what war actually is – and not as a video game where bodies quickly disappear, leaving behind a shiny gold coin.

Jon Stewart

Chapter 2: 'Experience the Second World War like never before!' Game Paratextuality between Transnational Branding and Informal Learning[1]

2.1 Introduction

In February 2016, the British game developer Bulkhead Interactive launched a crowdfunding campaign for a new FPS-game, centred on the events of the Second World War: *Battalion 1944*. The developer set a goal of £100.000 ($145.000), which was met in merely three days.[2] Four months later, the Swedish game developer Paradox Interactive announced that *Hearts of Iron IV*, the latest iteration of its grand strategy (GS) game series about the Second World War, had "sold over 200.000 copies worldwide in less than two weeks after its release." This made it their fastest selling historical GS game to date.[3] And in April 2017 and May 2018 respectively, two of the biggest game publishers globally, Activision and Electronic Arts, revealed that the next iterations of their best-selling FPS-games, *Call of Duty: WWII* and *Battlefield V*, would mark the return of both series to their original Second World War-setting, which especially in the case of *Call of Duty: WWII* led to great commercial success.[4] All of these examples show that there is still a significant interest in digital entertainment games about the Second World War, which have been around since the 1970s. It has added up to a large body of games: in April 2019, the database Mobygames listed a total number of 734 published digital games about the Second World War since 1976.[5] At the same time, several new games about the war have been published since, such as *Hell Let Loose* (Black Matter, 2019), *Partisans 1941* (Alter

1 This chapter has been published in modified form as: Pieter J.B.J. Van den Heede, "Experience the Second World War like never before! Game paratextuality between transnational branding and informal learning," *Infancia y Aprendizaje – Journal for the Study of Education and Development* 43, no. 3 (2020): 606-651. Most of the data for this chapter has been gathered in September 2018. Where fitting this has been complemented with additional illustrations and more recent empirical findings.

2 Andy Chalk, "Battalion 1944 Kickstarter Funded in Just Three Days," *PC Gamer*, http://www.pcgamer.com/battalion-1944-kickstarter-funded-in-just-three-days/, accessed September 25, 2020.

3 Paradox Interactive, "Latest News - Paradox Interactive Announces Grand Successes for Grand Strategy Titles," https://www.paradoxinteractive.com/en/paradox-interactive-announces-grand-successes-for-grand-strategy-titles/, accessed September 25, 2020.

4 Charlie Hall, "Activision Says Call of Duty: WWII Sold Twice as Many Copies as Infinite Warfare," *Polygon*, https://www.polygon.com/2017/11/8/16625428/call-of-duty-wwii-sales-versus-infinite-warfare-activision, accessed September 25, 2020.

5 Mobygames, "Historical Conflict: World War II," https://www.mobygames.com/game-group/historical-conflict-world-war-ii, accessed April 6, 2019. Due to changes made to the database, these figures are currently no longer publicly visible.

Games, 2020) and *Through the Darkest of Times* (Paintbucket Games, 2020). Several other games are currently in production.[6]

In this chapter, I address the first central question of this study: how the Second World War is represented through digital entertainment gaming, as an expression of a popular historical culture that is produced for entertainment purposes and commercial gain, as well as aimed at transnational publics. I do so by focussing on the broader 'paratextuality' that accompanies these games, in the form of press releases, promotional trailers, 'making off'-videos and other marketing materials that are created by game companies in conjunction with a digital game and presented through online stores, official game websites and dedicated pages on social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. I opt for this analysis because, as highlighted in the introductory chapter of this dissertation, marketing paratexts for games provide a direct insight into how game creators transform and repackage the Second World War in the context of a ludic commodity market. Marketing paratexts for games are not only meant to generate 'hype' for a cultural commodity and encourage people to purchase and engage with it. They equally function as primary 'gateways' into a game, which offer players frames through which they can reflect on the content of the games before of while playing them. This infuses the games with additional meanings, albeit often in close connection to the ones expressed in other media representations and the games themselves.[7] Marketing paratexts for historical games in particular tend to highlight how game creators embed their games in broader networks of mythologies, ideologies, historical imaginations and commemorative expressions.[8] This makes them relevant from the perspective of historical learning as well, especially in light of the increasingly blurred distinction between formal and informal historical learning processes:[9] marketing paratexts shed further light into the prior understandings of the Second World War that school aged young adults and other players can acquire through their ludic engagement with the broader media ecology in which digital entertainment games are embedded, as a site for informal historical learning.

In this chapter, I study which dominant historical and memory-related themes and narratives are expressed by game creators in marketing materials for digital entertainment

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6 See for example the following two compilation videos: Now Gaming Time, "Top 15 New World War 2 Games 2019 & 2020 | WW2 for PC PS4 XB1," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=txQf-rjUSEs&ab_channel=NowGamingTime, accessed September 25, 2020; Fragill, "Top 10 Ww2 Games For Pc, Ps4, Ps VR, Xbox One in 2020," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QqZ90wh1tgU&ab_channel=Fragill, accessed September 25, 2020.

7 Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2010), 23-46.

8 See for example: Esther Wright, "On the Promotional Context of Historical Video Games," *Rethinking History* 22, no. 4 (2018): 598-608.

9 See for example: Maria Grever, "Teaching the War: Reflections on Popular Uses of Difficult Heritage," in Terry Epstein and Carla L. Peck, eds., *Teaching and Learning Difficult Histories: Global Concepts and Contexts* (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), 30-44; Maria Grever and Karel Van Nieuwenhuyse, "Popular Uses of Violent Pasts and Historical Thinking," *Infancia & Aprendizaje – Journal for the Study of Education and Development* 43, no. 3 (2020): 483-502.

games about the Second World War, and what this says about the representation of this war in digital entertainment gaming more broadly, also in light of the central goals of formal history education. As a part of this effort, I also explicitly highlight how marketing paratexts of digital entertainment games about the Second World War tend to offer a transnationally converging representation of this war, in contrast to how the war is discussed in many nationally-oriented history curricula in schools and other commemorative discourses on the local, regional and (supra-) national level.[10]

In what follows, I first provide an in-depth discussion of the nature of paratexts and how they direct the reading of digital entertainment games as media texts. I also do so specifically in relation to how these paratexts operate in contemporary historical culture and informal learning. Secondly, I give an overall characterization of the games to which the studied marketing paratexts belong, to contextualize my paratextual analysis. Finally, I discuss which dominant historical and memory-related themes and narratives could be identified in the corpus, and what these findings mean for formal history education.

2.2 Game Paratextuality between Transnational Branding and Informal Learning

The concept 'paratext' was originally adopted in the field of literary studies. Gérard Genette used it to describe various elements that 'surround' a book as literary artefact, such as its cover, typesetting and other elements inside the book itself ('peritexts'), and reviews, interviews with the author and other elements external to it ('epitexts'). Genette identified all of these elements as 'thresholds of interpretation', which fundamentally channel the reader's expectations of a book before or while reading it.[11] The concept was later adopted by media scholars, who equally emphasized that the meanings people assign to a TV show, film or any other media text, are co-determined by the paratexts they consume in conjunction with the text.[12] Jonathan Gray in particular elaborated on this observation by developing a broader theory of media paratextuality, in which he highlights the following two elements:

10 For an analysis of how the Second World War is discussed in school history curricula worldwide, see for example: Keith Crawford and Stuart J. Foster, *War, Nation, Memory: International Perspectives on World War II in School History Textbooks* (Charlotte NC: Information Age Publishing, 2008); Peter Carrier, Eckhardt Fuchs, and Torben Messinger, "The International Status of Education about the Holocaust: A Global Mapping of Textbooks and Curricula" (Paris and Braunschweig: UNESCO & Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research, 2015), https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000228776, accessed September 25, 2020. These studies highlight how the discussion of the war in schools is still strongly locally (and in particular nationally) embedded, although a focus on broader topics such as the Holocaust and the development of historical thinking skills have become more prominent in history curricula in recent years, especially in North America and Europe.

11 Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), xi-xxii.

12 Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 23-46. See also the contributions in the special issue 'Paratexts, Promos and Publicity' in the journal *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. See for example: Robert Brookey and Jonathan Gray, "'Not Merely Para': Continuing Steps in Paratextual Research," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 34, no. 2 (2017): 101-110.

(1) Marketing materials, as a particular type of paratext, often do not primarily provide an overview of the features, pleasures and other benefits of a cultural commodity. Instead, they imbue that commodity with additional meanings, to embed it in a broader semiotic universe. This general observation only partly applies to media texts, as their marketing materials usually directly include scenes from the texts themselves. More generally, paratexts of a media text can best be seen as an integral part of a media text as a broader cultural entity in society. This means that the paratexts of media texts can at least partly provide insight into the central text itself. At the same time, however, also these paratexts aim to infuse the original text with additional meanings, to appeal to consumers.

(2) By setting up various meanings and interpretational strategies for readers to make sense of a text, paratexts allow for a process of 'speculative consumption', in which consumers, when faced with a large number of texts and only a limited amount of resources, will try to form an idea of what pleasures each text will offer, in order to decide which ones they will engage with. As a result, many people will only know a text at the paratextual level, which makes paratextual analyses all the more relevant.[13]

How do these observations relate to game paratexts and their operation in contemporary historical culture and informal learning? For game paratexts in general, game scholars have mostly corroborated the characterizations provided above.[14] At the same time, they have highlighted how marketing paratextuality for games functions in an explicitly bidirectional manner in comparison to the paratextuality of other media formats. American media scholar Matthew Payne for example has studied how marketing materials of military-themed digital entertainment games evoke a sense of 'ludic war' among players. He does so by adopting the 'circuitry of interactivity'-concept introduced by Canadian media scholars Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greg de Peuter, which postulates that technological production, marketing and cultural consumption should be seen as the three central sub-circuits of contemporary globalized capitalism, and the global game industry as a primary expression of it.[15]

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13 For the previous two paragraphs, see: Jonathan Gray, op. cit., 23-30.

14 Mia Consalvo, *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2007); Steven E. Jones, *The Meaning of Video Games: Gaming and Textual Strategies* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008). For a critical assessment of the previous two studies, see: Jan Švelch, *Paratexts to Non-Linear Media Texts: Paratextuality in Video Game Culture* (PhD dissertation, Charles University Prague, 2017). In a more recent contribution, Mia Consalvo also argues that fan-produced paratexts to a central text can easily become central texts themselves, meaning that the relationship between text and paratext should be viewed as a flexible and non-hierarchical one. See: Consalvo, "When Paratexts Become Texts: Ce-Centering the Game-as-Text," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 34, no. 2 (2017): 177-183.

15 Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter, *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), 30-59.

In his analysis, Payne goes on to describe how in the game industry, production and consumption have come to coexist in a fundamentally dialectical relationship, as game creators constantly seek feedback from players throughout the life-cycle of a game to optimize their game-product. This tendency has only been reinforced in recent years, due to two closely interconnected developments. On the one hand, an increasing number of game companies have adopted a service-oriented business model, in which they no longer limit themselves to producing games as singular commodities. Instead, they continue to provide updates and content through digital distribution channels long after the initial release of the game.[16] On the other hand, the emergence of social network platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and streaming services such as Twitch, has opened up additional venues for game creators and players to interact with one another. This reinforces the creation of '(online) brand communities' surrounding games and companies.[17] Taking these developments into account, Payne argues that game paratexts function as the 'preliminary textual interface' through which this constant interaction between game creators and players unfolds. At the same time, he still considers marketing paratexts created by game companies to be essential, in that they remain the first expressions of a game that players will usually encounter, and the first ones to establish important meaning-making frames that shape how players experience the game, as argued above.[18]

In relation to how marketing paratexts operate in contemporary historical culture as sites for informal learning, then, the following double characterization can be given. On the one hand, from the perspective of potential player-consumers, marketing materials of historical digital games function as sites to assess whether or not a game, and the updates that are subsequently released for it, will both reconfirm, and legitimately and meaningfully expand upon, a player's pre-existing knowledge, mnemonic frameworks and experiences in relation to a historical subject, as one component of a broader set of interests and desires players have for a game. A telling example thereof is how in May 2018, players reacted to the announcement trailer for the game *Battlefield V*, which became the subject of online controversy because it prominently depicted a female frontline soldier with a prosthetic arm, something that was considered to be too

16 See for example: Jason Schreier, "Top Video Game Companies Won't Stop Talking About 'Games As A Service,'" Kotaku, https://kotaku.com/top-video-game-companies-wont-stop-talking-about-games-1795663927, accessed September 25, 2020. For a more general discussion, see: Aphra Kerr, Global Games: Production, Circulation and Policy in the Networked Era (New York and London: Routledge, 2017), 64-105.

17 For the notion '(online) brand community', see: Francisco J. Martínez-López et al., *Online Brand Communities : Using the Social Web for Branding and Marketing* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2016).

18 For the entire paragraph, see: Matthew T. Payne, *Playing War: Military Video Games After 9/11* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2016), 145-156. Payne's discussion of marketing paratexts for games can also be found in: Matthew T. Payne, "Marketing Military Realism in Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare," *Games and Culture* 7, no. 4 (2012): 305-327.

unrealistic for a game set during the Second World War by a specific segment of the *Battlefield* player-community.[19] On the other hand, from a production perspective, i.e. the perspective I focus on in this chapter, marketing paratexts show how game creators aim to position themselves as 'developer-historians' and mnemonic agents when creating historical digital games, in that they, as discussed by British historian Esther Wright, use marketing materials to highlight the distinct historical and memory-related themes and broader narratives they wish to express through their games.[20] I identify these narratives as 'developer narratives', in line with Chapman's notion of the 'developer historian'.[21] By formulating these themes and developer narratives, game creators partly transform their online community platforms into sites for historical and mnemonic expression. This blurs the distinction between a profit-driven brand community on the one hand and a community for informal learning and remembrance on the other, at least in ways that are not meant to interfere with the commercial interests of the involved game companies. It allows players to acquire understandings of the past that operate as a starting point for further historical engagements, for example when entering a formal learning environment.

2.3 Method: Studying Game Paratextuality through Content Analysis

To study the marketing paratextuality of digital entertainment games about the Second World War as both an expression of a commodified popular historical culture and as a potential site for informal historical learning, I carried out an interpretative content analysis of textual and audiovisual source materials. I identified the historical and memory-related themes and 'developer narratives' that were highlighted in the press releases, promotional trailers and other marketing materials for the digital games about the Second World War that were published on Steam, a leading global online store for PC-games created by American game company Valve Corporation in 2003.[22] I also studied the complementary marketing paratexts of these games that could be identified on their dedicated community platforms, in particular their official websites and dedicated YouTube-channels.[23] When carrying out the interpretative content analysis, I paid special attention to lists of 'selling points' with an explicit historical and/or memory dimension that were highlighted in the marketing materials. To inform my

19 See for example: Andy Chalk, "Electronic Arts Says 'Female Playable Characters Are Here to Stay,'" *PC Gamer*, https://www.pcgamer.com/electronic-arts-says-female-playable-characters-are-here-to-stay/, accessed September 25, 2020.

20 Esther Wright, art. cit., 598-608.

21 For the notion 'developer-historian', see: Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History* (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 30-55 and in particular 33-34.

22 Steam's official website is: https://store.steampowered.com/, accessed October 18, 2020.

23 As the official websites of commercially distributed digital games often contain references to dedicated pages on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and more recently, chat-platforms tailored towards gaming such as Discord, these sites and pages can be identified as belonging to an interconnected ecosphere.

analysis of the paratextual 'developer narratives', I adopted the open-ended definition of a 'narrative' formulated by American historians Keith Barton and Linda Levstik. They define narratives as 'chains of events in cause-effect relationship' that unfold over time and involve specific actors, actions, goals/intentions, settings and instruments.[24] When studying the paratexts, I used this general definition to identify the 'developer narratives' that were expressed in both the textual and audiovisual sources.

I used games about the Second World War that were distributed on Steam as a starting point for this study, for several reasons. Not only is Steam a dominant online distribution platform for games globally.[25] It also serves as a focal point for marketing paratexts, and it allowed me to identify a broader corpus of games about the Second World War through its 'tagging' system, in that game creators and players can assign keywords to a game on Steam, to help other players search for games in a more targeted way.[26] As such, these tags shed light on what players themselves identified as games about the Second World War. Finally, Steam gave me insight into the popularity of games through SteamSpy. This is a web service that gathers information about games that are owned and played by Steam-users worldwide through an analysis of publicly available user statistics. As such, I analyzed the marketing materials of the games about the Second World War that were owned by the highest number of players on September 18, 2018.[27]

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24 Keith C. Barton and Linda S. Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good* (Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 129-132. The definition formulated by Barton and Levstik is based on the one provide by American film scholars David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson. See: David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (10th edition) (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2013), 72-110, in particular 73.

25 For example, according to the latest figures made available in May 2020, Steam is estimated to take up 75% of the global market share in terms of online distribution of pc games. See: Arthur Zuckerman, "75 Steam Statistics: 2019/2020 Facts, Market Share & Data Analysis," https://comparecamp.com/steam-statistics/, accessed September 25, 2020. Over the past decade, several competing online stores for PC-games have arisen, such as Origin, launched by US-based game publisher Electronic Arts in 2011; Uplay, launched by France-based game publisher Ubisoft in 2012; and most recently, the Epic Game Store, launched by US-based game company Epic in December 2018. However, these platforms have not been able to break Steam's monopoly (at least at the time of writing). Origin and Uplay primarily serve as distribution platforms for the games published by Electronic Arts and Ubisoft themselves, respectively. Electronic Arts removed some of its games from Steam when it launched Origin in 2011, but it has again released some of its games on Steam since the fall of 2019 (see: Ben Kuchera, "Battlefield 3 is not Coming to Steam, but EA Has a Real Reason," *Ars Technica*, http://arstechnica.com/gaming/2011/08/battlefield-3-not-coming-to-steam-ea-provides-good-reason/, accessed September 25, 2020; Chaim Gartenberg, "EA Games Are Returning to Steam along with the EA Access Subscription Service," *The Verge*, https://www.theverge.com/2019/10/29/20937055/ea-games-steam-access-subscription-service-pc-storefront-jedi-fallen-order-sales, accessed September 25, 2020). The Epic Game Store is gradually growing into a broader distribution platform. Alternative older platforms are Battle.net, a distribution platform for PC-games owned by US-based game publisher Activision Blizzard; and GOG.com, an online distribution platform primarily aimed at selling older games, and hosted by GOG sp. z o.o, a subsidiary of Polish game company CD Projekt S.A.

26 Valve Corporation, "Browse Steam Your Way: Introducing Steam Tags, A Powerful New Way to Shop For Games," http://store.steampowered.com/tag/, accessed September 25, 2020.

27 For more information about SteamSpy, see: SteamSpy, "About," http://steamspy.com/about, accessed September 25, 2020. Due to technical changes made to Steam in April 2018, the information

To carry out my study, I analyzed the marketing paratexts that were distributed on Steam and the aforementioned community platforms in the Netherlands, as this is where I accessed the materials. This is noteworthy for this study for several reasons. Firstly, not all the digital entertainment games about the Second World War that are created worldwide are made available on Steam, or are commercially successful in the Netherlands or other parts of the world. For example, as Steam has been less dominant up until recently in Asian countries such as China and Japan,[28] a choice for Steam means that some of the games that were distributed in these countries but not on Steam, were not included in the corpus.[29] Secondly, game stores such as Steam have a number of region-specific settings (although they mostly apply to pricing and payment methods), while globally produced games are usually also localized for specific regions and countries.[30] An example thereof is that until August 2018, Nazi symbols such as Swastika's were categorically removed from digital games and their marketing materials in Germany specifically, due to a prohibition on the use of these symbols in digital games under the German Criminal Code.[31] Taken together, this means that the current analysis is explicitly regionally embedded. At the same time, the adopted approach does allow for the identification of broader patterns in the marketing paratexts of digital entertainment games about the Second World War that are distributed around the world, especially in North America and both Western and Eastern Europe, including Russia. This is especially the case since games and their marketing materials are usually not translated

provided by SteamSpy has become less accurate than before. At the same time, SteamSpy is still widely used as a source for user statistics on Steam-games. See for example: Nathan Grayson, "Steam Spy Is Back, But Not As Accurate As Before," *Kotaku*, https://kotaku.com/steam-spy-is-back-but-not-as-accurate-as-before-1825608646, accessed September 25, 2020.

28 See for example: Andy Chalk, "Valve and Perfect World Are Bringing Steam to China," *PC Gamer*, https://www.pcgamer.com/valve-and-perfect-world-are-bringing-steam-to-china/, accessed September 15, 2020.

29 An example of this is the game *Girls und Panzer: Dream Tank Match* (Bandai Namco Entertainment, 2018), based on a Japanese anime film and tv series of the same name. The game was released for the PlayStation 4 (PS4) and Nintendo Switch home gaming consoles, but not on PC (through Steam and other stores). The following remarkable observation can also be made about the game: in the Netherlands, it cannot be purchased through the online PlayStation and Nintendo stores, nor other local Dutch gaming-dedicated retail stores. Other examples of games that cannot easily be accessed in the Netherlands include *Resistance War Online*, an online shooting game that was created by Chinese game developer PowerNet in close collaboration with the Chinese government in 2007. The game offers a depiction of the 'War of Resistance against Japan' between 1937 and 1945 that closely adheres to the propagandistic commemorative discourse surrounding the war put forward by the Chinese government. For a more elaborate discussion, see: Hongping Annie Nie, "Gaming, Nationalism, and Ideological Work in Contemporary China: Online Games Based on the War of Resistance against Japan," *Journal of Contemporary China* 22, no. 81 (2013): 499-517.

30 See for example: Miguel Á. Bernal-Merino, *Translation and Localisation in Video Games* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015); Rebecca Carlson and Jonathan Corliss, "Imagined Commodities: Video Game Localization and Mythologies of Cultural Difference," *Games and Culture* 6, no. 1 (2011): 61-82.

31 Gabby Raymond, "Germany Will Now Allow Some Nazi Symbols in Video Games. Here's What to Know About the History of That Ban," *Time Magazine*, http://time.com/5364254/germany-nazi-symbols-video-games-history/, accessed September 25, 2020.

in Dutch for a Dutch market, and there are no specific Dutch legal prohibitions concerning the content of digital entertainment games about the Second World War similar to the ones in Germany or elsewhere.

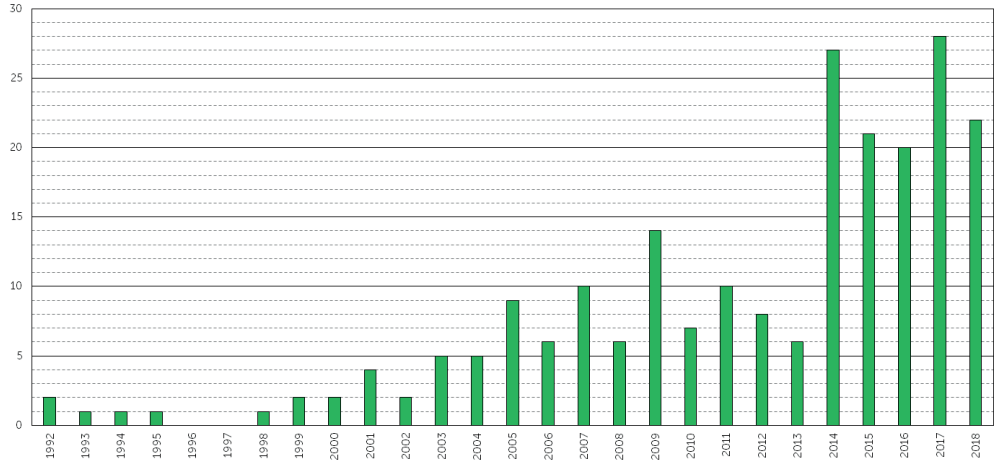

Figure 2.1: WWII-games: number of games/year (n = 220). (Steam, 6 September 2018)

Following the approach outlined above, I studied the marketing paratexts of 220 digital entertainment games, belonging to 151 different game series that were identified by game creators and players as 'World War II'-games on Steam. Most of these games were released on the platform since 2003, with a significant increase since 2014 (**Figure 2.1**).[32] To highlight the transnational dimension of these games and their marketing, I identified in what countries the main headquarters of the involved companies were located, based on the information found on Steam and the additional community pages. In doing so, it is important to remember that (1) several of these companies, such as Wargaming Group (*World of Tanks*), own subsidiary companies in other regions and are part of global multi-industry conglomerates; and that (2) most of these companies consist of teams combining various national backgrounds, who increasingly operate in digitally enabled transnational production networks. However, as game production is nevertheless still strongly embedded in distinct local (e.g. national) contexts, it remains important to identify these locations.[33]

32 This increase in 2014 aligns with an overall increase in the number of games published on Steam, due in large to the introduction of 'Steam Early Access' in 2013. This initiative allows game creators to publish early builds of games on Steam, to gather feedback from players and additional revenue. See: Samit Sarkar, "Almost Two-Fifths of Steam's Entire Library Was Released in 2016," https://www.polygon.com/2016/12/1/13807904/steam-releases-2016-growth, accessed September 25, 2020.

33 Aphra Kerr, op.cit., 27-63.

2.4 Results

To contextualize my paratextual analysis, I first provide an overall characterization of the studied game series in terms of genre and country of origin. Concerning genre, a striking consistency could be identified in the studied corpus: when ranking the games based on sales figures or how often they were downloaded, almost all of them could be identified as either first- or third person shooters (FPS/TPS) (32 series), flight and other simulation games (26 series), real-time-, turn-based or grand strategy games (RTS/TBS/GS) (65 series), or hybrid games combining several of these genres. As illustrated by the data provided by Quantic Foundry, these genres are predominantly, but not exclusively, played by male players.[34] This means that, also from the perspective of history education, a clear gender divide can manifest itself: the digital entertainment games about the Second World War that are currently available primarily appeal to male players. This means that history educators have a higher chance of encountering male school age young adults that have engaged with these digital games and their paratextuality as a platform for informal learning. The corpus included freely accessible online games (F2P MMO- or free to play massive multiplayer online games) such as *World of Tanks* (Wargaming, 2010), big budget games that are released on PC and home gaming consoles such as *Call of Duty: WWII* (Sledgehammer Games, 2017), and mobile games, such as *Battle Islands* (DR Studios, 2014). In line with the observation that today's global game industry is dominated by a small number of major cross-industry conglomerates such as Microsoft, Sony and the Chinese technology firm Tencent, while at the same time, there has been an explosion in the number of small game companies over the past decade,[35] the corpus included 13 game-series that were made by major companies and owned by millions of players, such as *Heroes & Generals* (Reto-Moto ApS, 2014), *War Thunder* (Gaijin Entertainment, 2013), *Company of Heroes* (Relic Entertainment, 2006-present) and *Sniper Elite* (Rebellion Developments, 2005-present) (**Appendix 1**). At the same time, it included dozens of small games that had only been downloaded by a few thousand players.

In terms of country of origin, a majority of the total number of involved game companies, that is, 156 developers and 121 publishers, had its main headquarters in the United States (33 developers, 31 publishers), Russia (17 and 10) and the United Kingdom (13, 10) (**Figure 2.2a and 2.2b**). Overall, approximately 50% of the games were (co-) created by companies that are US American, Russian or British in origin. Most other companies had their main headquarters in Canada or European countries such as Germany, Poland, Ukraine, Sweden and France. In all, only 8 developers and 9 publishers could be located outside of North America and Europe/Russia, i.e. in Japan,

34 Nick Yee, "Beyond 50/50: Breaking Down The Percentage of Female Gamers By Genre," *Quantic Foundry*, https://quanticfoundry.com/2017/01/19/female-gamers-by-genre/, accessed September 25, 22020.

35 Aphra Kerr, op. cit., 27-63.

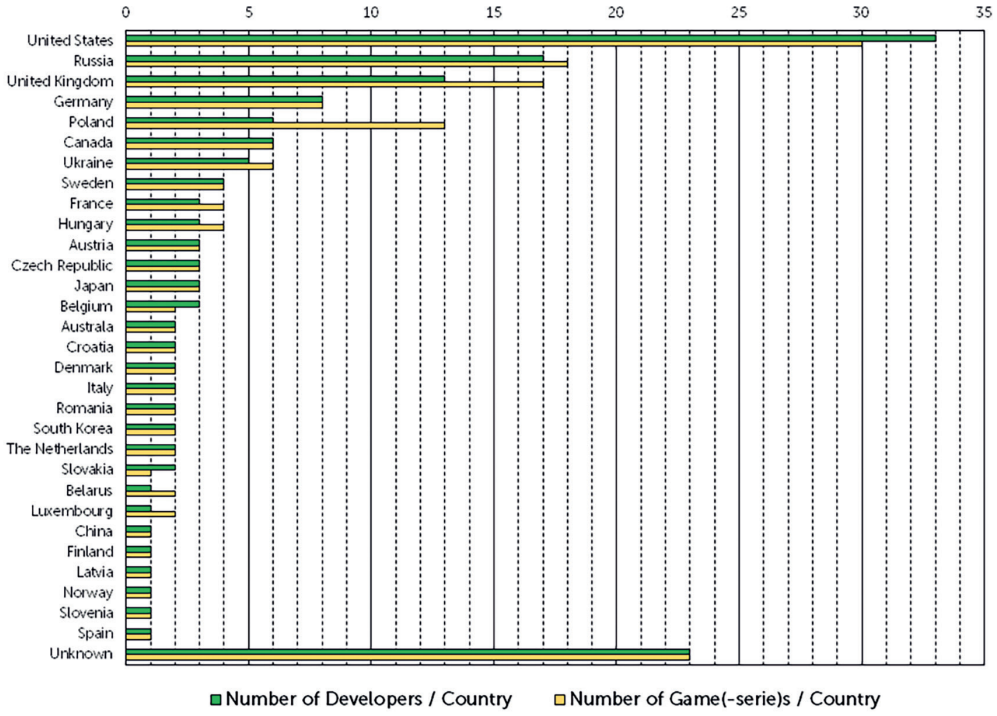

Figure 2.2(a): WWII-games: number of developers & games (/series) per country (Steam, 6 September 2018)

South Korea, China and Australia. This included Japanese companies such as Sega, who also publish games such as *Company of Heroes*, made by Canadian developer Relic Entertainment for primarily a North American and European market.[36] When ranked according to the number of owners of a game based on the date provide by SteamSpy, it became visible that the most popular games, with more than a million owners, were (co-) created by companies located in Denmark (*Heroes & Generals*), Russia (*War Thunder*), the US (*Red Orchestra* (Tripwire Interactive, 2006-present), *Call of Duty*), Canada (*Company of Heroes*), the UK (*Sniper Elite*), Sweden (*Hearts of Iron*), Belarus (*World of Tanks*) and Spain (*Commandos* (Pyro Studios, 1998-2003)), respectively (**Appendix 1**).

Throughout my paratextual analysis, I identified several distinct but interconnected historical and memory-related themes and 'developer narratives', reiterated upon repeatedly in transnational game creation circles. These themes and narratives revolved around the depiction of 'militaria' that were deployed by primarily male empowered

36 See for example: Jeff Grubb, "Sega Wants to Revitalize Its 'dormant IPs' While Focusing More on PC Games," *VentureBeat*, https://venturebeat.com/2017/05/15/sega-wants-to-revitalize-its-dormant-ips-while-focusing-more-on-pc/, accessed September 25, 2020.

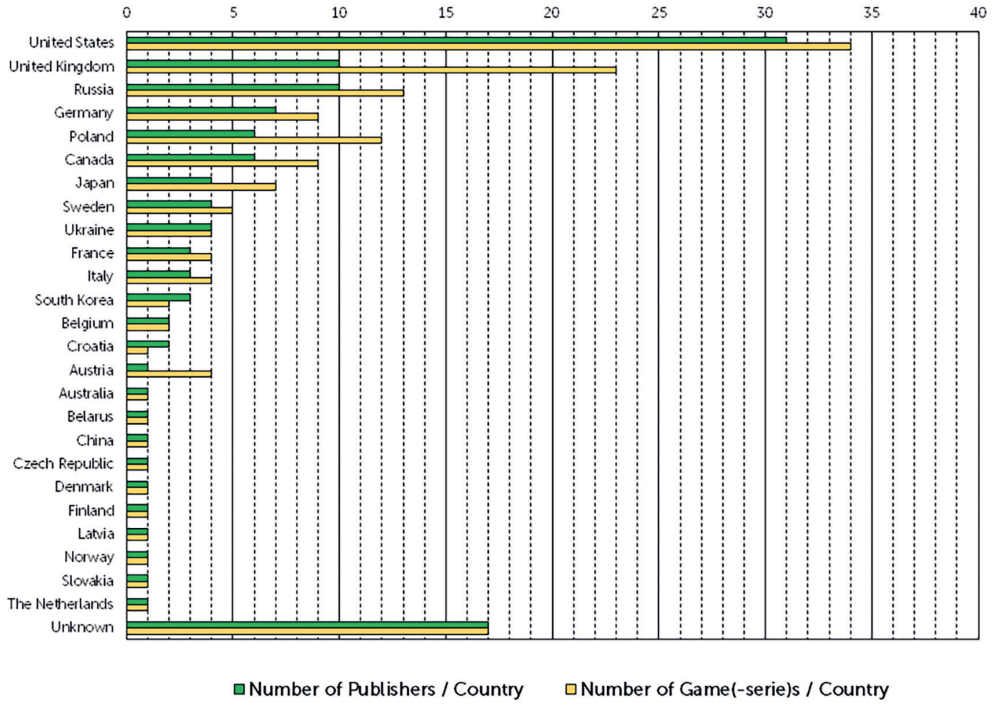

Figure 2.2(b): WWII-games: number of publishers & games (/series) per country (Steam, 6 September 2018)

military and political figures in distinct battle environments, as described in traditional battle histories, against either capable regular Axis armed forces or Manichaeistically 'evil' Nazi opponents. In addition, these themes and developer narratives were presented to players through the use of distinct aesthetic strategies. In what follows, I explore each of these recurring themes, narratives and aesthetics, and reflect on the broader implications of these findings for history education.

2.4.1 'Militaria fetishism' and battle narratives of empowered male heroism and ingenuity

Based on my paratextual analysis, I first identified a near exclusive focus of the studied marketing materials on armed combat and military- and politically-centered history. In the context thereof, I identified several sub-clusters of historical and memory-related themes and developer narratives, which I discuss more extensively below.

Firstly, a majority of the marketing paratexts, of games belonging to all of the genres and produced by companies located in all of the identified countries, included a wide range of explicit references to either firearms, vehicles or other types of military equipment, or the ability for players to deploy a range of meticulously recreated military units, sometimes explicitly in accordance to tactics and strategies deployed during the Second World War. This is shown in the quote below, taken from the press release for the game *Day of Infamy* in the selected corpus:

> *Use over 60 weapons including everything from Thompson sub machine guns to PIAT bomb launchers to FG42 auto rifles and flamethrowers. […]*
> *Progress through the ranks and unlock 33 different playable units of the US Army, British Commonwealth and German Wehrmacht factions like the 101st Airborne Division, No. 2 Commando, and 1. Fallschirmjäger Division.*
> (*Day of Infamy* (New World Interactive, 2016))[37]

This is a clear example of how creators of digital entertainment games about the Second World War aim to capture the historical fascination of players by focusing on what American media scholars Andrew Salvati and Jonathan Bullinger have called 'technological fetishism', i.e. the detailed depiction of the weapons used during the war,[38] or more broadly, a sense of 'militaria fetishism'. Given that this theme was mentioned in the paratexts of games produced in all of the involved countries, including China and South Korea, this can be seen as the primary transnational theme in the marketing of globally produced digital entertainment games about the Second World War. It is further illustrated by the historical and memory-related developer narratives that were shared on the online community platforms of for example the simulation games *World of Tanks*, *World of Warplanes* (Persha Studio, 2013) and *IL-2 Sturmovik* (1C Maddox Games/1C Game Studios, 2006-present), and the FPS *Rising Storm* (Tripwire Interactive, 2013). On the YouTube-channels of these games, a significant number of what I identify as 'narratives of technological operation' could be found, in which military consultants, game designers and celebrities talk about the design and functionality of tanks, planes and firearms, and the fate of specific pieces of military equipment that were used during the war and later recovered from the battlefield. Examples include a series of videos on the dedicated European YouTube-channel for Wargaming Group, the Belarussian company behind *World of Tanks*, *World of Warships* and *World of Warplanes*, in which Bruce Dickinson, the lead singer of the British heavy metal band Iron Maiden, talks about the design of planes such as the Messerschmitt BF 109 (**Figure 2.3**);[39] a series of videos on the same channel in which Richard Cutland, a British Gulf War veteran and one of Wargaming's in-house tank specialists, investigates what happened to a German 'Tiger I'-tank that was captured by the British armed forces in North Africa in 1943 that is exhibited in the British tank museum in Bovington;[40] two videos on the YouTube-

37 Steam, "Day of Infamy," https://store.steampowered.com/app/447820/Day_of_Infamy/, accessed September 25, 2020.

38 Andrew J. Salvati and Jonathan M. Bullinger, "Selective Authenticity and the Playable Past," in Matthew W. Kapell and Andrew B.R. Elliott, eds., *Playing With the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 153-167, in particular 158-159.

39 For a playlist of this series of videos, see: Wargaming Europe, "Bruce Dickinson Warplanes Diaries," https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLslIWpE2CMxScwPJrvzT10wn9L91X_nAT, accessed September 25, 2020.

40 For a playlist of this series of videos, see: Wargaming Europe, "Inside the Tanks - Tiger 1," https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLAjg5mNXtCCdbaPo4jMvL_lsnZcc_NRtW, accessed September 25, 2020.

channel of the Russian game developer 1C Game Studios, in which the director of a Russian aviation institute talks about a test flight he carried out with a recently restored Soviet 'Ilyushin IL-2 Sturmovik' aircraft;[41] and two videos in which the president of Tripwire Interactive, the creator of *Rising Storm*, showcases the firearms that were included in the game.[42]

Each of these narratives presents a detailed level of knowledge to players about the military technology that was used during the war, a topic that is usually not discussed in school history curricula.[43] From the perspective of historical thinking skills, as for example defined by Canadian historian Peter Seixas, this detailed rendition of military technology can offer a starting point for history educators to let school age young adults further reflect on aspects of historical significance:[44] to what extent is it historically meaningful to discuss military technology? Are there specific military technologies that were developed during the Second World War that have resulted in significant transformations over time? What is important for educators to take into account in this context is that many of these technocentric paratextual historical representations are more technological than violent: they express a fascination for military technology that usually ignores or only briefly touches upon the material destruction and loss of human life that these technologies brought about. This should be rendered explicit in history classes.

Secondly, and in close connection to this focus on 'militaria fetishism', I identified a strong emphasis on 'battle-centered' developer narratives in the studied marketing paratexts, especially in relation to direct military confrontations between the major wartime powers in the European, and to a significantly lesser extent Asia-Pacific, theatre of the war. Some of the most explicit examples thereof could be found on the websites of strategy games such as *Graviteam Tactics: Operation Star* (Graviteam, 2014), *Steel Division: Normandy 1944* (Eugen Systems, 2017) and *Company of Heroes*, where I encountered a significant number of blog posts detailing the events of, for example, the third battle of Kharkov (February-March 1943),[45] the D-Day landings in Normandy and operation 'Overlord' (June-August 1944),[46] and the 'Battle of the Bulge' in the Belgian

41 For the first video in a two-part series, see: 1C Game Studios, "IL2BOS Documentary - IL-2 Episode 1," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AdBDE_84l4w, accessed September 25, 2020.

42 For the first video in a two-part series, see: Tripwire Interactive, "Guns of Rising Storm Part 1," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d0cPoLLa9dc, accessed September 25, 2020.

43 See for example: Keith Crawford and Stuart J. Foster, *War, Nation, Memory*; Peter Carrier, Eckhardt Fuchs, and Torben Messinger, "The International Status of Education about the Holocaust."

44 For a discussion of the notion 'historical significance, see: Peter Seixas and Tom Morton, *The Big Six: Historical Thinking Concepts* (Toronto: Nelson Education, 2013), 12-39.

45 Graviteam, "Graviteam Tactics: Operation Star - History," http://graviteam.com/games/GTOS.html?action=history, accessed September 25, 2020.

46 Eugen Systems, "Steel Division: Normandy 44 - Divisions: 101st Airborne (Devblog)," https://www.eugensystems.com/steel-division-normandy-44-division-of-the-week-101st-airborne-us/, accessed September 25, 2020. Many of the posts found on the Devblog of Steel Division: Normandy 44, made by the French game developer Eugen Systems, also provide extensive discussions of the specific

Figure 2.3: 'Narratives of technological operation' in the marketing paratexts of popular games about the Second World War (Game: *World of Warplanes*)

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ap5HhDzSiE0, accessed October 18, 2020.

Ardennes region (December 1944-January 1945) (**Figure 2.4**).[47] It results in a rich set of battle accounts similar to the ones found in traditional military historiography, which offers players the possibility to gain insight into the overall military course of the Second World War. At the same time, many of these battle narratives were relatively 'bloodless', in that they revolved around rather abstract descriptions of strategic decision-making in which the brutality of violence is discursively rendered invisible, as is also often the case in school history textbooks, as highlighted by Spanish educational scholar Angela Bermudez.[48] However, given that these military events are often only discussed in general terms in history school curricula,[49] this also offers history educators an opportunity to reflect on aspects of historical significance. In addition, it can allow educators to establish meaningful connections with other aspects of the curriculum. Knowledge about the military course of the war serves as an important context to understand how, for example, the genocidal violence of the Nazi regime further escalated between 1939 and 1945.

Furthermore, when analyzing the distinct human perspectives that were highlighted in the 'battle-centered' developer narratives' and the studied marketing paratexts more generally, it became clear that a majority of them portrayed the war from the perspective of a series of, mostly white and male, militarized operatives and political leaders: infantry soldiers and junior officers at the frontlines, secret agents, fighter pilots and commanders of combat vessels, senior officers leading broader military operations, heads of state who take control of a country's military forces and its diplomatic and industrial apparatus, and resistance fighters. This is further illustrated when analyzing the 'cover images' of the studied games as presented on Steam, as games belonging to 70 of the 151 studied game series had cover images that explicitly rendered visible these perspectives (**Figure 2.5**). It can be explained based on the prevalence of FPS/TPS-, simulation- and strategy-games in the studied corpus, since these genres are centered on the depiction of these military and political perspectives. At the same time, although the paratexts of several games in the corpus did also refer to women and people of color in military roles, this does highlight their continued underrepresentation and marginalization.

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military units that were involved in the battles following the Normandy beach landings.

47 See for example: Company of Heroes, "The Battle of the Bulge: An Infographic," http://www.companyofheroes.com/blog/2014/12/16/the-battle-of-the-bulge-an-infographic, accessed September 25, 2020.

48 Angela Bermudez, "The Normalization of Political Violence in History Textbooks: Ten Narrative Keys" (New York: Dialogues on Historical Justice and Memory Network, 2019), http://historicaldialogues.org/2019/03/21/working-paper-series-no-15-the-normalization-of-political-violence-in-history-textbooks-ten-narrative-keys/, accessed September 25, 2020.

49 For the Netherlands, see for example the following report: Bron and Visser, "De Tweede Wereldoorlog in Het Curriculum" (Enschede: SLO Nationaal Expertisecentrum Leerplanontwikkeling, 2018), http://downloads.slo.nl/Repository/de-tweede-wereldoorlog-in-het-curriculum.pdf, accessed September 25, 2020.

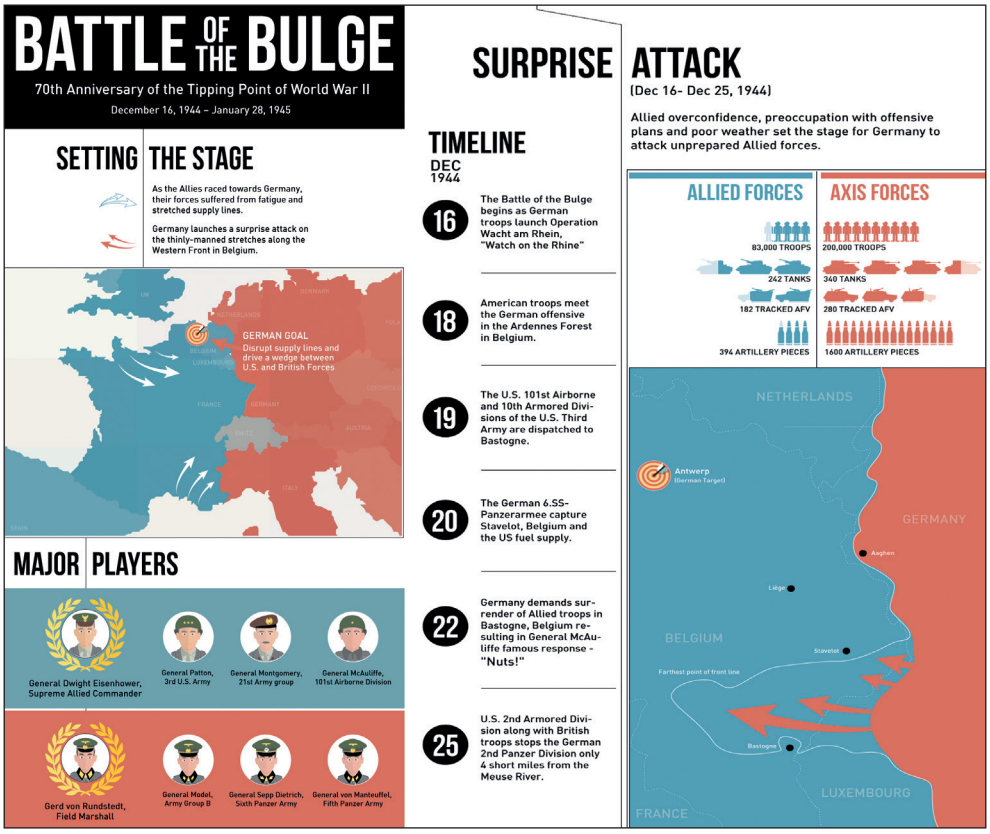

Figure 2.4: 'Battle narratives' in the marketing paratexts of popular games about the Second World War. (Part of an infographic shared on the website of the game: *Company of Heroes*)

Source: http://www.companyofheroes.com/blog/2014/12/16/the-battle-of-the-bulge-an-infographic, accessed October 18, 2020.

Following this observation about the depicted perspectives, I identified several historical and memory-related developer narratives that explicitly highlighted the 'noble heroism' and 'strategic ingenuity' of the involved operatives and leaders, as well as a call to commemorate their actions. In some cases, these narratives were closely linked to recruitment efforts on behalf of, for example, the US military.[50] This is shown in the marketing paratexts of games belonging to all genres, including: the aforementioned battle narratives identified on the official website of the RTS *Steel Division: Normandy 44*; an interview for the RTS *Company of Heroes 2: Ardennes Assault* (Relic Entertainment, 2015), in which a developer and military historian Peter Caddick-Adams discuss the 'Battle

50 See for example: Simon Parkin, "Call of Duty: Gaming's Role in the Military-Entertainment Complex," *The Guardian*, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/oct/22/call-of-duty-gaming-role-military-entertainment-complex, accessed September 25, 2020.

Figure 2.5: Cover images of popular games about the Second World War, as found on Steam (games, top to bottom: *Heroes & Generals*, *Hearts of Iron IV*, *Order of Battle: World War II*)

Source: https://store.steampowered.com/, accessed October 18, 2020.

of the Bulge' and the role played by junior officers therein;[51] a livestream video for the MMO FPS *Heroes & Generals*, in which two developers talk about the actions of heroic soldiers and resistance fighters whose names start with the letter 'B';[52] a series of videos uploaded to the YouTube-channel of the FPS *Call of Duty* in which US veterans of the Second World War talk about their wartime experiences;[53] and a series of instruction videos for the RTS *Sudden Strike 4* (Kite Games, 2017), in which a producer for the game

51 Company of Heroes, "Company of Heroes 2 Presents: A Look at the Battle of the Bulge," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HE-NBUYYstY, accessed September 26, 2020.

52 Heroes & Generals, "Heroes & Generals Devstream - Devstream #61 - Live from Copenhagen," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AlB8SWDI1-U, accessed September 26, 2020. For an overview of the Devstream-videos, in which members of the Heroes & Generals development team discuss technical and other changes they have implemented in the game, see: Heroes & Generals, "Devstreams (Playlist)," https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLnPg4s8q3uRSM6NuSCKbNDttmyRbHVrc2, accessed September 26, 2020.

53 Call of Duty, "Veterans Day (Playlist)," https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLZeek85Kuka21NF7kqTTbPyh9Drn0uLsj, accessed September 26, 2020.

discusses the military 'doctrines' that players can adopt in the game, as a reference to strategic innovations and military successes that were implemented and achieved during the Second World War by generals such as Heinz Guderian, Georgy Zhukov, George Patton and Bernard Montgomery.[54]

All of these narratives are subsequently projected onto the player, who in the marketing paratexts is challenged to take on the role of these figures, and change the outcome of the war or history itself, in reference to player 'agency' and an exaggerated sense of 'heroic empowerment', as described by Swedish game scholar Jonas Linderoth.[55] This is shown in the quotes below, taken from the press releases in the selected corpus:

> *Eisenhower, Rommel, Zhukov; Assume your rightful place among the great generals commanding the Allies, Germans or Soviets as they advance through the decisive battles of WWII.*
> (*Blitzkrieg Anthology* (Nival, 2003))[56]

> *You hold the power to tip the very balance of WWII. It is time to show your ability as the greatest military leader in the world. Will you relive or change history?*
> (*Hearts of Iron IV* (Paradox Development Studio, 2016))[57]

In contrast, hardly any of the studied paratexts mentioned the ability for players to experience the Second World War from the perspective of a non-combatant civilian, as is the case in a fictional game such as *This War of Mine* (11Bit Studios, 2014), or explore the broader impact of the war on civil society. An exception to this are the paratexts for the game *Attentat 1942*, a point-and-click adventure game created by researchers at the Charles University of Prague in 2017, which highlight that players will be able to discover what happened to their grandparents during the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Nazi Germany during the war, by talking to fictionalized eye witness accounts.[58] Additional

54 Kalypso Media, "Sudden Strike 4 - General's Handbook (Playlist)," https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLlQXYwoUl2OfQd3pm7unW__PKpdM5JjhD, accessed September 26, 2020.

55 Jonas Linderoth, "Superheroes, Greek Gods and Sport Stars: Ecological Empowerment as a Ludo-Narratological Construct," in Konstantin Mitgutsch et al, eds., *Context Matters! Proceedings of the Vienna Games Conference 2013: Exploring and Reframing Games and Play in Context*, Vienna, 2013, 17-30, https://www.academia.edu/5886444/Superheroes_Greek_gods_and_sport_stars_Ecological_empowerment_as_a_ludo-narratological_construct, accessed September 26, 2020.

56 Steam, "Blitzkrieg Anthology," http://store.steampowered.com/app/313480/Blitzkrieg_Anthology/, accessed September 26, 2020.

57 Steam, "Hearts of Iron IV," http://store.steampowered.com/app/394360/Hearts_of_Iron_IV/, accessed September 26, 2020.

58 Holger Pötzsch and Vit Šisler, "Playing Cultural Memory: Framing History in Call of Duty: Black Ops and Czechoslovakia 38-89: Assassination," *Games and Culture* 14, no. 1 (2019): 3-25; Šisler et al., "Stories from the History of Czechoslovakia, A Serious Game for Teaching History of the Czech Lands in the 20th Century – Notes on Design Concepts and Design Process," in Marc Herrlich, Rainer Malaka and Maic Masuch, eds., *Entertainment Computing – ICEC 2012: Proceedings of the*

examples of digital games that adopt the perspective of a non-combatant that have been published on Steam since September 2018 include *My Memory of Us* (Juggler Games, 2018), a platforming game in which players can explore a fictionalized version of occupied Warsaw during the Second World War from the perspective of two children, and *Through the Darkest of Times* (Paintbucket Games, 2020), in which players take on the role of a member of the resistance in Nazi Germany between 1933 and 1945. In all, however, apart from these games, no other paratexts that referred to a similar focus on non-combatant perspectives, or a broader sense of disempowerment during war, could be identified. When compared to how 'war narratives' as a broader cultural form in general have evolved over time, this means that the developer narratives expressed in the marketing paratexts of the selected games about the Second World War, and in close connection, the games themselves, tend to focus on top-down leadership-perspectives and grassroots heroic soldier-perspectives, in reference to the top-down general narratives that were prevalent until the late nineteenth century and the 'democratized' soldier-narratives that became more dominant during the First World War. In contrast, the game paratexts hardly contained any of the types of war narratives that have become prevalent during the second half of the twentieth century in North America and Europe but also elsewhere, centered on accounts of civilians and victims of mass violence, in particular of the Holocaust.[59]

What are the broader implications of these observations for the development of historical thinking skills in formal history education? Given that most of the studied marketing materials put a strong emphasis on heroic empowerment and player 'agency', these paratextual narratives offer history educators a good starting point to let school age young adults reflect on the underlying causality that is highlighted in these paratexts and the games themselves. This can help to advance the ability of school age young adults to assess aspects of historical causality, one of the central historical thinking concepts identified by Peter Seixas.[60] To what extent did individual political and military leaders shape the outcome of the Second World War? To what extent was this outcome already determined by economic and other structural forces? A complementary set of historical and memory-related themes and developer narratives that I want to highlight in that respect could be identified in the marketing paratexts of GS-games such as *Hearts of Iron* and *Supreme Ruler: 1936* (BattleGoat Studios, 2014), in which players take on the

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11th International Conference, Bremen, 2012, 67-74, https://hal.inria.fr/hal-01556175/document, accessed September 26, 2020.

59 For a discussion of how war narratives, as expressed in various forms of cultural textuality, have evolved since the nineteenth century, in particular in North America and Europe, see: Nanci Adler, Remco Ensel, and Michael Wintle, eds., *Narratives of War: Remembering and Chronicling Battle in Twentieth-Century Europe* (New York and London: Routledge, 2019), especially 204-217. Also in particular the essay of historian John Horne in this volume is of interest: John Horne, "A Tale of Two Battles: Narrating Verdun and the Somme, 1916," in Nanci Adler, Remco Ensel, and Michael Wintle, eds., op. cit., 18-34. See also: Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War Between Historical Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006).

60 Peter Seixas and Tom Morton, *The Big Six*, 102-135.

role of a head of state. Here, I encountered several marketing paratexts that highlighted various aspects of political, military and diplomatic history, as well as several causal factors that were seen as crucial to understand this history. This is for example shown in the development diaries of the game *Hearts of Iron IV*, in which the developers talk about how the game is focused on resource management, the creation of industrial capacity and constant technological innovation, as a reference to the role essential played by these factors in determining the outcome of the Second World War.[61] This again shows how the studied marketing paratexts, and the games themselves, can offer rich sites for further reflection on the nature of historical causality.

Finally, I also want to highlight a significant transnational dimension in relation to the developer narratives of militarized male empowerment identified above. In line with the finding that approximately 50% of the games in the selected corpus were (co-) created by US, Russian and British companies, it could be established that the national, state- and military-centered perspectives of these countries in particular were dominant in the paratexts. References to other, more localized historical and memory-related narratives about the Second World War on the other hand were usually absent or only of secondary importance (for example when embedded in optional additional downloadable content for the games),[62] also in the paratexts of games produced by companies located elsewhere. This is illustrated in the following quotes, taken from games created by companies located in the US, Russia and Sweden, respectively (see also **Figure 2.5**):

> *Join Matt Baker, Joe Hartsock and the rest of the 101st Airborne Division in Operation Market Garden as they fight to open the infamous Hell's Highway in a daring bid for a quick end to the war.*
> (*Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway* (Gearbox Software, 2008))[63]

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61 See for example: Paradox Interactive, "Hearts of Iron IV - 'Naval, Land and Air Power' - Developer Diary 2," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bGTMxjL1ED0&list=PL4hR-M4rl7ufKgj2A0SfgQKdvBpldrK9X&index=24, accessed September 26, 2020. For an overview of the development diaries released for *Hearts of Iron IV*, see: Paradox Interactive, "Developer Diaries," Hearts of Iron IV Wiki, https://hoi4.paradoxwikis.com/Developer_diaries, accessed September 26, 2020.

62 Several games have released additional content packs since they were originally published, in which attention is also given to the perspectives of other countries. Since it originally launched the game *World of Tanks* in 2010, developer Wargaming has also made various tank models that were used in the armies of France, Japan, China, Czechoslovakia, Sweden, Poland and Italy during the Second World War (World of Tanks, "Tankopedia: Reviews, Comparison and Collections of Combat Vehicles," https://worldoftanks.eu/en/tankopedia/#wot&w_m=tanks, accessed September 26, 2020). Since it originally released *Hearts of Iron IV*, developer Paradox Development Studio has released new 'national focus trees' for member states of the British Commonwealth (Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and British India) (*Together for Victory*), the Central and Eastern European states Hungary, Romania, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia (*Death or Dishonor*), China (*Waking the Tiger*), France, Spain and Portugal (*La Résistance*) and minor powers surrounding the Black and Aegean Sea (Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey) (*Battle for the Bosporus*).

63 Steam, "Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway," http://store.steampowered.com/app/15390/Brothers_in_Arms_Hells_Highway/, accessed September 26, 2020.

> *Men of War: Condemned Heroes tells the story of one of the infamous Soviet penal battalions during the WWII. […] These battalions' images are surrounded by many myths, and this game tells the truth about these regiments based on real evidence from their former members.*
> (*Men of War: Condemned Heroes* (1C-SoftClub, 2012))[64]
> *FLYING TIGERS: SHADOWS OVER CHINA is an air-combat action game based on the true events of America's secret volunteer squadrons that defended China against Japan in the China-Burma-India theatre of World War 2.*
> (*Flying Tigers: Shadows over China* (Ace Maddox AB, 2015))[65]

What therefore emerges as a second dominant set of transnational themes and developer narratives is an emphasis on the ability for players to 'step into the shoes' of empowered military and political heroes of the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, Germany (and to a lesser extent Japan) as the great wartime powers, and determine the course of the war. These function as the commercially most viable themes and narratives for digital entertainment games about the Second World War, as they are assumed to be recognizable for the highest number of players, especially in North America, Europe and Russia. This doesn't mean that counter-examples were absent. The game *Attentat 1942* was already discussed earlier. Furthermore, I noticed throughout my analysis that the marketing paratexts of several games made by companies located in Poland tended to highlight specific national themes, for example related to the Warsaw Uprising in 1944. In these paratexts, the Soviet Union was for example sometimes explicitly identified as an enemy state, in reference to the inherently contentious nature of how the Soviet Union's involvement in the Second World War is remembered in Poland. It confirms the observations made by Polish game scholar Piotr Sterczewski, who discusses how Polish game creators have actively strived to include more explicit references to their national commemorative frameworks in their games in recent years.[66] In all however, such examples were rare, and most of these games only sold a limited number of copies, as shown by the data provided by SteamSpy. In addition, the involved game creators also sometimes made additional strategic choices to increase the game's visibility. In the Polish FPS *Enemy Front* (CI Games, 2014) for example, partly set during the Warsaw

64 Steam, "Men of War: Condemned Heroes," http://store.steampowered.com/app/204860/Men_of_War_Condemned_Heroes/, accessed September 26, 2020.

65 Steam, "Flying Tigers: Shadows Over China," https://store.steampowered.com/app/365810/Flying_Tigers_Shadows_Over_China/, accessed September 26, 2020.

66 Piotr Sterczewski, "This Uprising of Mine: Game Conventions, Cultural Memory and Civilian Experience of War in Polish Games," *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 16, no. 2 (2016), http://gamestudies.org/1602/articles/sterczewski, accessed September 26, 2020. Land of War – The Beginning, an FPS that focuses on the German invasion of Poland in 1939 and that is in development at the moment of writing, is a more recent example of this trend. See: MS Games, "Land of War | The Beginning," https://www.landofwar.pl/en/home/, accessed September 26, 2020.

Uprising, players do not play as a Polish resistance fighter but as an American journalist who fights alongside them, as shown in the marketing trailers. This choice was made because of commercial imperatives, to appeal to a wider community of players.

2.4.2 'Nazisploitation': eccentric fascination, horrified bewilderment, and carnivalesque ridicule and revenge

A second major cluster of themes and developer narratives that could be identified in the marketing paratexts was related to the depiction of the Nazi regime, or Nazism more generally. Here, I found that the concerned paratexts primarily referred to game settings that were centred on what American literary scholars Daniel Magilow, Kristin Vander Lugt and Elizabeth Bridges have described as 'Nazisploitation'-themes (in reference to a subgenre of low-brow cinema that emerged during the 1970s),[67] in which players have to confront mad Nazi 'scientists', evil SS commanders, robotic super-soldiers, zombies and dinosaurs, in games such as *Wolfenstein*, *Zombie Army Trilogy* (Rebellion Developments, 2015), *ÜberSoldier II* (Burut CT, 2008) and *Dino D-Day* (800 North/Digital Ranch, 2011) (**Figure 2.6a and b**). In relation to these games, I encountered several interviews in which the involved game creators stated that they had drawn inspiration from what they identified as eccentric characteristics of the Nazi regime (some of which are only of minor importance historically or are closely connected to conspiracy theories about the Nazis) such as the involvement of prominent Nazi leaders in occult societies and the search of the Nazi-leadership for 'wonder weapons', and some of the war crimes committed by the Nazi regime, such as the gruesome experiments carried out by notorious SS doctor Joseph Mengele at the Auschwitz concentration- and extermination camp complex.[68] The involved creators stated that they used these elements as a starting point to create over-the-top game scenarios for players to overcome through excessive and subversive virtual violence. Other marketing paratexts elaborated on this premise, such as the promotional trailers for the game *Wolfenstein: The Old Blood* (MachineGames, 2015), which urge players to 'infiltrate the Nazi paranormal division' in a fictional German town and virtually 'kill as many Nazis as you can'.[69] These marketing materials did not present elaborate historical or memory-related developer narratives that were meant to be informative, as was the case for the narratives identified in the previous section. Instead, they mostly highlighted what I define as themes of 'eccentric

67 Daniel H. Magilow, Kristin T. Vander Lugt, and Elizabeth Bridges, *Nazisploitation! The Nazi Image in Low-Brow Cinema and Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2012).

68 See for one such example: Gamereactor, "E3 13: Wolfenstein: The New Order - Interview," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AMtv1hRVdvk, accessed September 26, 2020.

69 Bethesda Softworks, "Wolfenstein: The Old Blood - Launch Trailer," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZgb99kBsxM, accessed September 26, 2020. An additional interesting example is the satirical 'fake' cartoon *Blitzmensch!*, centered around a Nazi superhero of the same name, introduced in trailers for the game *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* (MachineGames, 2017): Bethesda Softworks, "BLITZMENSCH - UBER MAN TO UBER HERO!" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=45quOTuvsNc, accessed September 26, 2020.

Figure 2.6a: 'Propaganda Art' for the game *Dino D-Day*, centred on 'Nazisploitation'-themes

Source: https://www.dinodday.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/HitlerRapter_small-e1403827605178.jpg, accessed October 18, 2020.

fascination, horrified bewilderment and carnivalesque ridicule and revenge', in that they were meant to invite players to either have fun while killing larger-than-life Nazis, or to symbolically subvert and cathartically overcome a regime that is seen as unambiguously evil, in a more directly ideologically driven manner. In that respect, also a transnational dimension could be identified, in that game creators located in the US and the UK in particular, but also in Russia and elsewhere, equally tended to replicate these themes. An example thereof can be identified in a number of videos published on the official website of the FPS-game *RAID: World War II*, made by the Zagreb-based developer Lion Game Lion in 2017, in which members of the development team talk about how their game was inspired by fascinating stories about for example Nazi art- and gold theft.[70]

The following general observations can be made about these paratextual themes, also in relation to the development of historical thinking skills in formal history education. Firstly, although the aforementioned depictions of Nazism explicitly rely on exaggeration and revolve around symbolic ridicule and subversion, they do reinforce the same

70 See the second development diary video in a four part series: Lion Game Lion, "RAID: World War II – Dev Diary #2," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ybof-RXR7f4, accessed September 26, 2020.

Figure 2.6b: 'Propaganda Art' for the game *Dino D-Day*, centred on 'Nazisploitation'-themes

Source: https://www.dinodday.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/GermanPoster001.jpg, accessed October 18, 2020

binary dichotomies between 'good' and 'evil' that are omnipresent in other popular historical representations of the Nazi regime. These dichotomies are equally present in the marketing paratexts of single player games centred on military combat between Allied and German soldiers in particular, such as *Call of Duty: WWII*. Secondly, this critique on strict binaries also applies to the following observation: marketing paratexts of primarily multiplayer games that mentioned the Wehrmacht, or the regular German armed forces during the war, and the ability for players to play from both an Allied and a German perspective, mostly omitted direct references to Nazism, regardless by whom the games were created. This means that, also specifically through marketing, North American, European and Russian game creators continue to make a clear distinction between the Nazi regime and the German armed forces. This transnationally perpetuates the 'Wehrmacht-myth', i.e. the misconception that the Wehrmacht was an apolitical organization that was not actively involved in the genocidal violence and other war

crimes committed by Nazi Germany on the Eastern Front in particular.[71] All of these distinctions make it important for history educators to explicitly counter dichotomies, by discussing how extreme war violence is brought about by complex social and other processes that do not lend themselves to static binary distinctions between 'heroes' and 'villains'. Here, a connection can be made with two historical thinking-concepts: historical perspective-taking and ethical reflection.[72] The distinction between 'heroes' and 'villains' often found in games can offer a good starting point for school age young adults to both learn how to understand the socio-cultural structures and intellectual and emotional settings that have shaped people's lives in the past, and to make proper ethical judgments about past actions and events.

2.4.3 Aspects of audio-visual design

Finally, it is useful to analyse the aesthetic design of the audio-visual marketing paratexts, as it equally is a crucial way for game creators to repackage the history of the Second World War, and offers players an important entryway to assess whether or not a game will meaningfully connect to their pre-existing knowledge, memory-related frameworks and experiences. Here, one can immediately see that the marketing paratexts of a majority of the studied digital entertainment games included explicit references to either (stereotypical assumptions about) media used during the war itself, such as black-and-white newsreel footage and visual propaganda materials from the 1940s (**Figure 2.6a and b**), or references to the cinematic conventions of more recent, and especially military-themed media texts, such as the US, British and Russian films *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998), *Fury* (David Ayer, 2014), *Dunkirk* (Christopher Nolan, 2017) and *Stalingrad* (Fedor Bondarchuk, 2013) (**Figure 2.7**). This confirms the observations made by several authors,[73] i.e. that the use of cinematic and other audio-visual conventions makes up a central aesthetic strategy in the marketing of digital entertainment games about the Second World War, especially the ones that are published in North America and Europe, including Russia. These intermedial points of reference are actively used to play into a sense of recognition and perceived authenticity among players when they engage in speculative consumption of commodified historical

71 For a more elaborate discussion, see: Adam Chapman and Jonas Linderoth, "Exploring the Limits of Play: A Case Study of Representations of Nazism in Games," in Torill E. Mortensen, Jonas Linderoth, and Ashley M.L. Brown, eds., *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), 137-153; Eugen Pfister, "'Of Monsters and Men' – Shoah in Digital Games," *Public History Weekly* 6 (2018), https://public-history-weekly.degruyter.com/6-2018-23/shoah-in-digital-games/, accessed September 26, 2020. For a brief overview of the historiographical debate surrounding the role of the German Wehrmacht during the Second World War, see: Dan Stone, *The Historiography of the Holocaust* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 206-207.

72 Peter Seixas and Tom Morton, *The Big Six*, 136-167 and 168-214.

73 See for example: Andrew J. Salvati and Jonathan M. Bullinger, "Selective Authenticity and the Playable Past," 159-161; Eva Kingsepp, "Immersive Historicity in World War II Digital Games," *Human IT: Journal for Information Technology Studies as a Human Science* 8, no. 2 (2006): 60-89.

Figure 2.7: Cinematic conventions in promotional trailers for popular games about the Second World War (reference to the film *Saving Private Ryan*) (Game: *Days of War*)

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PpnZ2r1eLOg, accessed October 18, 2020.

representations. It perpetuates these audio-visual conventions as a naturalized point of reference, although they primarily refer to distinct media properties rather than an outside reality. As such, meaningful connections can be established with the 'hyperreal'

Figure 2.8a: Cover art for the game *Wolfenstein: The New Order*

Source: https://images.ctfassets.net/rporu91m20dc/4STh9RJ85TtEepJhuBLx2A/05d30a3126d2c3041bb8fa25d8df6ba0/wolfenstein--the-new-order-hero-img?q=70&fm=webp, accessed October 18, 2020.

Figure 2.8b: Unknown photographer, "Reichsparteitag. Übersicht über den grossen Appell der SA, SS und des NSKK. Overview of the mass roll-call of SA, SS and NSKK troops. Nuremberg, November 9, 1935."

Collection: Charles Russell Collection, 1923 - 1935. Consulted through the US National Archives and Records Administration, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/558778, accessed September 26, 2020.

and 'simulacra' as defined by the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard.[74] It makes it important for history educators to identify these media constructs and analyse them accordingly. This also applies to the aesthetics that are used in the marketing paratexts of games that explicitly depict Nazism and 'Nazisploitation'-themes, which rely heavily on the symbolic language used by the Nazi regime. This happens in a strongly subversive manner in the studied paratexts, as discussed above. At the same time, the aesthetics of the paratexts continue to replicate some aspects of the propagandistic self-image and 'brand' that the Nazis themselves wanted to perpetuate. This can be illustrated by referring to the repeated use of images showing huge crowds of uniformed SS soldiers in the marketing paratexts of games such as *Wolfenstein*, which in the original Nazi propaganda were explicitly staged and meant to express a sense of strength, unity and determination (**Figure 2.8a and b**). In the paratexts, this notion is explicitly ridiculed and exaggerated, but at the same time, the images are still used to highlight a sense of overwhelming power that needs to be challenged, at least partly in line with what the Nazi leadership originally wanted to express.[75] This continued replication of the symbolic language of the Nazi regime as a semiotic index for the regime itself needs to be explicitly addressed by history educators.

2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I carried out an interpretative content analysis of the marketing paratextuality of the digital entertainment games about the Second World War that were distributed in North America and Europe (including Russia) in particular, through online game stores such as Steam and the additional official community platforms of these games. Based on my analysis, I established that the marketing paratexts of the games in my corpus, which were mostly made by North American, European and Russian game companies, tended to revolve around a limited set of interconnected historical and memory-related themes and 'developer narratives', reiterated upon by a majority of the involved game creators:

(1) A near exclusive focus on military and political history, as both showcased by a clear emphasis on 'militaria fetishism' and accompanying 'narratives of technological operation' on the one hand, and 'battle-centred' narratives that highlighted the heroism and strategic ingenuity of mostly white and male military and political figures on the other. Other perspectives and narratives were mostly absent.

74 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

75 See for example: Nicholas O'Shaughnessy, *Marketing The Third Reich: Persuasion, Packaging and Propaganda* (New York and London: Routledge, 2018) (Fascism and the Far Right Series), in particular 136-193; Susan D. Bachrach, Edward J. Phillips, and Steven Luckert, *State of Deception: The Power of Nazi Propaganda* (Washtington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2009).

(2) The depiction of 'Nazisploitation'-themes and a desire to ridicule and subvert Nazism through excessive virtual violence. More generally, two overall binary dichotomies could be identified in the studied paratexts: a first one between Allied 'heroes' and Axis 'villains', and a second one between unidimensionally 'evil' Nazis and apolitical, 'clean', Wehrmacht-soldiers.

(3) The use of aesthetics that draw heavily from the formal properties of other war-related audio-visual representations produced both during the war itself and in later decennia, and the propagandistic iconography used by the Nazi-regime, to play into a sense of recognition and perceived authenticity among potential players.

This transnational consistency presents both challenges and opportunities to history educators, in that these themes, narratives and aesthetics need to be actively questioned and deconstructed, while they can also be actively addressed to play into the prior knowledge of school-aged young adults who play these games, as a starting point to both expand on the aspects of the Second World War that are currently discussed in history school curricula, and to advance the development of historical thinking skills.

To explain the prevalence of the aforementioned themes and developer narratives, several factors can be mentioned. On the one hand, the creation of digital entertainment games about the Second World War is structurally embedded in a strongly militarized mnemonic infrastructure. This is illustrated by the observation that a significant number of the studied digital games were at least partly made in cooperation with military advisors and national militaries, in what is often identified as a 'military entertainment complex.[76] This is for example clearly illustrated by the game *Call of Duty*, which is created with the active support of (former) military advisors and used by the US armed forces for military recruitment efforts. What's more, the game is also marketed in collaboration with foreign military institutions. For example, in the Netherlands, the game *Call of Duty: WWII* was revealed during a live event on November 2, 2017, hosted by the Dutch National Military Museum in Soest (**Figure 2.9**).[77] However, it applies to many other games as well.[78] On the

76 This 'military entertainment complex' has been identified and analyzed by a significant number of scholars. See for example: Ed Halter, *From Sun Tzu to Xbox: War and Video Games* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2006); Roger Stahl, *Militainment, Inc. War, Media, and Popular Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 2010); Nina B. Huntemann and Matthew T. Payne, *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Tim Lenoir and Luke Caldwell, *The Military-Entertainment Complex* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

77 The video recording of the *Call of Duty: WWII* launch event in the Dutch National Military Museum can be watched here: https://www.facebook.com/NationaalMilitairMuseum/posts/1438513322935320, accessed September 26, 2020. For a discussion of how *Call of Duty* is made in collaboration with military advisors and adopted by the US military, see for example: Simon Parkin, "Call of Duty: Gaming's Role in the Military-Entertainment Complex," *The Guardian*, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/oct/22/call-of-duty-gaming-role-military-entertainment-complex, accessed September 26, 2020; Joshua Goodpastor, "How the Military Uses Call of Duty As A Recruitment Tool," *Gamerant*, https://gamerant.com/call-duty-modern-warfare-recruitment-tool/, accessed September 26, 2020.

78 For the creation of its games World of Tanks, World of Warships and World of Warplanes, game

Figure 2.9: Photograph taken at the launch event of the game *Call of Duty: WWII* in the Dutch National Military Museum in Soest, on November 2, 2017. (Copyright: Female-Gamers)

Source: https://www.female-gamers.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/20171102_203417-768x432.jpg, accessed October 18, 2020.

other hand, several game design and marketing considerations play an important role. Not only does the perceived clarity of the Second World War in both moral and military terms (i.e. Nazi Germany as a Manichaeistically evil enemy and an emphasis on combat between clearly distinguishable state armies) lend itself well for game design. At the same time, what I have identified elsewhere as a 'presumed burden of interactivity' can be observed in transnational game creation circles, that is, the assumption that game design centred on armed combat and existing genre-conventions in particular is usually seen as commercially 'safe', which causes game companies to not explore other design principles,

company Wargaming Group actively works together with military museums across the world. In addition, it has been present during public military events such as the NATO days in the Czech Republic. See: Wargaming Europe, "World of Tanks, World of Warships - Nato Days, Czech Republic - 2015," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8NtgXpFp3-s, accessed September 26, 2020. Also the games/game series War Thunder, Company of Heroes, Sniper Elite and Hearts of Iron are made in active collaboration with military advisors. For the game War Thunder, see for example: War Thunder, "[Development] "To Minnesota for the 'Abrams,'" https://warthunder.com/en/news/5782-development-to-minnesota-for-the-abrams-en, accessed September 26, 2020. For the game Company of Heroes, see earlier. For the game Sniper Elite, see for example: Lisa Traynor and Jonathan Ferguson, "Shooting for Accuracy: Historicity and Video Gaming," in Alexander von Lünen et al., Historia Ludens: The Playing Historian (New York and London: Routledge, 2020), 243-254. For the game Hearts of Iron, see for example: GameSpot Trailers, "The Tanks of Hearts of Iron IV - Tanks for the Inspiration," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FekhysdFw2Y, accessed September 26, 2020.

and therefore ignore non-combat oriented narratives.[79] Finally, most game creators also focus on what is the least contentious and most recognizable for players globally to be commercially successful, which leads them to avoid sensitive and lesser known topics. What are the implications of these previous findings for formal history education? The current analysis has shown how digital entertainment games and their paratexts, as shared through the online community platforms of these games, offer, primarily male, players a wide range of historical and memory-related representations and narratives about the Second World War, which can serve as a significant basis of prior understanding of the war before these players enter a formal instruction setting. By engaging with the historical knowledge and memory discourses that circulate on the community platforms of these games, players will encounter historical representations that are overtly technocentric and sidestep the violent consequences and broader societal impact of the Second World War, while also consistently adopting distinct aesthetic strategies that need to be actively deconstructed. At the same time, these paratextual representations offer players the opportunity to gain knowledge about the military course of the war, and in the case of more complex strategy games, some of the political decision-making and the role played by factors such as a country's industrial capacity in determining the outcome of the war. These are forms of historical knowledge that are more commonly discussed in military historiography. In doing so, the marketing paratexts of digital entertainment games about the Second World War highlight aspects of the conflict that are often not extensively discussed in history classrooms and other formal learning environments.

Furthermore, as a platform for informal learning, the studied marketing paratextuality can, under the right circumstances, certainly be used as a source for formal history education. Throughout my analysis, I have especially tried to show how the marketing materials, and the historical and memory-related themes and narratives that are expressed therein, can be used to advance historical thinking. Here, several opportunities present themselves: the elaborate depictions of military equipment and battle narratives in the paratexts offer history educators the possibility to reflect on the nature of historical significance, whereas the emphasis put on player agency and empowerment in the paratexts and the games themselves can be used as a starting point to further discuss the nature of historical causality. In relation to the two central dichotomies that could be identified in the paratexts, between Allied 'heroes' and Axis 'villains' and 'evil Nazis' and honourable, 'clean' Wehrmacht-soldiers, I argued that these static and mythic binaries should be actively deconstructed by history educators, which offers a good opportunity to reflect on both historical perspective-taking and the ability to engage in historically meaningful ethical reflection. These are but a number

79 For the notion 'perceived burden of interactivity', see: Pieter Van den Heede, Kees Ribbens, and Jeroen Jansz, "Replaying Today's Wars? A Study of the Conceptualization of Post-1989 Conflict in Digital 'War' Games," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 31, no. 3 (2018): 238.

of meaningful ways in which the discussed paratextual content can be used to advance historical thinking skills.

In chapter three, I continue my effort to study how digital entertainment games represent the Second World War. I do so by studying digital games themselves as a form of representational and performative historical configuration.

In hindsight, defiance is always self-evident.

Chapter 3: Replaying Wartime Résistance? Studying Ludic Memory-Making in the Open World Game *The Saboteur*[1]

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I addressed the first main question of this dissertation, i.e. how the Second World War is represented through digital entertainment gaming. I did so by studying the marketing paratexts that accompany the digital entertainment games about the Second World War that are distributed commercially in the Netherlands. In this and the following chapter, I expand on this effort, by studying how the Second World is ludically represented through digital games themselves. I do so because, as highlighted in the introductory chapter, digital games can be identified as a distinct form of historical expression that is both representational and performative in nature. Digital games do not only invite players to engage in a "reflexive process of producing a meaning" through the consumption of a representation. They also require players to physically and cognitively 'produce' the game through an act of configuration that actively influences the in-game events.[2] As such, it becomes meaningful to analyse how digital games reconfigure historical and memory discourses through specific formal properties.

In this chapter, I study how digital entertainment games that depict the Second World War ludically represent the (Western) European territories occupied by Nazi Germany between 1939 and 1945. I do so because, as shown in the previous chapter, digital entertainment games about the war tend to prioritize depictions of military frontline combat, in particular in Europe during the later stages of the war. As such, they mostly ignore the previous period of occupation, also in particular in Nazi-occupied Europe. This happens despite the fact that, as for example stated by Polish historian Czesław Madajczyk, a majority of the people who lost their lives during the Second World War, did

1 This chapter is under review in modified form as: Pieter J.B.J. Van den Heede, "Replaying Wartime Résistance? Studying Ludic Memory-Making in the Open World Game *The Saboteur*".

2 Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History* (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 30-37. For the quote, see: Tom Apperley, *Gaming Rhythms: Play and Counterplay from the Situated to the Global* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2020), 11. See also: William Uricchio, "Simulation, History, and Computer Games," in Jeffrey H. Goldstein and Joost Raessens, eds., *Handbook of Computer Game Studies* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2005), 327-338; Andrew B.R. Elliott and Matthew Kapell, eds., *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), in particular 1-29; Holger Pötzsch and Vit Šisler, "Playing Cultural Memory: Framing History in Call of Duty: Black Ops and Czechoslovakia 38-89: Assassination," *Games and Culture* 14, no. 1 (2019): 3-25.

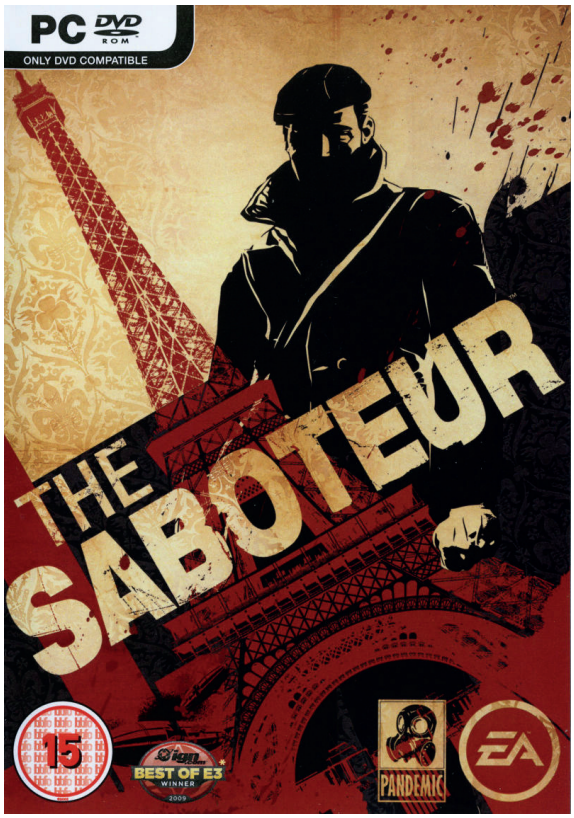

Figure 3.1: Cover art for the game *The Saboteur*

Source: https://www.mobygames.com/game/saboteur_____/cover-art/gameCoverId,171945/, accessed October 18, 2020.

so "not at […] or even near the front, but as a result of the terror and of the conditions created in the occupied territories […]."[3] I analyse how digital entertainment games reimagine the phenomenon of wartime occupation, by providing an analysis of the historical meaning-making potential of one of the few digital entertainment games on the market that does offer a ludic representation of a freely explorable occupied territory during the Second World War. This is the open world third-person shooter (TPS) game *The Saboteur*, set in Nazi-occupied France (and the city of Paris in particular). The game was made by the now defunct US-based game developer Pandemic Studios, and published by Electronic Arts in 2009 (**Figure 3.1**).

To carry out this analysis, I do not solely discuss the specific historical and memory discourses that are embedded in the game *The Saboteur* itself. I also formulate an

3 Czesław Madajczyk, "Die Besatzungssysteme Der Achsenmächte. Versuch Einer Komparatistischen Analyse," *Studia Historiae Oeconomicae* 14, no. 1 (1980): 105.

innovative analytical framework, by expanding on the one put forward by media scholars Holger Pötzsch and Vit Šisler for the study of digital games as mediated mnemonic expressions.[4] I do so by emphasizing three interrelated elements. Firstly, I focus on the perspective of the creators of a game, by carrying out a thematic analysis, as defined by psychologists Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, of the promotional interviews given by the latter to various press outlets, as marketing paratexts.[5] I do this to assess what I identify as the 'paratextual positioning' of a digital game from a historical and memory perspective, i.e. the extent to which game creators actively claim to want to depict the past or contribute to the remembrance of past events. Secondly, based on this assessment, I carry out a systematic analysis of a game's ludic design, through an adaptation of the model formulated by Spanish game scholar Óliver Pérez Latorre.[6] I do so to study the social discourse that a game expresses through its ludic design. Thirdly, I highlight my own perspective as a researcher, by discussing how digital entertainment games such as *The Saboteur*, by adhering to an intertextually established central premise of an exciting action game, confronts me with a sense of perceived ludonarrative dissonance from a historical perspective. This concept serves as a modification to the theory on ludonarrative dissonance as first formulated by American game developer Clint Hocking.[7]

In what follows, I first provide an overview of how digital entertainment games have been studied as historical and mnemonic cultural expressions until now. Next, I discuss how a focus on marketing paratexts, the social discourse embedded in a game's ludic design and a sense of perceived ludonarrative dissonance can enrich these analyses. Finally, I apply these conceptual tools to *The Saboteur* and investigate how this game, as a popular historical representation, offers a ludic representation of France and Paris as occupied territories during the Second World War.

3.2 Digital Games as a Format for History and Memory

As discussed in the introductory chapter, historians are increasingly studying how the past is represented through various popular historical expressions as well as how people engage with them. To do so, they often draw inspiration from the interdisciplinary field of memory studies, which investigates how socio-cultural, political, economic, technological and cognitive factors shape how individuals, groups and societies

4 Holger Pötzsch and Vit Šisler, *Playing Cultural Memory*.

5 For a discussion of thematic analysis as a method for qualitative content analysis, see: Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77-101.

6 Óliver Pérez Latorre, "The Social Discourse of Video Games Analysis Model and Case Study: GTA IV," *Games and Culture* 10, no. 5 (2015): 415-437.

7 For the original discussion of the notion 'ludonarrative dissonance,' see: Clint Hocking, "Ludonarrative Dissonance in Bioshock," *Click Nothing: Design From a Long Time Ago*, http://clicknothing.typepad.com/click_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html, accessed September 27, 2020.

remember the past. A significant tradition in the field of memory studies focuses on the study of 'cultural memory,' which departs from the centrality of material and medial representation in the construction of memory: collective memories are not accidentally brought about by social entities, but rather the result of active attempts at cultural mediation through diverse material, textual, audio-visual and performative means.[8] Especially here, several scholars have started to analyse how cultural memory intersects with digital gaming. Holger Pötzsch and Vit Šisler in particular have formulated a game-specific version of the analytical framework for the study of mediated mnemonic expressions presented by German memory scholar Astrid Erll, which consists of three levels of analysis: (1) an intramedial level, which is centred on the distinct formal properties through which a media format represents and allows for engagements with the past; (2) an intermedial level, which is centred on the intertextual influences of a representation and how it "refers to, comments upon, or recontextualizes preceding representations dealing with the same historical period or even;" and (3) a plurimedial level, where potential meanings of a representation are either embraced, negotiated and/ or subverted by diverse audiences in varying contexts.[9] In relation to this model, Pötzsch and Šisler emphasize that the intramedial level of analysis of the memory-potential of digital games has to equally consider the simulational/ procedural and performative nature of the medium, since this is what distinguishes games from other cultural forms.[10]

This model presented by Pötzsch and Šisler has been adopted by several other scholars to analyse various historical digital entertainment games, including games that are set during the Second World War. Piotr Sterczewski incorporates the framework in his discussion of Polish games about the war, illustrating how they present a layered negotiation between dominant conventions of war-themed digital entertainment games on the one hand and the national commemorative discourse about the war in Poland on the other.[11] And Danish game scholar Emil Hammar adopts the framework as a starting

8 Jan Assmann, "Communicative and Cultural Memory," in Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, eds., *Cultural Memory Studies: An Interdisciplinary Handbook* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2008; Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011; Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). For a brief general overview, see: Marek Tamm, "Beyond History and Memory: New Perspectives in Memory Studies," *History Compass* 11, no. 6 (2013): 458-463.

9 For the entire paragraph, see: Holger Pötzsch and Vit Šisler, art. cit., 5-7. The discussion presented by Pötzsch and Šisler is based on: Astrid Erll, "Literature, Film, and the Mediality of Cultural Memory," in Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, eds., op. cit., 389-398.

10 Holger Pötzsch and Vit Šisler, art. cit., 4-5. The argument presented by Pötzsch and Šisler builds on characterizations provided by historians such as Adam Chapman, Andrew B.R. Elliott and Matthew Kapell, and media scholars such as William Uricchio (see footnote 2 in this chapter).

11 Piotr Sterczewski, "This Uprising of Mine: Game Conventions, Cultural Memory and Civilian Experience of War in Polish Games," *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 16, no. 2 (2016), http://gamestudies.org/1602/articles/sterczewski, accessed September 29,

point to discuss how the game *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry* (Ubisoft, 2013), centred on the experiences of a black protagonist living in the Caribbean region during the period of the Transatlantic slave trade, can subvert existing hegemonic historical narratives through the possibility for counter-hegemonic ludic memory-making.[12]

These studies shed significant light on how digital entertainment games have the potential to co-configure how we understand and remember the past. At the same time, they adopt a rather open-ended approach in assessing the meaning-making potentials of the intra-, inter- and plurimedial dimension of digital games as historical and mnemonic expressions. Therefore, to allow for a more systematic analysis of these layers, I next discuss how an analysis of interviews given by game creators to various press outlets as marketing paratexts, an analysis of the social discourse of a game and a discussion of what I as a researcher identify as aspects of perceived ludonarrative dissonance, can complement these previous analyses.

3.3 Extending the Study of Ludic Memory Making

3.3.1 Paratexts and the 'double-faced nature' of (ludic) popular historical representation

As discussed in the previous chapter, both media and game scholars have increasingly studied the many paratextual 'thresholds of interpretation' that accompany cultural texts.[13] They have demonstrated how game marketing paratexts, as an expression of an increasingly digitized and interconnected culture, should be seen as fundamentally bidirectional sites of negotiation, where game creators continuously interact with players to gather feedback and address various player concerns throughout the entire life-cycle of a game. At the same time, these scholars have emphasized that 'publisher-driven' marketing paratexts such as promotional trailers and interviews with game developers, as for example presented during dedicated press events, remain important as a source of meaning-making, as these provide the initial frames through which players can think about a game prior to its release.[14] This is certainly the case for games that were made in the first decade of the 21st century, when digital game distribution and social media engagement were not as prevalent as they are today.

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12 Emil L. 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.

13 Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), xi-xxii.

14 For the entire paragraph, see: Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter, *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), 30-59; Matthew T. Payne, *Playing War: Military Video Games After 9/11* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2016), 145-156.

In light of these observations, I argue that a thematic analysis of online available promotional interviews with the creators of a game,[15] as an example of a traditional publisher-driven paratext, can significantly complement the intermedial analysis of the memory-making potential of historically-themed digital entertainment games. I formulate this argument for two closely interconnected reasons. On the one hand, these interviews have traditionally been, and remain, a primary site for game creators to render explicit the intertextual influences that have inspired the development process, or at least the ones that the publishers deem relevant from a marketing perspective. When releasing a game, creators try to position it in a broader network of meaning to convey to players what they can expect from the game. As such, creators actively seize the opportunities provided by (gaming-centred) press outlets to establish these connections. On the other hand, online available interviews are a relevant source to study what I identify as a game's paratextual positioning from a historical and cultural memory perspective. This concept refers to the efforts of creators of historically-themed games to position their product on a multivariate spectrum of what one can call the 'double-faced nature' of popular historical representation. As discussed by Emil Hammar in relation to the games from the *Assassin's Creed*-series, creators of historically-themed digital entertainment games aim to establish a degree of referentiality to the past, while also emphasizing that various aspects of the game, such as its central narrative, are fictional. This allows game creators to achieve a double goal: "[it] leaves the game to conveniently both be marketed as alluring for its so-called historical authenticity and simultaneously not bound to criticisms of its depictions."[16] Here, I argue that a variation of this tension between fact and fiction manifests itself in every popular historical representation that was produced as an entertainment-oriented, often profit-seeking cultural commodity. As such, interviews with game creators function as an interesting site to assess where on the spectrum creators try to position their game product. More precisely, identifying which aspects of the past game creators wish to represent and how they wish to do so, allows researchers to carry out a more targeted analysis of the game from the perspective of historical culture and cultural memory.

In my analysis, I study the paratextual positioning of *The Saboteur* as follows: I conduct a thematic analysis on a corpus of promotional interviews with the creators of the game as identified on gaming websites such as *IGN* and in press outlets aimed at wider audiences such as *Time Magazine* (for a full overview of the studied corpus of interviews, see: **Appendix 2**).[17] Throughout my analysis, I identify: (1) which fictional and historical sources of inspiration the creators of *The Saboteur* highlight when they talk about the game; and (2) whether or not the creators of the game formulate explicit

15 Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, art. cit., 77-101.
16 Emil L. Hammar, "Counter-Hegemonic Commemorative Play," 375-376. For the quote, see: Ibidem, 376.
17 Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, art. cit., 77-101.

arguments about the past or aim to contribute to the remembrance of past events while talking about these sources of inspiration.

3.3.2 The social discourse of historically-themed digital entertainment games

Following the study of the 'procedural rhetoric' of digital games, which emphasizes that games make ideological claims about the world through their algorithmic rules,[18] Óliver Pérez Latorre has developed a multi-level framework for the analysis of a game's ludic design (i.e. a game's interactive dynamics) and how it can express various ideological and social realities. Latorre makes a distinction between three discursive components that can be identified in a game's ludic design. Firstly, he refers to the design of the character/player: the scope of the action potential of the playable character of a game and the player, as defined by the game rules. Secondly, he highlights the design of the game world: the virtual environment in which the game is set, including the social environment created by playable characters of other players and virtual non-player characters (NPC's). Thirdly, he refers to the design of the overall gameplay activities: the broader units of play that can be identified in a game, such as the different types of quests players can undertake. For each of these layers, he makes a further classification of rules and properties, each of which can add meaning to the social realities potentially expressed by the game.[19] In this chapter, I present an analytical framework based on the model formulated by Latorre that emphasizes the following aspects of the ludic design of the character/player, the game world and the overall gameplay activities:

(1) In relation to the character/player, I focus on what Latorre identifies as the game mechanics, as determined by performance and operation rules. Performance rules determine the possible actions of a playable character. Operation rules establish a link between these actions and how players perform them through physical input devices such as a mouse and keyboard or a gamepad. In addition, I analyse what Latorre identifies as state rules, which establish the varying states a playable character can find itself in, as for example expressed through the amount of in-game 'health' the character has.

(2) In relation to the game world, I emphasize what Latorre identifies as the world's spatiotemporal design, as a broader category. This encompasses the analysis of the

18 The concept 'procedural rhetoric' was first introduced by American game scholar Ian Bogost. See: Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2007). For a more explicitly design-centred discussion of procedural rhetoric, see: Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2009). For a critical discussion of the proceduralist tradition, see: Miguel Sicart, "Against Procedurality," *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 11, no. 3 (201), http://gamestudies.org/1103/articles/sicart_ap, accessed September 29, 2020; Miguel Sicart, *Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2013).

19 For the entire paragraph, see: Óliver Pérez Latorre, "The Social Discourse of Video Games Analysis Model and Case Study: GTA IV," *Games and Culture* 10, no. 5 (2015): 415-437, in particular 420-427.

aesthetic and scenic design of the game world, the virtual objects in it and the rules that apply to them, and the patterns of behaviour of the NPC's that populate the game world. In relation to open-world games, this analysis of NPC-behaviour is especially significant, in that creators of open world-games develop AI-systems and animations that regulate how NPC's behave in order to uphold the illusion of a 'living' virtual environment for the player. In doing so, the analysis of NPC-behaviour can shed further light into the historical and memory discourses that game creators want to express about the past through their game. A good example thereof are the games from the *Assassin's Creed*-series, where NPC-crowds are designed to express past mentalities. In the game *Assassin's Creed: Unity* (Ubisoft, 2015) for example, set during the French Revolution, an atmosphere of 'revolutionary fervour' is simulated by letting different factions of NPC's, such as extremist revolutionaries and royalist guards, clash violently with one another, without active involvement of the player.[20]

(3) In relation to the gameplay activities, I focus on the chains of actions that constitute gameplay units, the winning and losing conditions that characterize them and the extent to which players can adopt varying ludic strategies to achieve the central goals of the units and the game *The Saboteur* in its entirety.[21]

I apply this framework in order to provide a systematic analysis of the intramedial dimension of *The Saboteur* as a popular representation of the Second World War.

3.3.3 Perceived ludonarrative dissonance and history/memory

As first introduced by game developer Clint Hocking in relation to the FPS-game *Bioshock* (Irrational Games, 2007), the notion of 'ludonarrative dissonance' refers to a central meaning-making conflict that can manifest itself when the narrative and procedural layers of a game express divergent, or even fundamentally contradictory, values and ideologies. In the case of *Bioshock*, a game that tries to critique the objectivist philosophy of Ayn Rand, this is shown in the contradiction that can be observed between the game's ludic design, which allows players to aggressively pursue their self-interest by for example killing every opponent they encounter, and its overall narrative, which forces players to altruistically help other characters. The game's central narrative premise subverts its central ludic premise.[22]

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20 This principle is for example discussed by Christine Blondeau, senior game designer on the game *Assassin's Creed: Unity*, in the following presentation given at the 2015 International Game Developers Conference in San Francisco: Christine Blondeau, "Developing Systemic Crowd Events in Assassin's Creed Unity," Game Developers Conference (GDC) 2015, San Francisco, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FaV88JAWnbQ, accessed September 29, 2020.

21 For the previous three paragraphs, see: Óliver Pérez Latorre, "The Social Discourse of Video Games Analysis Model," 420-427.

22 For the entire paragraph, see: Clint Hocking, "Ludonarrative Dissonance in Bioshock."

In this chapter, I expand on the notion ludonarrative dissonance and how it manifests itself in relation to ludic meaning-making from a historical and memory perspective, especially in light of the 'double-faced nature' of popular historical representation identified above. I argue that ludonarrative dissonance should not primarily be seen as a property of a game, but as a perception of the player. This can be illustrated by my personal experience while playing *Bioshock*, as I was not aware of the philosophical inspirations of the game when I first played it, and did not experience any of the contradictions identified by Hocking. More precisely, as highlighted in the introductory chapter of this dissertation, I argue that the level of ludonarrative dissonance perceived by players as active cultural agents is determined by their personal biographies, in two ways: on the one hand, by their personal lived experience, in line with Alexander Galloway's observation that games are only perceived as 'realistic' if a degree of congruence exists between the realities expressed by a game and the social realities as lived by the player;[23] and on the other hand by what I identify as a person's 'inter- and paratextual biography', or the ever-evolving repository of appropriated textual expressions that a player consciously as well as unconsciously draws upon when reflecting on their engagements with a game, as a form of cultural capital.[24] This observation presents an important addition to the plurimedial level of analysis identified by both Erll and Pötzsch and Šisler as discussed above, in that meaning-making potentials of mediated historical and mnemonic expressions are not only embraced, negotiated and/or subverted. They can equally be ignored or left unnoticed due to a variety of reasons.

Concerning historically-themed digital games such as *The Saboteur*, then, the observation that ludonarrative dissonance is primarily perceptive means that a player's sense of ludonarrative dissonance is dependent on their historical awareness, as shaped by the cultural imaginations they have engaged with and the broader historical culture(s) of which they are a part. This places a direct emphasis on my role as interpreter of the game: As creators of historically-themed digital entertainment games claim to want to represent the past through paratextual positioning, as discussed above, players can experience ludonarrative dissonance in relation to how a game does so based on their historical and memory-related frames of reference. I illustrate this in my analysis of *The Saboteur*, by highlighting instances of ludonarrative dissonance that I identified when studying the game's narrative and ludic design from a historical and cultural memory perspective.

23 Alexander R. Galloway, "Social Realism in Gaming," *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 4, no. 1 (2004), http://www.gamestudies.org/0401/galloway/, accessed September 29, 2020.

24 Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in John G. Richardson, eds., *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), 241-258.

3.4 Ludic Historical and Memory Discourses in *The Saboteur*

3.4.1 Paratextual positioning of *The Saboteur* as a ludic historical representation

Based on my thematic analysis of the promotional interviews given by the creators of *The Saboteur* to various press outlets, I identified several thematic clusters of (intertextual) references to both fictional and historical sources of inspiration that are relevant for the analysis of the game from a historical and cultural memory perspective.

A first thematic cluster of sources of inspiration highlighted by the creators of *The Saboteur* concerns the protagonist and central narrative of the game. In *The Saboteur*, players take on the role of Sean Devlin, a fictional Irish race driver who, following the death of a close friend during a race in Germany at the hands of a Nazi officer, becomes actively involved in the French resistance in the aftermath of the German invasion of France in 1940. Following this central premise, the creators of *The Saboteur* highlight that the protagonist of the game was inspired by a historical British race car driver named William Grover-Williams, who helped the French resistance and the British secret service during the war.[25] However, the creators subsequently emphasize that they actively changed the character, in two major ways. On the one hand, they gave the protagonist an Irish background. This was done to strip the character of a direct political allegiance during the war, to tell a story of an 'ordinary' person, in contrast to the narratives centred on soldiers in military shooter-games such as *Call of Duty*. On the other hand, the creators transformed the character into a cinematic action hero with distinct character traits. This is shown in the quotes below, taken from interviews with Tom French and Phil Hong, respectively the lead designer and lead producer of *The Saboteur*:

> *"We went with the Irish character just to separate ourselves from the typical World War II game. […] If we made [Sean Devlin] English […], he would […] be distracted with […] the political motivation of the war that's going on. So by making him Irish, it really makes him a man without a home inside this occupied country."*[26]

25 This is mentioned in most of the studied promotional interviews. See: Dan Cheer, "The Saboteur: We Speak with Pandemic's Tom French," *Gameplanet New Zealand*, https://www.gameplanet.co.nz/xbox-360/features/i134264/The-Saboteur-We-speak-with-Pandemics-Tom-French/, accessed September 29, 2020, Tracey John, "Sex and 'The Saboteur': Dev Talks Nudity in New Game," *Time Magazine*, http://techland.time.com/2009/12/08/sex-and-the-saboteur-dev-talks-nudity-in-new-game/, accessed September 29, 2020; IGN, "IGN Interviews Pandemic About Saboteur," https://www.psu.com/forums/threads/ign-intreviews-pandemic-about-saboteur.63786/, accessed September 29, 2020; Gamervision, "Tom French The Saboteur Interview," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dMpZS4g9dAQ, accessed September 29, 2020; Tyler Winegarner, "The Saboteur Interview," https://www.gamespot.com/videos/the-saboteur-interview/2300-6209426/, accessed September 29, 2020; UFragTV, "Thomas French Lead Designer - Pandemic Games PAX09," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vEG-kcEeYlo, accessed September 29, 2020.

26 Tracey John, "Sex and 'The Saboteur': Dev Talks Nudity in New Game."

> *"The Saboteur is not your typical soldier story […]. It's an intense personal revenge story [that] will take you […] right into the heart of the French Resistance and its "ordinary" people who become heroes eventually."*[27]

> *"When we started working on Sean, we wanted to make him [a] cool action hero that we all wished could be […]. So […] we […] referenced a lot of like what we felt were some of the greatest action heroes of all time — Indiana Jones, John McClane from Die Hard. And we [...] wanted to imbue him with that classic cool […], like Steve McQueen. He's good with women, he smokes, he drinks and so we really wanted him to have all those character traits."*[28]

Here, it first becomes clear that the creators of *The Saboteur* wanted to make an exciting game centred on a cinematic action hero more than recreate history. This is also reflected in the choice to give the protagonist an Irish background, as this allows for a game narrative that is, at least at a first glance, centred on a more personal (but also more universal) desire for revenge, freedom and righteousness rather than sentiments of patriotic allegiance towards specific countries. At the same time, the quotes show how the game serves as a homage to William Grover-Williams as a remarkable historical figure and the 'ordinary people', active in the French resistance and beyond, who took up arms against Nazi oppression during the Second World War. As a result, *The Saboteur* also contributes to a memorialization of these 'everyday heroes' as historical actors, which partly places the game on the referential side of the representational spectrum. Secondly, it becomes clear that Sean Devlin as a fictional character closely adheres to heteronormative conceptions of masculinity, whereby a predisposition towards physical violence, sexual conquest and substance (ab)use are identified as admirable inclinations. This points to a distinctly gendered representation of wartime resistance.

A second cluster of sources of inspiration highlighted by the creators of *The Saboteur* concerns France and Paris as the setting of the game. Here, the developers highlight that they wanted to capture 'the spirit of Paris', in several ways. Firstly, Chris Hunt, the game's art director, describes how the developers made a research trip to Paris to properly recreate the city's outline, landmarks and visual style.[29] Secondly, the developers discuss how they adopted an explicit black-and-white aesthetic for the game, for a double reason. On the one hand, they did so to render visible what they identified as the 'sexuality' of Paris, with its burlesque nightclubs. To recreate this atmosphere, they adopted the aesthetic tropes of 'film noirs' such as *Sin City* (Robert Rodriguez, 2005), which to varying degrees also play into sexual themes. On the other hand, they adopted

27 Dan Cheer, "The Saboteur: We Speak with Pandemic's Tom French."
28 Tracy John, Ibidem.
29 CoinOp TV, "The Saboteur Interview with Tom French," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=an9xIKnjpxA (starting point: 01.00), accessed on September 29, 2020.

the aesthetic to reference the obscure atmosphere in which the resistance operated, and to refer to a sense of despair that the population of Paris assumedly felt due to the presence of the Nazi occupier. This is shown in the quotes below:

> *"Paris has this inherent sexuality about it. I mean, Paris is really famous for its red-light district, and the Moulin Rouge… […] So having that in the game really puts Sean in kind of the seedy underbelly of the world […]. That's the mood and the picture that we wanted to paint that the resistance lived in, hiding from the Nazis in these strange little places. […] On top of that, there's a lot of film noir influence in our game […], and those movies have a kind of inherent sexual undertone to them as well."*[30]

> *"The art design […] arose from a simple necessity. We wanted to let the player feel the occupation, the oppression, and you can't really achieve that by just putting down a bunch of Nazis into a vibrant and colourful city like Paris. We literally wanted to let the player feel like the life had been sucked out of the city […], which is how the stylized b&w look came into existence."*[31]

These quotes show a rather ambiguous approach to historical representation in relation to the game's setting. On the one hand, the creators of *The Saboteur* adopted a black-and-white aesthetic to explicitly embed the game's representation into a broader post-war intertextual (cinematic) framework and activate a degree of sexual titillation to appeal to heterosexual male players as a core target audience for the game. On the other hand however, they also adopted the aesthetic as an expression of various assumptions about the experience of living in France/Paris, and territories occupied by the Nazi regime more generally, during the war. This is also meant to convey a degree of historical authenticity and verisimilitude, which makes it meaningful for me to carry out an in-depth analysis of how the ludic design of the game aims to express this authenticity.[32]

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30 Tracey John, Ibidem.

31 Dan Cheer, Ibidem.

32 An interesting perspective on how digital entertainment games attempt to establish a sense of verisimilitude, also in particular from a historical perspective, is formulated by Takuhiro Dohta, the technical director of the game *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo, 2017). In a presentation given at the Game Developers Conference (GDC) in San Francisco in 2017, Dohta talks about how, game developers tell 'clever lies' about real-world phenomena. For example, when the developers of *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* wanted to implement laws of physics in their game, they did so in such a manner that these 'game physics' first and foremost served the ludic design of the game. However, they also actively tried to establish connections with how players intuitively understand physics in the real world, to make the gameplay more inviting - even when these intuitive understanding are false in reality. This observation can be extended to the game *The Saboteur*. In this game, 'clever lies' are told about the wartime occupation, through game systems that primarily serve the overall ludic design of the game, but also connect to various preconceptions players have about the depicted historical events. These preconceptions are often drawn from for example film and other cultural expressions as key reference points. For Dohta's presentation, see:

A final observation about the sources of inspiration of *The Saboteur* relate to the overall historical accuracy of the game's core ludic design. About these, Tom French, the game's lead designer, states the following:

> *"I always like to say The Saboteur is 'historically inspired' rather than historically accurate. [...] While we did our research in learning every bit we could about actual events, those were just starting points for our designs […]. Our goal was to capture that almost pulpy high-spirited adventure fantasy of the war."*[33]

Here, it becomes clear that the historical events of the Second World War, in particular in occupied France, primarily serve as a grab bag for a fictional action game that is centred on excessive violent action, adventurous exploration and sexuality as male-dominated endeavours. However, the creators of the game also actively identify various assumptions about the events of the war as a source of inspiration, in particular concerning the game's protagonist, its spatial setting and how the latter is 'coloured'. As such, it becomes meaningful to further interrogate *The Saboteur* as a historical representation. Based on this assessment, I follow Latorre in analysing the social discourse of the game's ludic design.

3.4.2 Ludic social discourse and perceived ludonarrative dissonance in *The Saboteur*

To carry out an analysis of *The Saboteur*'s social discourse in light of the games paratextual positioning, I first discuss the ludic design of the character/player. Here, an overview of the game mechanics already sheds significant light on how *The Saboteur* represents the phenomenon of resistance during the Second World War in German-occupied France. As defined by the performance rules, the possible actions of Sean Devlin can be summarized as follows: walking and running on foot, involvement in fist fights, use of firearms and explosives, stealing and driving cars and other motorized vehicles, the ability to secretly infiltrate and escape forbidden areas by climbing on buildings, putting on disguises and hiding in places, and finally, the ability to call in support from other resistance fighters. Combined with the operation rules, which revolve around a rather standard input-pattern for TPS-games through a game controller or a keyboard-and-mouse, this results in the need for players to apply visual and motoric skills when engaging in fighting and racing, strategic planning when carrying out infiltrations and spatial orientation while navigating the game world. Apart from this, especially the state rules that apply to Sean Devlin, which describe the moment-to-

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Fujibayashi, Dohta, and Takizawa, "Breaking Conventions with The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild," *Game Developers Conference (GDC) 2017*, San Francisco, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QyMsF31NdNc (start: 23:00), accessed September 29, 2020.

33 Dan Cheer, Ibidem.

Figure 3.2: Screenshots of the tutorial for the 'suspicion meter' in the game *The Saboteur*

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wQ9FfB5CLWw&t=3491s&ab_channel=MKIceAndFire (Screenshots taken from 57:37 onwards), accessed December 18, 2021.

moment conditions of Sean's playable character, add a significant discursive dimension to the character's ludic design. The interface of the game doesn't only show a map, the selected weapon and an increasing number of bloodstains on-screen when Sean is increasingly hit by gunfire. The interface also includes a 'suspicion meter' (**Figure 3.2**) that shows to what extent Sean's actions are attracting the attention of the Nazi guards in Sean's immediate vicinity. This can significantly impact how players behave in the game, as certain actions, such as openly carrying firearms, can quickly result in enemies sounding the alarm. This is not necessarily meant to urge players to avoid these actions, as they have to perform them to complete the objectives of the game. Rather, it stimulates players to plan their actions in advance and otherwise test their evasion skills. Once an alarm has been raised, players cannot escape the situation by killing the soldiers and guards in the area, as this will increase the alarm level and therefore the difficulty and intensity of the pursuit, in a dynamic similar to the one found in the games from the *Grand Theft Auto*-series (Rockstar Games, 1997-present). Players are therefore strongly induced to plan their missions, carry them out and experience the tension and excitement of fleeing the scene.

Taken together, the ludic design of the character/player can be characterized as follows: it primarily references a romanticized notion of empowered male violent resistance against the Nazi menace, and the feelings of danger, adventure and excitement that assumedly accompanied it. As such, the ludic design not only aims to capture the cinematic action fantasy that was mentioned in the interviews. It also paints a very specific and narrow image of what constitutes 'resistance' that is not only found in many other North American and European 'popular' representations of resistance during the Second World War in occupied France and Europe more broadly.[34] It is equally reminiscent of the heroic and self-congratulatory cultural narratives that many (Western) European countries adopted in the immediate afterwar period.[35] Finally, by adopting a focus on exciting and adventurous action, the design ignores the many non-violent manifestations of resistance in the territories occupied by Nazi Germany and its allies, such as providing support to people in hiding, the disruption of industrial production by factory workers through 'go slow'-actions and the distribution of clandestine press, also in particular as carried out by female members of the resistance. It also overemphasizes individual agency and the overall importance and impact of armed resistance during the war, as only a small segment of the European population was involved in it.[36]

34 See for example: Christophe Corbin, *Revisiting the French Resistance in Cinema, Literature, Bande Dessinée, and Television (1942–2012)* (Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2019).

35 Pieter Lagrou, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation: Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in Western Europe, 1945-1965* (Cambrige: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

36 Bob Moore, ed., *Resistance in Western Europe* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2000), 1-26; Philip Cooke and Ben H. Shepherd, eds., *Hitler's Europe Ablaze: Occupation, Resistance, and Rebellion During World War II* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2013), in particular 1-13; William I. Hitchcock,

Concerning the ludic design of the game world, i.e. the second main dimension of Latorre's framework, players can immediately observe how its spatio-temporal design closely aligns with the intermedial network of meaning discussed above. The black-and-white aesthetics becomes instantly visible when exploring the game world. In addition, the focus on heteronormative sexuality, inspired by both 'film noirs' and conceptions about Paris as a 20th-century 'capital of sin', is rendered visible at the start of the game, as its opening scene takes place in the 'Belles de Nuit', a burlesque night-club that serves as one of Sean Devlin's hiding spots (**Figure 3.3**). It directly appeals to a heterosexual male gaze.

Figure 3.3: Screenshot of the interior of the 'Belles de Nuit' in the game *The Saboteur*

Source: https://cdn.staticneo.com/n/2/sean_in_the_girls_dressing_room.jpg, accessed October 18, 2020.

Apart from these elements, the game world is filled with an abundance of signs that highlight the 'Nazi-infested-ness' of Paris and the French countryside.[37] Examples include banners with swastikas and iron crosses, and installations such as guard towers, weapon depots and propaganda speakers. Especially here, an interesting set of rules that apply to these game objects can be identified. When players destroy these virtual

"Collaboration, Resistance and Liberation in Western Europe," in Richard J.B. Bosworth and Joseph A. Maiolo, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Second World War. Volume II: Politics and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 412-435. For a (succinct) comparative discussion of the involvement of women in resistance during the Second World War, see: D'Ann Campbell, "The Women of World War II," in Thomas W. Zeiler and Daniel M. DuBois, eds., *A Companion to World War II* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 727-729.

37 Eva Kingsepp, "Immersive Historicity in World War II Digital Games," *Human IT: Journal for Information Technology Studies as a Human Science* 8, no. 2 (2006): 66.

installations, they do not only earn 'contraband', i.e. the in-game currency with which players can buy weapons and equipment on the black market. At the same time, these actions also permanently remove the objects from the game world without further consequences. As a result, the game seemingly represents the Nazi occupation of France as a superficial material presence that players can straightforwardly remove through physical violence and spatial conquest.

Next, especially the design of the NPC's in *The Saboteur*, and the AI-scripting that defines their in-game behaviour, provides a specific representation of the occupation of France during the Second World War. Here, distinct assumptions about the occupation of France as a historical event become visible.

Firstly, I will analyse how the occupation regime is represented through NPC's. This is done by placing a variety of German soldiers in the game world, who all wear explicit Nazi insignia such as swastika's and only differ from one another based on the weapons they carry, and therefore the challenge they pose to the player. As a result, the game fundamentally ludifies and simplifies the occupation. It not only represents the latter as a playful obstacle that is meant to challenge the player's visual, motoric and strategic skills. It also represents the occupation as a homogeneously Nazi affair, in which French civilians or government officials were not actively involved. This is reflective of an underlying assumption that can productively be interrogated historically. During the war, the Nazi occupier relied extensively on the collaboration of local political and economic elites, administrative circles and police forces, as well as denunciatory actions by citizens to inform on political opponents, Jews or laborers in hiding, to organize daily life in its occupied territories.[38] This also applies to Paris and the part of France occupied by Nazi Germany in 1940.[39] Here, I equally identified a first example of perceived ludonarrative dissonance when analysing *The Saboteur* from a historical perspective. In the narrative of the game, the player is repeatedly given missions to assassinate traitors or informants, in reference to the collaborationist and denunciatory practices that characterized France's socio-political life during the occupation. However, this reality is not made visible in the explorable game world. Here, players do not have to consider denunciatory efforts on behalf of French civilian NPC's when they observe Sean Devlin's suspicious and violent behaviour. Instead, the civilian NPC's are mostly passive in their conduct when walking around in the game world, as well as fearful of German reprisals.

38 For a general overview, see for example: Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire: Nazi Rule in Occupied Europe* (London: Allen Lane, 2008). For a discussion of practices of denunciation, tentatively defined by historians Sheila Fitzpatrick and Robert Gellately as "spontaneous communications from individual citizens to the state (or to another authority such as the church) containing accusations of wrongdoing by other citizens or officials and implicitly or explicitly calling for punishment,' see: Fitzpatrick and Gellately, "Introduction to the Practices of Denunciation in Modern European History," *The Journal of Modern History* 68, no. 4 (1996): 747-767.

39 For a discussion of the occupation of France in general, see: Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940-1944* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Laurent Joly, *La Délation Dans La France Des Années Noires* (Paris: Perrin, 2012).

Figure 3.4: Screenshot of an execution about to be carried out by Nazi soldiers in the game *The Saboteur*

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pW_3JGBhwM0 (Screenshot taken at 2:11:14), accessed October 18, 2020.

As a result, the game indirectly characterizes the collaboration of the French civilian population during the war as negligible rather than systemic: it was done by a number of individuals as 'bad apples', who can justifiably be killed by the player.

Secondly, I want to highlight how Nazi NPC's behave towards the French civilians, and how they respond to the violent acts of the player. Concerning the first, the Nazis are represented as indiscriminately violent. Players can encounter numerous scenes in the game world as shown in **Figure 3.4**, where Nazi guards are detaining or executing civilians for no apparent reason. Furthermore, as these executions already occur at the start of the game, it suggests that the violence of the Nazis is consistent and unchanging. This can again be interrogated by contrasting it to the policies of the occupier in France during the war. Following Nazi Germany's military victory over France in June 1940, the first months of the occupation were relatively peaceful. However, this was followed by an intensifying spiral of reprisals and executions from June 1941 onwards, when Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union.[40] *The Saboteur* therefore offers a fundamentally a-historical representation of the wartime occupation of France, in which the occupying Nazi regime is depicted as a Manichaeistically 'evil' one that imposed itself on an innocent French nation without any form of structural local support and through never-abating excessive violence. This places the Nazi regime outside of history and within the

40 See for example: Alan Mitchell, *Nazi Paris: The History of an Occupation, 1940-1944* (New York and London: Berghahn Books, 2010), 45-89.

realm of the mythological. Concerning the response of the Nazi NPC's to the actions of the player, I furthermore identified a second example of perceived ludonarrative dissonance from a historical point of view. In the main narrative of the game, the player is regularly confronted with the consequences of Sean Devlin's actions. An example thereof is that several story missions revolve around saving hostages taken by the Germans in response to prior narrative events. However, this is not the case when players freely engage in violence in the game world. Here, if players kill a guard or destroy equipment and flee, the Nazi guards will only target the playable character and not the French civilian population. This directly contradicts the reprisal policies adopted by the Nazi occupier during the war, especially from the summer of 1941 onwards.[41] This design choice is also meant to emphasize *The Saboteur*'s premise as a popular ludic historical representation. The game is meant to be an adventurous depiction of the heroism of violent resistance against the Nazi occupier, in which the player is not confronted with the broader impact of his or her violent resistance on civilians. This is reflective of common design tropes in other popular first- and third-person shooter games.[42]

Finally, in relation to the design of *The Saboteur*'s broader gameplay activities, several play units can be identified, whose chains of actions are made up of a combination of the following activities, as a direct translation of the game mechanics discussed above: stealing motorized vehicles, driving support characters to their destination, shadowing or assassinating dangerous or high profile individuals, sabotaging military installations, rescuing captured resistance fighters, engaging in open combat with the Nazi occupier, fleeing the scene of an attack after the alarm has been raised, and participating in car races across France. For each of these activities, rather strict winning conditions exist, as players can only advance in the game if they successfully shadow, kill, destroy, steal or rescue targets and elude the pursuing Nazis. The degree of variability when engaging in these gameplay activities is also limited, as players can only choose between silent infiltration or open combat. In line with the ludic design of the character/player, this again demonstrates the prioritization of tense action and violence in the game, in accordance with *The Saboteur*'s central intermedial premise as a romanticized fantasy of heroic male violent resistance.

As part of the overall narrative of *The Saboteur*, each of the central gameplay activities are carried out by the player on behalf of several side characters, who either belong to one of the cells of French resistance fighters scattered across Paris, or a fictionalized rendition of the British Special Operations Executive. The cells of French

41 Alan Mitchell, *Nazi Paris*, 45-89.

42 Holger Pötzsch, "Selective Realism: Filtering Experiences of War and Violence in First- and Third-Person Shooters," *Games and Culture* 12, no. 2 (2017): 159-162; James Campbell, "Just Less than Total War," in Zach I. Whalen and Laurie N. Taylor, eds., *Playing the Past: History and Nostalgia in Video Games* (Nashville TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2008), 183-200; Eva Kingsepp, "Fighting Hyperreality With Hyperreality. History and Death in World War II Digital Games," *Games and Culture* 2, no. 4 (2007): 366-375.

resistance fighters are depicted as being exclusively driven by patriotic motives, which means that the game represents the French resistance as a purely nationalist movement. This can also be contrasted with the situation during the war, as various groups with other ideological backgrounds, in particular communist ones, were involved in violent resistance against the Nazi occupier, often more actively than others.[43] As Sean Devlin helps each of these side characters to obtain their objectives, he ultimately achieves a personal one: avenging the death of a close personal friend, who was killed by a Nazi officer. By doing this, Sean achieves an important additional goal in the game: he succeeds in uniting the scattered cells of resistance in Paris who, with the support of the SOE, launch an uprising against the Nazi occupier to liberate the city in an effort to achieve full national liberation at the end of the game.

Here, I want to highlight an additional goal of the gameplay units in *The Saboteur*, which also manifests itself in the spatiotemporal design of the game world. When players complete key missions in the game, they activate the so-called 'Will to Fight' (WTF)-dynamic in the region where the mission was completed. This means that, upon completion of the mission, a cutscene starts playing that shows how the black-and-white aesthetic of the area is lifted and replaced by a bright and colourful one. This serves as a metaphor for the return of hope and a fighting spirit among the local civilians, but also as a condition for the latter to join the armed uprising at the end of the game. The changing atmosphere is also translated into behavioural changes among the NPC's in the area. The virtual French civilians will now act in a more assertive manner when Nazi soldiers harass them, and players are able to enter 'Fight Back Zones' in case of an alarm. Here, other armed resistance fighters can be called in to support the character/player in fighting Nazi soldiers.

Following these observations, I argue that the ludic design of the core gameplay activities of *The Saboteur* carries in itself a double discursive, and therefore memory-making potential. On the one hand, the gameplay units, and the ability for players to successfully unite the French resistance in its fight against the Nazi occupier, can be seen as an expression of a power fantasy. Players are invited to revel in imagining how they would have been involved in heroic resistance against the Nazi regime during the Second World War. On the other hand, especially the 'Will to Fight' (WTF)-dynamic and the appearance of the 'Fight Back Zones' in the 'liberated' areas of the game world, can be seen as an acknowledgement of the notion that France was a 'nation of resisters' during the war that reluctantly accepted the occupation and only needed an, in this case external, spark to rise up. This characterization is reminiscent of the narrative propagated by Charles de Gaulle and his 'Free French' movement, which upheld that 'the French [people], defeated but defiant after 1940, were virtually all sympathetic to, if not indeed active participants in, the Resistance'.[44] These interpretations also became

43 Bob Moore, *Resistance in Western Europe*, 1-26.

44 See for example: Robert Gildea, *Fighters in the Shadows: A New History of the French Resistance*

a part of the American public discourse through for example wartime Hollywood films made by French film maker Jean Renoir, official visits by Charles de Gaulle to New York in 1944 and 1945 meant to win over the US leadership for the cause of the 'Free French', and the post-war translation of novels about the French resistance written by Joseph Kessel and others.[45] However, this characterization has been actively refuted since the 1970s by historians such as Robert Paxton, Jean-Pierre Azéma, Philippe Burrin, Julian Jackson and Alan Mitchell, who have demonstrated how significant sections of the French population actively pursued strategies of accommodation or collaboration with the Nazi occupier, both in the northern zone of France occupied by the German military command and the southern 'free' zone administered by the French Vichy regime.[46] It illustrates how the American creators of *The Saboteur*, in their efforts to create an exciting action game, quickly end up reiterating nationalist memory discourses about the wartime experience of the French population and stereotypical American imaginations of (occupied) France, as seen in other 'popular' representations.

3.5 Conclusion

The goal of my analysis of *The Saboteur*, a historically-themed open world digital entertainment game set in Nazi-occupied France during the Second World War, was twofold. Firstly, as the 'total wars' of the 20th-century not only resulted in large-scale military confrontations between state armies but also transformed entire societies, this analysis aimed to shed light into how digital entertainment games represent these broader societal transformations. The analysis showed that *The Saboteur* could indeed be characterized as what the game's creators called a 'pulpy action adventure', which represents the wartime occupation of France and the French resistance in a fundamentally romanticized and gendered manner, by emphasizing exciting, heroic and male-dominated violence against a Manichaeistically 'evil' Nazi occupier. Following this assessment, several underlying assumptions about the occupation of France as a historical event could also be identified. One example thereof is that the game reduces the occupation of France to a superficial layer of Nazism that can straightforwardly be overcome through spatial conquest from within, and that affected the morale of the French population but none of France's deeper societal structures. As such, the game not only depicts the German occupation as an a-historically violent one but also as a

(London: Faber & Faber, 2015), in particular the final chapter ('Conclusion: Battle for the Soul of the Resistance'); Wieviorka, *Divided Memory: French Recollections of World War II from the Liberation to the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012). For the quote, see: Mitchell, *Nazi Paris*, 12.

45 See for example: Donald Reid, "Everybody Was in the French Resistance… Now! American Representations of the French Resistance," *French Cultural Studies* 23, no. 1 (2012): 49-63.

46 See for example: Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1972); Jean-Pierre Azéma, *Du Munich à la Libération* (Nouvelle Histoire de la France Contemporaine, Partie 14) (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1979); Philippe Burrin, *La France à l'Heure Allemande, 1940-1944* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1995); Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years*; Mitchell, *Nazi Paris*.

homogeneously Nazi affair, devoid of structural French involvement. It reaffirms the ongoing prevalence of the celebratory cultural narratives that were first formulated in France and other Western European countries shortly after the war and that have actively been refuted by (international) historians since, such as the narrative that France in its entirety was a 'nation of resisters'.

Secondly, my analysis in this chapter contributes to the study of the meaning-making potentials[47] of digital entertainment games from a historical and cultural memory perspective, by proposing a mixed-methods approach. The chapter presented three analytical tools that complement prior analyses. Firstly, I emphasized the importance of studying the paratextual positioning of a game, in light of an inherent 'double-faced nature' of 'popular' historical representation. By conducting a thematic analysis of interviews given by the creators of a game prior to its release, researchers gain a better understanding of how the creators aim to depict the past. This serves as a significant context for the analysis of the game. Secondly, highlighting the importance of systematically studying the social discourse embedded in a game's ludic design, based on framework presented by Óliver Pérez Latorre, resulted in a deeper insight into a game's discursive potential from a historical and cultural memory perspective, as it enables researchers and players to systematically assess all ludic components of a game. In relation to open world-games such as *The Saboteur*, it highlights the discursive potential of the design of non-player characters (NPC's), as distinct NPC-design allows for the expression of various historical socio-cultural and political realities. Finally, by highlighting the importance of the perspective of the researcher, I made visible that experiences of dissonance through play are dependent on a player's lived experience and textual biography, as expressed in the concept 'perceived ludonarrative dissonance. Combined, these three analytical tools provide a rich framework for the continued study of digital entertainment games as a format for historical and mnemonic expression.

In chapter four, I continue my effort to study digital games as a distinct form of representational and performative configuration, by analysing how games depict aspects of the Holocaust.

47 The notion 'meaning-making potentials' is derived by the notion 'memory-making potentials', formulated by Pötzsch and Šisler. See: Holger Pötzsch and Vit Šisler, "Playing Cultural Memory," 5-7.

Murderers are not monsters,
they're men.
And that's the most
frightening thing about them.

Alice Sebold

Chapter 4: Engaging with Genocidal Violence through Play? A Critical Assessment of Representing the Holocaust in Digital Games[1]

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I investigate how digital entertainment games ludically aim to represent (elements of) the Holocaust. Games have long omitted such references to the Holocaust.[2] This can be attributed to the fact that game creators primarily want to create pleasurable gameplay experiences, which often leads them to avoid grave topics such as the Holocaust. In addition, it can be attributed to the fact that digital games in general, but also the ones made for entertainment purposes in particular, are often still seen as inherently trivial in nature by wider publics and therefore unsuited to tackle sensitive and contentious histories.[3] However, in recent years, the trend of avoiding the Holocaust in digital entertainment games has begun to change, as a number of commercially distributed digital games have been created that do allow players to engage with the Holocaust.

In this chapter, I aim to achieve two central goals. Firstly, I present an analysis of how the Holocaust is ludically represented in two entertainment-oriented and commercially successful FPS-games: *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Call of Duty: WWII*. The first game was created by Stockholm-based game developer MachineGames and published by US-based game publisher Bethesda Softworks in 2014. The second game was made by American game developer Sledgehammer Games and published by US-based game publisher Activision in 2017. Throughout my analysis, I show how both games instrumentalize the Holocaust in the context of an ideologically underpinned and entertainment-oriented representation. Secondly, I discuss an alternative way in which digital games can be adopted to stimulate critical historical thinking about the Holocaust. I will do so by referring to a type of game design that significantly diverges from the one presented in the aforementioned FPS-games.

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1 A modified version of this chapter was submitted to a journal as: Pieter J.B.J. Van den Heede, "Engaging with Genocidal Violence through Play? A Critical Assessment of Representing the Holocaust in Digital Games."

2 See for example: Eugen Pfister, "Das Unspielbare Spielen - Imaginationen Des Holocaust in Digitalen Spielen," *Zeitgeschichte* 43, no. 4 (2016): 250-263.

3 Adam Chapman and Jonas Linderoth, "Exploring the Limits of Play: A Case Study of Representations of Nazism in Games," in Torill E. Mortensen, Jonas Linderoth and Ashley M.L. Brown, eds., *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), 137-153.

This second discussion is inspired by the following observation: although the public awareness of the Holocaust has increased significantly since the 1980s, especially in Europe and North America,[4] a number of recent studies, also about these regions in particular, have pointed to a reverse trend: people of all education levels and ages, but especially youngsters, often combine a genuine interest in the history of the Holocaust with mistaken understandings of the subject.[5] This is complemented by the observation that, in Western European countries, teaching about the Holocaust has been actively called into question over the past two decades by some students with a non-European and Muslim background in particular, who refer to Holocaust denial theories or allegations of Israeli instrumentalization of the Holocaust that are expressed prominently in immigrant and diaspora communities of which they are a part.[6] Both observations not only pose significant challenges to educators, remembrance professionals, researchers and policy makers, who aim to contribute to a greater awareness of the atrocities of the Holocaust, especially in light of the dwindling number of living witnesses of these events. It has also led Holocaust-related research institutions and networks such as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) and the European Holocaust Research Infrastructure (EHRI), to explore this broader question: how can we, in the digital age, engage younger generations, who primarily gather information through the internet by watching online videos, playing games and interacting with others through social media platforms?[7] Digital games are especially of

4 In most of these countries, the study of the Holocaust has become an integral part of the (history) curriculum in compulsory education. See: Peter Carrier, Eckhardt Fuchs, and Tobin Messinger, *The International Status of Education about the Holocaust: A Global Mapping of Textbooks and Curricula* (Paris and Braunschweig: UNESCO and the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research, 2015, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000228776, accessed September 30, 2020.

5 See for example: Stuart Foster et al., *What Do Students Know and Understand About the Holocaust?* (London: UCL Centre for Holocaust Education, 2017), https://www.holocausteducation.org.uk/research/young-people-understand-holocaust/, accessed September 30, 2020; Pew Research Center, *What Americans Know About the Holocaust* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2020), https://www.pewforum.org/2020/01/22/what-americans-know-about-the-holocaust/, accessed September 30, 2020.

6 See for example: Remco Ensel and Annemarike Stremmelaar, "Speech Acts: Observing Antisemitism and Holocaust Education in the Netherlands," in Günther Jikeli and Joëlle Allouche-Benayoun, eds., *Perceptions of the Holocaust in Europe and Muslim Communities: Sources, Comparisons and Educational Challenges* (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2013), 153-171; Tsafrir Goldberg and Geerte M. Savenije, "Teaching Controversial Historical Issues," in Scott A. Metzger and Lauren McArthur Harris, eds., *The Wiley International Handbook of History Teaching and Learning* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018), 515-516.

7 See for example: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), "Holocaust Education in the Digital Age," *Memory & Action* 5, no. 2 (Spring 2017): 8-11, https://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/Spring_2017_Magazine_Final_spreads.pdf, accessed September 30, 2020. On November 8-9 2017, the EHRI-network also organized the international workshop 'Engaging New Generations - The Holocaust and Knowledge Dissemination in the Digital Age', which was specifically intended to foster further reflection on this topic. See for example: Erwin Nuijten, "The 'Engaging New Generations' Workshop and the Digital Link between the Holocaust and Present-Day Mass Violence," https://niodbibliotheek.blogspot.com/search?q=engaging+new+generations, accessed

interest in that respect, for two major reasons. Not only do games enjoy an increasing level of popularity worldwide, among young people as well as other age groups. Games also allow players to have a significant impact on what happens during play, which can result in high levels of engagement. I elaborate on this observation by arguing that digital games offer players a promising format to develop a critical reflection, rooted in experiential engagement, on some of the societal dynamics that have shaped the Holocaust as a historical event. I argue that digital games are well suited to put players in an indirect and fictionalized dynamic position of 'liminality', or uncertainty in light of unknown outcomes during periods of socio-political transformation, as discussed by historians of the Second World War.[8]

In what follows, I first briefly discuss how scholars have previously reflected on the representation of the Holocaust, or the lack thereof, in digital games. Secondly, I will present a reading of the FPS-games *Wolfenstein: The New Order* (hereafter: WTNO) and *Call of Duty: WWII* (hereafter: CODWWII), based on both an analysis of the games themselves and their marketing materials (in particular interviews given by the creators of both games). Thirdly, I will discuss how digital games have the potential to evoke a sense of 'liminality' as stated above, in particular in light of the history of the Second World War. I will present an analysis of the game *Papers, Please*, made by independent American game developer Lucas Pope.

4.2 Literature Review: Representing the Holocaust through Digital Games

In an early reflection on the depiction of the Holocaust in digital games, published in 2000, Uruguayan game scholar Gonzalo Frasca discussed how not only economic reasons – the then dominant focus of the global game industry on children and male teenagers as their core target audience – but also several dominant game design conventions prevented games from dealing with more serious topics, such as the Holocaust. Frasca highlighted two dominant ludic principles of popular digital entertainment games in particular: the binary notion that you either 'win' or 'lose' a game and can always try again, and, in relation to it, the observation that 'dying' in games is mostly reversible and therefore has no far-reaching consequences. As an alternative, Frasca proposed the creation of 'ephemeral games': interactive narratives

September 30, 2020.

8 See in particular: Frank Bajohr and Andrea Löw, "Beyond the 'Bystander': Social Processes and Social Dynamics in European Societies as Context for the Holocaust," in Andrea Löw and Frank Bajohr, eds., *The Holocaust and European Societies: Social Processes and Social Dynamics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 3-14; Ismee Tames, "About Thresholds: Liminality and the Experience of Resistance" (Inaugural lecture given in acceptance of the position of Endowed Professor 'Geschiedenis en betekenis van verzet tegen onderdrukking en vervolging' at the Faculty of Humanities at Utrecht University, 2016), https://www.niod.nl/sites/niod.nl/files/Oratie%20Ismee%20Tames%20Over%20grenzen.pdf, accessed September 30, 2020.

which can only be played once and where choices are made irreversible, to avoid a strategy of 'trial and error'.[9]

Unsurprisingly, no such games were made, due to their unattractiveness from a commercial perspective. More generally, as described by German historian Eugen Pfister, most earlier initiatives to create digital games about the Holocaust until recently, including ones that were explicitly made with an educational goal in mind, were met with extensive criticism and therefore cancelled. One example thereof is the educational game *Imagination is the Only Escape*, first presented by French-British game developer Luc Bernard in 2008. In this game, which would have revolved around puzzle- and platforming gameplay as could later be found in the First World War-themed game *Valiant Hearts: The Great War* (Ubisoft, 2014), players would have followed the story of a fictional Jewish boy who flees Paris and finds refuge in a southern French village after his mother is murdered by the Nazis during the Vél' d'Hive Roundup of July 1942.[10] As the Jewish boy tries to escape the bleakness of his situation through his imagination, the story would have been partly fantastical in nature. When Bernard started looking for funding for the project and made plans to release the game on the Nintendo DS game device with the help of the British game publisher Alten8, several critical articles about it appeared in newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *The Jewish Chronicle*.[11] In these articles, Jack Kagan, a survivor of the Nowogródek labour camp in contemporary Belarus, stated that he felt appalled by the idea, and that no games about the Holocaust should be made.[12] In addition, Karen Pollock, the Chief Executive of the Holocaust Educational Trust, a Holocaust remembrance organization located in the UK, stated that she considered a game "in which imagination and make-believe [sits] alongside historical facts such as the atrocities perpetrated during the Holocaust" to be "a step too far."[13] In the end, Alten8 was unable to gather sufficient funding for the game and the project was put on hold.[14]

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9 For the entire paragraph, see: Gonzalo Frasca, "Ephemeral Games: Is It Barbaric to Design Videogames after Auschwitz?" Cybertext yearbook 1, no. 1 (2000): 172-180, https://ludology.typepad.com/weblog/articles/ephemeralFRASCA.pdf, accessed September 30, 2020.

10 For further information about the Vél d'Hiv Roundup, see: USHMM, "The Vélodrome d'Hiver (Vél d'Hiv) Roundup," https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-velodrome-dhiver-vel-dhiv-roundup, accessed September 30, 2020.

11 Sridhar Pappu, "Nintendo to Not Release Holocaust-Themed Game in U.S.," The New York Times, https://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/10/technology/10iht-10nintendo.10861480.html, accessed September 30, 2020; Laura A. Parker, "Inside Controversial Game That's Tackling the Holocaust," Rolling Stone, https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/inside-controversial-game-thats-tackling-the-holocaust-251102/, accessed September 30, 2020; Tori Floyd, "Holocaust Survivor Criticises WWII Game," Kotaku Australia, https://www.kotaku.com.au/2008/03/holocaust_survivor_criticizes_wwii_game-2/, accessed September 30, 2020; Dana Gloger, "Survivor to 'vet' Video Game," The Jewish Chronicle, https://www.pressreader.com/uk/the-jewish-chronicle/20080328/281771329903814, accessed September 30, 2020.

12 Tori Floyd, "Holocaust Survivor Criticises WWII Game."

13 For the quote, see: Dana Gloger, "Survivor to 'vet' Video Game."

14 For the entire paragraph, see: Eugen Pfister, "Das Unspielbare Spielen," 253-255. For a more in-

An explanation for this and similar responses to digital games about the Holocaust can be found in how the medium has long been perceived in society: in contrast to film and television, (digital) games are often still viewed as inherently trivializing in nature. Adam Chapman and Jonas Linderoth explain this by referring to what Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman calls the 'limits of play'. As discussed by Goffman, most subjects in society are open for playful exploration, by 'keying' them accordingly. An example thereof is a mock fight between children, which has the appearance of a real fight but is ultimately a form of play. However, whereas this is possible for most subjects, Goffman also states that in most societies, clear limits to playful exploration are established in relation to certain topics which renders them taboo.[15]

Chapman and Linderoth argue that most of the controversies about the depiction of sensitive topics in games, such as the Holocaust, can be seen as an example of such 'limits of play', because of two central characteristics of games: the fact that they give rise to a process of 'ludification', and the fact that they potentially present 'controversial playable positions'. The first refers to the notion that in the context of a game, components such as a board-game piece not only offer a representation, but also serve a ludic purpose. This can lead to a perceived sense of trivialization in relation to sensitive subjects, as a fear arises that people will only pay attention to the functional dimensions of the game components. The second aspect revolves around the possibility for players to take on the role of (perceived) historical antagonists, and the fear that players will be allowed to "re-enact historical crimes as play actions."[16]

Chapman and Linderoth offer a compelling explanation for why the Holocaust as a topic has long been avoided in games about the Second World War. However, as stated above, this trend of avoiding depictions of the Holocaust in digital games has begun to change recently. This is illustrated by the games WTNO and CODWWII, which include visible depictions of aspects of the Holocaust. In what follows, I offer an analysis of how both games represent the Second World War and the Holocaust in particular.

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depth discussion of the game *Imagination is the Only Escape*, see especially: Laura A. Parker, "Inside Controversial Game That's Tackling the Holocaust."

15 For the entire paragraph, see: Adam Chapman and Jonas Linderoth, "Exploring the Limits of Play," 140-145. For Goffman's work, see: Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1974).

16 For the quote, see: Adam Chapman, "It's Hard to Play in the Trenches: World War I, Collective Memory and Videogames," *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 16, no. 2 (2016), http://gamestudies.org/1602/articles/chapman, accessed September 30, 2020. For the entire paragraph, see: Adam Chapman and Jonas Linderoth, "Exploring the Limits of Play," 140-145.

4.3 Representations of the Holocaust in the games *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Call of Duty: WWII*

4.3.1 *Wolfenstein: The New Order*

Apart from having pioneered the FPS-genre, the games from the *Wolfenstein*-series (1992-present) are also often characterized as action adventure games that virtually and ludically remediate[17] some of the central themes of low-brow 'Nazisploitation'-films made since the 1970s, such as the pornographic film *Ilsa: She Wolf of the SS* (Don Edmunds, 1975), and the Hollywood cinema that was inspired by them.[18] *Wolfenstein*-games cast the player as a muscular heterosexual US American white male protagonist named William 'B.J.' Blazkowicz in scenarios reminiscent of the *Indiana Jones*-films (Steven Spielberg, 1981-2008), in which Blazkowicz is tasked with virtually killing hordes of unidimensional 'evil Nazis', in 3D environments that signal their 'Nazi-infestedness' through extensive use of Nazi iconography.[19] In line with this characterization, American historian Jeff Hayton discusses how the *Wolfenstein*-games, which are "mobilized by the Holocaust, but loathe to mention it," avoid the depiction of the genocidal violence of the Nazi regime, by transforming a horror trope that has been common in cinema since the 1920s: the pursuit of forbidden and dangerous knowledge by 'mad scientists' through an exploration of the occult.[20] Whereas older horror films would depict these scientists as misguided, *Wolfenstein*-games reinterpret these characters as Manichaeistically evil ones who tortures victims and creates mutant soldiers or fantastical weapons. This is subsequently rooted in history through marketing by the creators of the *Wolfenstein*-games by referring to, for example, the torturous experiments carried out by Joseph Mengele, the notorious SS doctor of the Auschwitz camp complex, or the strive of the Nazi leadership to create 'Wunderwaffen' or 'miracle weapons' during the later stages of the war, such as the V-1 flying bomb and jet-propelled aircraft such as the Messerschmitt Me 262.[21] The choice for this representation can be attributed to the trivial reputation of digital games discussed above, but also to elements of game design. In combat-oriented game genres such as the FPS, 'mad scientists' who bring the undead to life or create mutant soldiers and 'miracle weapons', can more easily be integrated into ludically appealing combat scenarios, in

17 For the concept of 'remediation', as discussed in the field of cultural memory studies, see: Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney, *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2009).

18 Jeff Hayton, "Digital Nazis: Genre, History and the Displacement of Evil in First-Person Shooters," in Daniel H. Magilow, Kristin T. Vander Lugt and Elizabeth Bridges, eds., *Nazisploitation! The Nazi Image in Low-Brow Cinema and Culture* (London: Continuum, 2012); Eva Kingsepp, "Fighting Hyperreality With Hyperreality. History and Death in World War II Digital Games," 366-375; Eva Kingsepp, "Immersive Historicity in World War II Digital Games," *Human IT: Journal for Information Technology Studies as a Human Science* 8, no. 2 (2006): 60-89; Alicia Kozma, "Ilsa and Elsa: Nazisploitation, Mainstream Film and Cinematic Transference," in *Nazisploitation!*, 55-71.

19 Eva Kingsepp, "Immersive Historicity in World War II Digital Games," 66-69.

20 Hayton, "Digital Nazis," 206-213. For the quote, see: Ibidem, 211.

21 Ibidem, 206-213.

which players have to use all the virtual tools at their disposal, as well as their strategic and motoric skills, to overcome a diverse range of virtual enemies.

WTNO reiterates on, but also reinterprets the aforementioned themes. In interviews given to various news outlets, the creative director of the game, Jens Matthies, states that the developers wanted to create a game that is "grossly exaggerated from reality" but also offers a more personal drama. Here, Matthies refers to films that directly offer a fictionalized representation of the Second World War such as *Inglourious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino, 2009), but also science fiction films such as *District 9* (Neill Blomkamp, 2009) and *RoboCop* (Paul Verhoeven, 1987), as cinematic reference points. In addition, he argues that the developers wanted to further emphasize the role played by 'Nazi technology' in comparison to previous games in the series and create fictional virtual environments that express the megalomania of the Nazi regime. More significantly, however, Matthies claims that the development team wanted to provide a less shallow interpretation of Nazism and render explicit why players are fighting it:[22]

> *"From day one, we didn't want to cartoonify Nazi ideology. We have these over-the-top, larger-than-life antagonists. […] But within that boundary […], we wanted to make sure that we conveyed what Nazi ideology is about. […]. It's far too convenient to put a swastika on somebody and say, "shoot them!" For us, it was incredibly important to show what Nazi ideology was about, and that the player gets to experience what it's like to be on the receiving end of that."*[23]

This shift in focus is also reflected in WTNO in a number of ways. At a first glance, WTNO seems to be structured around the same themes of the previous games in the *Wolfenstein*-series. In WTNO, players also fight hordes of virtual Nazi soldiers and robots created by a 'mad scientist'. However, when further analysing the overarching narrative of the game, a shift in themes and tone can be identified. In contrast to previous *Wolfenstein*-games, WTNO takes place during the 1960s, in an alternate history setting where the Nazis have won the Second World War. Following an earlier attempt to turn the tide of the war and

22 For the entire paragraph, see the following interviews given by members of the WTNO development team, in particular creative director Jens Matthies: Patrick Klepek, "A Conversation With Wolfenstein: The New Order's Jens Matthies," *Giant Bomb*, https://www.giantbomb.com/articles/a-conversation-with-wolfenstein-the-new-orders-jens-matthies/1100-4943/, accessed September 30, 2020; David Jenkins, "Wolfenstein: The New Order Preview and Interview – 'Very Few Things Are as Satisfying as Stabbing Nazis!'," *Metro*, https://metro.co.uk/2014/05/06/wolfenstein-the-new-order-preview-and-interview-very-few-things-are-as-satisfying-as-stabbing-nazis-4719003/, accessed September 30, 2020; Gamereactor, "Wolfenstein: The New Order - Creative Director Interview," *Gamereactor*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9lMbkbct5D0, accessed September 30, 2020; Adam Rosenberg, "Beneath the Nazi Slaying, Wolfenstein: The New Order Is a Morality Play," *Digital Trends*, https://www.digitaltrends.com/gaming/interview-with-jens-matthies-of-wolfenstein-the-new-order/, accessed September 30, 2020.

23 For the quote, see: Patrick Klepek, "A Conversation With Wolfenstein: The New Order's Jens Matthies."

defeat the Nazi regime, protagonist Blazkowicz is heavily injured and taken to an asylum for the mentally and physically disabled located in Poland. From there, he fights his way to join the 'Kreisau Circle', a group of resistance fighters loosely inspired by the historical group of middle- and upper-class German dissidents of the same name.[24]

Following this premise, the game not only depicts excessive virtual violence and bombastic Nazi-infested virtual worlds, as seen through the lens of a fictionalized version of the 1960s. It also renders the genocidal violence perpetrated by the Nazi regime explicit, in a twofold manner. Firstly, both the protagonist and the supporting characters of the game have suffered physically and/or psychologically from Nazi violence in a very direct and visible manner. For example, Blazkowicz' injury occurs after he, and with him the player, discovers an incinerator room filled with mutilated bodies inside the hideout of the SS scientist, is captured by the latter, and is forced to choose which of two fellow captured soldiers will be used for gruesome experiments (the surviving soldier becomes a central character in the game narrative who suffers from a psychological trauma as a result of these events).

Secondly, and in close connection to the violence suffered by the characters in the game's narrative, WTNO also contains explicit references to the Holocaust and other acts of genocidal violence perpetrated by the Nazi regime. For example, when the protagonist is brought to the Polish asylum following his injury, he encounters a local nurse. Shortly after the nurse is introduced, the protagonist, and with him the player, witnesses how the nurse's parents are killed by Nazi guards, when they decide to shut down the asylum and execute the patients. This can be seen as a direct reference to 'Aktion T4', the killing program targeting patients with physical and mental disabilities living in Germany and the German-annexed territories, initiated by Hitler and the Nazi leadership in October 1939.[25] In a later level of the game, the protagonist is given the task to infiltrate a fictional concentration camp (**Figure 4.1**). Shortly after gaining access to the concentration camp, the protagonist, and with him the player, can observe, and is subjected to, torture and (near) death by incineration in a furnace (**Figure 4.2**).

Taken together, the observations made above allow for the following general characterization: whereas WTNO is still centred on the same excessive virtual violence and exaggerated 'Nazisploitation'- and horror tropes of the previous *Wolfenstein*-games, it also more visibly than before depicts central ideological tenets of Nazism, such as antisemitism, social Darwinism and a strife for 'racial hygiene'.[26] However, it

24 For a discussion of the historical 'Kreisau Circle', see for example: Detlef Schmiechen-Ackermann, "Resistance," in Shelley Baranowski, Armin Nolzen and Claus-Christian W. Szejnmann, eds., *A Companion to Nazi Germany* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018), 139.

25 See for example: Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich at War* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 75-105.

26 See for example: Richard J. Evans, "The Emergence of Nazi Ideology," in Jane Caplan, ed., *Nazi Germany (Oxford Short History of Germany)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 26-47; For a plea for a wider study of Nazi ideology that goes beyond the ideas of the Nazi leadership, see: Claus-Christian W. Szejnmann, "National Socialist Ideology," in Shelley Baranowski, Armin Nolzen and Claus-Christian W. Szejnmann, eds., *A Companion to Nazi Germany*, 77-94.

Figure 4.1: Screenshot taken from the level 'Chapter 8: Camp Belica' in *Wolfenstein: The New Order*

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcC5vP8VpPc (Screenshot taken at 2:27), accessed October 18, 2020.

only does so in a superficial manner, by invoking the iconography of mass murder and the Holocaust through a depiction of concentration camps, torture, executions and emaciated dead bodies. It does this to allow the people who play the game to engage in cathartic ludic revenge against an enemy that can straightforwardly be recognized and easily defeated. However, the game does not in any way address the broader socio-psychological and wider historical dynamics that led to the rise of the Nazi movement in Germany, a context that is often ignored altogether in digital games about the Second World War.[27] It equally does not address the broader dynamics and developments that led to the implementation of the exclusionary policies and genocidal violence by the Nazi regime in Europe during the 1930s and 1940s, which are essential to understand how the violence implemented by the Nazi regime could take on such extreme forms.[28]

27 For example, as demonstrated extensively by historians, core Nazi beliefs such as antisemitism, social Darwinism and eugenics circulated more widely in Germany, Europe and beyond, a context that is easily overlooked. See: Robert N. Proctor, *Racial Hygiene: Medicine under the Nazis* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); William I. Brustein, *Roots of Hate: Anti-Semitism in Europe Before the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Christian Gerlach, *The Extermination of the European Jews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

28 In her history of the Holocaust, historian Doris Bergen emphasizes how the Second World War serves as a necessary context to understand how the violence of the Nazi regime escalated the way it did, as, for example approximately 95% of the Jewish victims murdered by the regime between 1939 and 1945 lived outside of Germany's borders prior to the war. See: Doris Bergen, *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust* (2nd edition) (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009).

Figure 4.2: Screenshots taken from the level 'Chapter 8: Camp Belica' in *Wolfenstein: The New Order*

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcC5vP8VpPc (Screenshots taken at 10:55 and 11:22), accessed October 18, 2020.

The Nazi soldiers that players virtually kill in WTNO are merely symbolic and 'ludified' depictions of a hateful ideology, not representations of the people that shaped or supported the Nazi regime and enabled it to function.

4.3.2 *Call of Duty: WWII*

Given its commercial success over the past two decades,[29] the *Call of Duty*-games (Activision, 2003–present) has become one of the most prominent popular representations of the Second World War, especially in North America and Europe. As such, the games have been analysed from various perspectives. Andrew Salvati and Jonathan Bullinger have identified the early *Call of Duty*-games that depict the Second World War, made between 2003 and 2008, as an expression of what they call *Brand WW2*, a US American set of myths and memories about the war that were commoditized into a collection of "simplistic narratives, easily recognizable visual signifiers, and emotional cues" broader audiences can connect to, such as the notion that the Second World War was a 'good' and 'justified' war, won by the 'greatest generation' of 'citizen soldiers' of various nations, but also the US in particular.[30] This characterization of the Second World War became prevalent in the US and beyond during the 1990s in particular , through the work of writers such as historian Stephen Ambrose and journalist Tom Brakow, and Steven Spielberg's successful war film *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998).[31] Salvati and Bullinger argue that *Call of Duty* remediates *Brand WW2* by for example emphasizing a sense of technological fetishism, i.e. a focus on a detailed rendition of the weaponry used during the war, and by adopting aesthetic tropes of (post-war) films and wartime newsreels to create a cinematic experience.[32] This corresponds to the findings of my paratextual analysis presented in chapter two.

This characterization is further explored by American media scholar Debra Ramsay, who discusses how the first *Call of Duty*-games explicitly diverged from *Medal of Honor* (1999-2013), another American FPS-series that depicts the events of the Second World War. According to Ramsay, the first *Call of Duty*-games reinterpreted the themes of the *Medal of Honor*-games, centred on the depiction of American special operatives and their actions behind enemy lines, in two ways. On the one hand, *Call of Duty* highlighted the involvement of other countries in the war such as the Soviet Union and Great Britain, in contrast to the focus on US heroism in *Medal of Honor*. On the other hand, *Call of Duty* depicted large-scale battles fought by infantry soldiers rather than

29 See for example: Alissa McAloon, "The Call of Duty Series Has Sold over 300 Million Games," *Gamasutra*, https://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/342030/The_Call_of_Duty_series_has_sold_over_300_million_games.php, accessed September 30, 2020.

30 Jonathan M. Bullinger and Andrew J. Salvati, "A Theory of Brand WW2," *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture* 11, no. 4 (2011), accessed through the Internet Archive Wayback Machine, https://web.archive.org/web/20141008153753/http://reconstruction.eserver.org/Issues/114/Salvati-Bullinger.shtml, accessed September 30, 2020.

31 John E. Bodnar, *The "Good War" in American Memory* (Baltimore MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2010). See also: Marc Gallicchio, "World War II in Historical Memory," in Thomas W. Zeiler and Daniel M. DuBois, eds., *A Companion to World War II* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 978-998.

32 Andrew J. Salvati and Jonathan M. Bullinger, "Selective Authenticity and the Playable Past," Matthew W. Kapell and Andrew B.R. Elliott, eds., *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 153-167.

operations behind enemy lines carried out by individual agents. As a result, the first *Call of Duty*-games depicted the spectacle and chaos of industrialized warfare, and the vulnerability of the soldiers involved in it who had to fight together to survive, as its protagonists, rather than the empowered individual operatives of the older *Medal of Honor*-games. This shift in emphasis is reflected in the different connotations of *Call of Duty* and *Medal of Honor* as brand names.[33]

CODWWII closely adheres to the themes of previous *Call of Duty*-games, as demonstrated both through marketing and game content. For example, when the game was first announced to the public on April 26 2017, during a livestreaming event in London, then CEO of publisher Activision, Eric Hirschberg, stated that the game "strives to capture the intense bonds of brotherhood that came from common, everyday people who rose above the most epic and horrible conflict in human history," in direct reference to the 'greatest generation'.[34] Further illustrations can be found in interviews with the developers of the game, in which the latter discuss how they, while working on CODWWII, came into contact with veterans, whose experiences of comradery during combat they explicitly wanted to include in the game.[35] Some members of the development team even referred to the potential of CODWWII to introduce the history of the Second World War to a new generation, as a means to counter the fleeting nature of the memory of the war at a time when the people who directly witnessed it are gradually passing away.[36] In that respect, it is significant to highlight that *Brand WW2* can best be characterized as a hegemonic cultural memory of the war centred on a celebration of US American patriotism and heroism, which is actively and enthusiastically embraced by a transnational community of players (with very divergent understandings of the Second World War), but also leaves little room for divergent voices.[37]

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33 For the entire paragraph, see: Debra Ramsay, "Brutal Games: Call of Duty and the Cultural Narrative of World War II," *Cinema Journal* 54, no. 2 (2015): 94-113.

34 For the quote, see: Call of Duty, "Official Call of Duty®: WWII Reveal Livestream," April 26, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n2wNC5TYjyw&list=PLZeek85Kuka1TziseLrPA7jngtx7kRTBo&index=50, accessed September 30, 2020.

35 Activision, "Sledgehammer Games Talks Call of Duty: WWII - Interview with Glen Schofield," November 28, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9XAMZnOTTIM&list=PLJfbGPVIsfTvXV-J0aB1dY0fM25ff8IaW&index=2, accessed September 30, 2020; Call of Duty, "Official Call of Duty®: WWII Reveal Livestream."

36 Call of Duty, "Making Call of Duty® WWII Livestream," June 8, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mjn3huizPsI&list=PLZeek85Kuka1TziseLrPA7jngtx7kRTBo&index=49, accessed September 30, 2020; GamerHubTV, "Call Of Duty: WW2 - Campaign Developer Interview," November 2, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jabiyaA-tUE, accessed September 30, 2020.

37 For the concept of hegemonic memory, also in particular in relation to historical digital games, see: Emil L. 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. The mythic rendition of the Second World War as a 'good' war tends to render invisible divisions and conflicts in American society that continued or even exacerbated during the war (see for example: Kenneth D. Rose, *Myth and the Greatest Generation: A Social History of Americans*

The themes discussed above are equally depicted in the game itself, which reiterates and reinterprets *Brand WW2* through both its narrative and its ludic design. Firstly, the narrative of the game closely adheres to the conventions of what film historian Jeanine Basinger has identified as the 'World War II combat film', a genre of Hollywood cinema that gradually emerged during the Second World War itself between the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 and the end of the war in August 1945.[38] CODWWII's cinematic narrative follows a group of soldiers of the American 1st 'Big Red One' infantry division that is socio-culturally, ethnically and geographically diverse. Some of the characters are a farmer from Texas, a Jewish man from Chicago, an Italian-American from New York and a college graduate photographer. An African-American character is introduced later in the game, despite the fact that racially mixed military units were unthinkable in the US military at that time.[39] Apart from a depiction of the 'citizen soldiers' of all walks of life, this can also be seen as a clear reference to the notion of the American 'melting pot'.[40] Secondly, through the narrative, the theme of 'brotherhood' is indeed explicitly expressed as announced through marketing. The narrative revolves around a friendship between two of the soldiers, protagonist and player character Donald 'Red' Daniels (the Texan farmer), and Robert Zussman (the Jewish soldier from Chicago), who save each other's lives during the D-Day landings and swear to protect each other until the end of the war.

Apart from this repetition of familiar themes, CODWWII also adds new elements that are not found in previous *Call of Duty*-games. Firstly, CODWWII explicitly expresses the theme of 'brotherhood' through its core gameplay, in contrast to previous games in the series. Whereas CODWWII equally revolves around the use of various weapons to engage in virtual killing and spatial conquest as the other *Call of Duty*-games, CODWWII also expresses a sense of 'brotherhood' through the computer-steered NPC soldiers that fight alongside the player character and the player. For example, when

in World War II (New York: Routledge, 2008); Travis J. Hardy, "Transnational Civil Rights during World War II," in Thomas W. Zeiler and Daniel M. DuBois, eds., *A Companion to World War II*, 739-753). It also tends to render invisible misconduct and crimes committed by US soldiers in the European and Asian-Pacific Theatre of the war (see for example the study by sociologist/criminologist J. Robbert Lilly on sexual violence perpetrated by American soldiers in the European Theatre of the war: J. Robbert Lilly, *Taken by Force: Rape and American GIs in Europe during World War II* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2007). As stated by historian Michael C.C. Adams, the goal when discussing the US involvement in the Second World War should be to present a "balanced view […] that avoids the extremes of glorification ('This was the Good War') and vilification ('We were no better than our enemies')" (see: Michael C.C. Adams, *The Best War Ever: America and World War II* (2nd edition) (Baltimore MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 2015), xv).

38 Jeanine Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film* (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003). See in particular: Ibidem, 14-75.

39 During the Second World War, African American soldiers served in racially segregated units. They were also primarily given support roles behind the immediate frontlines. See for example: Bryan D. Booker, *African Americans in the United States Army in World War II* (Jefferson NC: McFarland & Company Inc. Publishers, 2008).

40 Jeanine Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film*, 14-75.

the character/player is in need of ammunition, 'health packs' or other supplies, they can call out to these fellow NPC soldiers, who will then throw these supplies at the character/player.

Secondly, and more significantly in this context, CODWWII addresses the theme of racism and the Holocaust more explicitly than previous *Call of Duty*-games. Not only does the game attempt to address the racial segregation of the US military during the Second World War through the inclusion of a secondary narrative that revolves around an African-American infantry soldier. More generally, the game expresses the notion that a sense of American 'unity in diversity' was forged during the war through combat and in light of the evil of Nazism. This is equally expressed in how the game represents the Holocaust, through the character arc of Robert Zussman, the Jewish soldier of the squad. When, later during the game, Zussman is captured by German soldiers, he is sent to Stalag IX-B, a historical POW camp near Bad Orb in Germany where several thousands of American POW's, together with POW's from a number of other countries, were held from the winter of 1944-1945 onwards.[41] When Zussman is forced to give up the names of Jewish American POW's, he refuses to do so, by stating that the captured soldiers "are Americans, period".[42] As a result, all captured American soldiers are sent to Berga, a sub-camp of the Buchenwald concentration camp complex built in November 1944.[43] Here, CODWWII's narrative suggests that American POW's in general suffered this fate through a united opposition against the racist worldview of the Nazis. However, during the war, primarily Jewish American soldiers were subjected to this punishment, together with approximately 350 soldiers who had violated disciplinary camp rules.[44]

Based on this analysis, the following characterization can be given: CODWWII also instrumentalizes the history of the Holocaust, in support of a repetition of the dominant American cultural narrative of the Second World War as a 'good' war in which the US stood united in its fight against the Axis powers and Nazism in particular. When at the end of the game, the protagonist, and with him the player, can walk around in a virtual rendition of the Berga sub-camp, the character, and with him the player, becomes one of the soldiers who discovers the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime in the camp and pledges to testify about them, in a portrayal that is directly reminiscent of some of the scenes in the ninth episode of the series *Band of Brothers* (entitled 'Why We Fight') (David Frankel, 2001) (**Figure 4.3**).

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41 For more information about Stalag IX-B, see: USHMM, "Mannschafts-Stammlager (Stalag) IX B," https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/mannschafts-stammlager-stalag-ix-b, accessed September 30, 2020.

42 For the quote, see for example: LeedStraiF, "Call of Duty WW2 - Mission 10: Ambush 'Veteran Mode' Walkthrough (1080p60FPS)," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XIH8xLjxnXc, accessed September 30, 2020.

43 For more information about the Berga sub-camp, see: USHMM, "Berga-Elster ('Schwalbe V')," https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/berga-elster-schwalbe-v, accessed September 30, 2020.

44 USHMM, "Mannschafts-Stammlager (Stalag) IX B."

Figure 4.3: Screenshots taken from the level 'Epilogue' in *Call of Duty: WWII*

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GLgWLAWvc4o (Screenshots taken at 20:41, 21:36 and 21:59), accessed October 18, 2020.

In the analysis above, I have shown how both WTNO and CODWWII depict aspects of the Holocaust to achieve secondary goals. The two games aim to offer a representation of the horrific and racist actions of the Nazis and the involvement of US American soldiers during the Second World War in Europe, but in a way that is ultimately primarily meant to give players an entertaining gameplay experience (or to achieve other goals, such as, in the case of CODWWII, contribute to military recruitment efforts). As a result, these two games only highlight the historical events and processes that led to the Second World War, Nazism and the Holocaust in distinct ways and to a limited extent, while reiterating on stereotypical and counter-productive understandings of them. In what follows, I therefore reflect on how digital games as a format can be adopted more directly from a learning perspective to contribute to critical historical thinking about the Holocaust. This effort connects to the principles of serious gaming, which is centred on the creation of digital games that are not only or primarily made to entertain, but also to achieve additional goals, such as various learning- or health-related outcomes.[45] I reflect on this topic based on a discussion of recent historiographical trends in relation to the study of the Second World War and an analysis of the game *Papers, Please*.

4.4 Towards a 'Liminal' Perspective in Digital Games about the Second World War

4.4.1 Historiographical perspectives

Over the past decade, several new conceptual frameworks have been developed to characterize the occupation of Europe during the Second World War and the involvement of European societies in the genocidal violence implemented by the Nazi regime. For example, in the book *The Holocaust and European Societies*, German historians Frank Bajohr and Andrea Löw highlight how the categories 'perpetrators', 'victims' and 'bystanders', once formulated by Jewish American historian Raul Hilberg to characterize people's behaviour during the Holocaust, are inherently static in nature, and therefore inadequate to capture the dynamic nature of people's conduct during the war. As a result, Bajohr and Löw plea for a study of social actors and -processes:

> *"Under the intense and ever-changing pressures of violence, war and occupation that prevailed in the Nazi era, people's positions could change from moment to moment: they were seldom fixed. […] There is much to be said for an analytical perspective that defines those involved as social actors who acted and reacted to these developments in manifold and highly differentiated ways."*[46]

45 See for example: Ralf Dörner et al., *Serious Games: Foundations, Concepts and Practice* (Berlin: Springer Switzerland, 2016), in particular 1-34.

46 For the entire paragraph, see: Frank Bajohr and Andrea Löw, "Beyond the 'Bystander'," 3-14. For the quote, see: Ibidem, 4-5. For the categories formulated by Hilberg, see: Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators,*

This assessment is mirrored by Dutch historian Ismee Tames, who calls for a new way to study resistance during wartime, in particular during the Second World War. Instead of interpreting the actions of those involved in terms of 'right' or 'wrong' from a contemporary perspective, she proposes to view them as resulting from an experience of 'liminality' in times of political transformation. The concept of liminality comes from the field of anthropology, where it was introduced by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner to characterize the cultural significance of 'rites of passage': ceremonial rituals in a society that mark the transition of an individual's life from one stage to another. During such rituals, people enter a 'liminal' stage: a moment in which they no longer inhabit their previous identity or status, nor have adopted a new one, thus temporarily residing beyond the established socio-cultural categories of society.[47] Tames argues that people who are confronted with war and persecution, also in particular during the Second World War, undergo a similar transformation. Faced with the new realities of occupation, oppression, persecution and scarcity, people are forced or provoked to reflect on their current ways of living and the extent to which they can uphold their habits and identities.[48] The observation is useful beyond the study of wartime resistance, in that it sheds light into the uncertainty that led people to react dynamically to the persecution and mass violence that were central to the Holocaust. For example, whether or not people in Nazi Germany and the occupied territories decided to offer Jewish victims of Nazi persecution refuge or help them to flee was dependent on a variety of factors, including pre-existing attitudes and beliefs, but also a fear for the repercussions of dissident actions.[49]

Digital games have two advantages in comparison to other formats when addressing these and other aspects of the Holocaust and the Second World War. Firstly, as argued by media scholar Jeroen Jansz, digital games offer players a 'private laboratory' in which they can safely engage in emotional experimentation without causing harm in the real world, as actions unfold in a virtual and fictional environment.[50] Secondly, as digital games are centred on moment-to-moment interaction, they have a high potential to illustrate the dynamics of human conduct and place players in a position of liminality within the confines of a fictional representation. I will illustrate this latter premise based on a discussion of the game *Papers, Please*.

Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe, 1933-1945 (New York: Aaron Asher Books, 1992).

47 For a concise discussion of these concepts as introduced by van Gennep and Turner, see: Nigel Rapport and Joanna Overing, *Social and Cultural Anthropology: The Key Concepts* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 229-236.

48 For the entire paragraph, see: Tames, "About Thresholds: Liminality and the Experience of Resistance."

49 See for example the contributions in the section 'Protagonists' in: Peter Hayes and John K. Roth, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Holocaust Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

50 Jeroen Jansz, "The Emotional Appeal of Violent Video Games for Adolescent Males," *Communication Theory* 15, no. 3 (2005): 219-241. For the notion 'private laboratory', see in particular: Ibidem, 229-235.

Figure 4.4: Screenshot taken from the game *Papers, Please*

Source: https://www.mobygames.com/game/windows/papers-please/screenshots/gameShotId,649531/, accessed October 18, 2020.

4.4.2 Towards a position of 'liminality' in the digital game *Papers, Please*

Papers, Please (hereafter: PP; **Figure 4.4**) is a point-and-click game in which players take on the position of an anonymous immigration officer at a border checkpoint in the fictional Eastern Bloc country of Arstotzka in the 1980s, in the aftermath of a war with a neighbouring country. In the game, the character/player is asked to examine those who want to enter the country, in light of the not yet fully subsided wartime tensions. Players do this by comparing the paperwork they submit to a series of guidelines and documents given at the onset of every new workday. When applicants are in possession of forged papers or are not able to present the required documents, players have the capacity to refuse, or, at a later stage, detain them. For every application players handle correctly, they are given a payment, which they can use to cover daily costs such as rent and medical bills. When players process too many applications incorrectly, they are given a fine, making it difficult to provide for themselves and their in-game family.[51]

In order to successfully play PP, players need to carefully compare and assess travel documents presented to them by NPC travellers. In addition, players are challenged to process these documents quickly, as the amount of money they receive at the end of a workday depends on the number of applications they assess correctly. Throughout the game, the assessment of the travel documents also becomes increasingly difficult, as the guidelines that players need to follow constantly change and become more complicated.

Secondly, the game regularly confronts players with moral dilemmas. For example,

51 For a general overview of the game, see: Papers, Please, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papers,_Please, accessed September 30, 2020. See also: Lucas Pope, *Papers, Please*, https://papersplea.se/, accessed September 30, 2020.

early in the game, a female character will come up to the player and mention that the male character behind her is trying to sell her into sexual slavery. Here, players need to decide whether or not they will deny the male character access at the expense of a fine or let him through at the expense of the wellbeing of the female character. More significantly in light of Tames' historiographical discussion of 'liminal' experiences highlighted above, some of the game's moral dilemmas explicitly force players to position themselves vis-à-vis the game's fictional and corrupt Eastern Bloc regime in light of experiences of uncertainty. For example, at a later point in the game, players encounter a member of 'EZIC', a secret organization that aims to overthrow Arstotzka's regime.[52] During this and subsequent encounters with EZIC, players need to decide whether or not they will help the organization and risk being arrested, or work against it and risk being killed if EZIC manages to overthrow the corrupt Eastern Bloc regime. In that respect, it is equally important to highlight that the anonymous game character cannot rely on any form of legal protection, and that players have to take into consideration denunciatory practices. For example, when players accept briberies and start to earn too much money, other characters can denounce them to the authorities. This means that players also actively need to reflect on whether they can trust other characters and whether or not certain actions are worth the risk.[53]

As discussed by game scholars Michael Heron and Pauline Belford, PP explicitly externalizes these moral dilemmas onto its players. While digital games often include 'morality systems' identifying certain in-game actions as 'right' or 'wrong', many of these systems are superficial in nature, in that choosing between the 'right' and 'wrong' options in these games tends to lead to various ludic and narrative rewards (such as access to new virtual weapons or storylines). This motivates players to make choices on an instrumental rather than a moral basis. In PP this is less the case: choices do not offer additional benefits, and due to the anonymity and lack of characterization of the game's protagonist, PP directly projects the moral dilemmas onto the player, within the confines of its fictional ludic narrative.[54]

In light of the observations made above, PP offers a promising venue for people to engage in a reflection on the nature of a 'liminal' position, also in particular while living under a dictatorial regime while facing the prospect of war. However, given that PP's

52 See for example: Papers Please Wiki, "EZIC," https://papersplease.fandom.com/wiki/EZIC, accessed September 30, 2020.

53 For a discussion of the nature of denunciatory practices, also in particular in relation to Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union under Josef Stalin, see for example: Sheila Fitzpatrick and Robert Gellately, "Introduction to the Practices of Denunciation in Modern European History," *The Journal of Modern History* 68, no. 4 (1996): 747-767.

54 For the entire paragraph, see: Michael J. Heron and Pauline H. Belford, "Do You Feel Like a Hero Yet? Externalized Morality in Video Games," *Journal of Games Criticism* 1, no. 2 (2014), http://gamescriticism.org/articles/heronbelford-1-2, accessed September 30, 2020. For a more elaborate discussion, see also: Miguel Sicart, *The Ethics of Computer Games* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2009).

narrative takes place in a fictional communist country, it is first necessary to emphasize that the experience of living under a communist dictatorship, for example in the Eastern Bloc or in the Soviet Union, cannot and should not straightforwardly be equated with the experience of living in Nazi Germany or the territories occupied by the Nazi regime and its allies during the Second World War. This can most clearly be illustrated when comparing the dictatorial regimes of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, where the available historiographical literature identifies several structural points of distinction between the two regimes in terms of governance, use of violence and the social identities they gave rise to.[55] It is more difficult to illustrate when discussing Nazi Germany and the dictatorships of the Eastern Bloc, since comparative historical analyses of the two are scarce. Nevertheless, also here obvious differences can be identified.[56] And finally, significant distinctions also need to be highlighted when discussing the Nazi occupation of Europe, as most historians agree that the Nazi occupation of Central and Eastern Europe reached levels of brutality not seen in Western Europe, resulting in millions of civilian and military deaths.[57] In this context however, I build on a comparative argument presented by historian Paul Hagenloh in relation to Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union as the two most prominent European dictatorships of the first half of the twentieth century. Hagenloh argues that both regimes implemented a "coherent set of violent state practices" prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, involving varying degrees of "surveillance, denunciation, preventative detention, population registration and mobility restrictions, forced labour, extra-legal repression of political suspects, and […] mass repression of entire swathes of domestic populations who were defined as internal 'aliens' on ethno-religious or socio-political grounds and targeted for expulsion or total annihilation." These state practices were continued and further escalated when the Second World War broke out.[58] This comparative observation is also significant when discussing the communist dictatorships of the Eastern Bloc, as these adopted not all, but many similar state policies identified by Hagenloh, to varying degrees. As PP's protagonist and the player is directly confronted with the consequences of these similar policies, it has the potential to demonstrate to players through experiential engagement with a fictional ludic narrative, how people's behaviour could change rapidly and dynamically when living under such uncertain conditions. This is also directly relevant when reflecting on the history of the

55 See for example: Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick, eds., *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). One of the central aims of the book is to offer a historical critique of 'totalitarianism' as a philosophical and social scientific concept.

56 See for example: Mary Fulbrook, *Dissonant Lives: Generation and Violence through the German Dictatorships* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

57 See for example: Mazower, *Hitler's Empire: Nazi Rule in Occupied Europe* (London: Allen Lane, 2008).

58 Paul Hagenloh, "Discipline, Terror, and the State," in Nicholas Doumanis, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of European History 1914-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 343-361. For the quote, see Ibidem, 344.

Holocaust, and both the Second World War and the Nazi occupation of Europe that serve as important contexts to it, as discussed by historians Bajohr, Löw and Tames (see above).

When reflecting on PP's potential to place someone in a position of liminality, it is important to highlight a number of inherent limitations, also of digital games as a representational and performative format in general. Firstly, the activity of playing digital games such as PP does not directly offer players the possibility to experience the same sense of liminality that people experienced during the Second World War. The activity of playing games revolves around adopting a set of premises that are primarily meaningful within the context of a fictionalized ludic framework and that cannot directly be projected onto the real world outside of that context.[59] In addition, the activity of playing a digital game needs to be characterized as an inherently limited and indirect form of experiential engagement with the past, in that it takes on the form of a "motoric, cognitive and emotional engagement with a computer as a fiction-producing piece of technology" rather than a directly mimetic experience.[60] A second significant limitation lies in the observation that the people who play games such as PP make choices based on contemporary values and epistemologies and that PP in particular presents a causal model of human conduct that can be misinterpreted in exculpatory terms. As players attempt to earn money and provide food and shelter for their virtual family, PP minimizes the role played by attitudes and ideological beliefs, which can make the game counterproductive when one would want to discuss ideologically motivated forms of perpetratorship in occupied Europe during the Second World War. Digital games as a format also tend to overemphasize the significance of human agency over structural factors more generally, which can lead to an underappreciation of the latter in shaping the genocidal violence implemented by the Nazi regime. Thirdly, one needs to address the question of generalizability. A game such as PP sheds light onto some of the factors that can be relevant to understand why people in Nazi-controlled territories behaved dynamically, and how the Holocaust unfolded the way it did because of it, in line with the observations made by Bajohr, Löw and Tames. At the same time, PP does so by emphasizing factors that are relevant to understand the nature of dictatorial regimes more generally. This creates the risk that a game such as PP mainly provide insight into processes that ignore the specificity of the Nazi regime and the Holocaust and are used to formulate superficial ahistorical lessons about them.[61]

59 Here, one can refer to the concept of the 'magic circle', as formulated by historian and anthropologist Johan Huizinga. See: Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2004), 92-99. See also: Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949).

60 Pieter J.B.J. Van den Heede, "Digital entertainment gaming as a site for (informal) historical learning? A reflection on possibilities and limitations," forthcoming.

61 See for example: Arthur Chapman, "Learning the Lessons of the Holocaust: A Critical Exploration," in Stuart J. Foster, Andy Pearce and Alice Pettigrew, eds., *Holocaust Education: Contemporary Challenges and Controversies* (London: UCL Press, 2020), 50-73.

The risks identified above can be addressed in a number of ways. Firstly, it is important to emphasize that the goal of the current discussion of PP as a liminal game is to illustrate how it can be used as a source of inspiration to create digital games that more directly address the liminal experience of living in Nazi Germany or wartime occupied Europe. As such, the critiques formulated above can be taken into account when creating new games.[62] Secondly, as the current discussion closely connects to serious game design aimed at creating digital games that can also be used in the classroom and other formal learning environments, teachers can actively discuss these limitations. This is a productive instruction strategy in relation to digital games in general, as the latter inherently present ideological arguments about the (historical) world.[63] Thirdly, I want to highlight the following element: as (digital) games are inherently systemic in nature, they at a first glance appear to be better suited to shed light into ideal-typical societal phenomena rather than historical ones. However, as players also autonomously make choices while engaging with an open-ended digital game such as PP, the outcome of the individual interaction between a player and PP as an algorithmic artefact does tend to be specific, which points to the significance of the historically contingent. In that respect, the explicitly fictional nature of PP's central narrative can offer an additional advantage. Although people who play games such as PP might have general knowledge about dictatorships and wartime violence before playing the game, they usually have no prior knowledge about PP's specific in-game events. This invites players to reflect on their activity of playing the game and dealing with the consequences of their in-game actions as a historically contingent process.

Finally, to complement this critical assessment of PP, it is significant to show that many of the meaning-making potentials discussed above are actively identified by players. For example, in a sample of the 100 reviews written by players on the gaming platform Steam that were identified as 'the most helpful' reviews of the game by other players on 9 June 2020, 99 of which were positive, 24 contained explicit references to the experiences of liminality discussed above. This is illustrated in the quotes below, which sometime refer to a broader totalitarian frame, but nevertheless explicitly refer to aspects of liminality:[64]

62 One possible approach lies in creating digital games that are centered around a 'rhetoric of failure', in which players are supposed to lose, not because of a lack of skill, but because the game deliberately aims to produce an undesirable outcome to convey a message. See: Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2007), 84-89.

63 See for example: Bogost, op. cit.; Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2009); Miguel Sicart, *Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2013).

64 This assessment is based on a corpus of 100 English reviews for the game Papers, Please on the gaming platform Steam that were identified by the player community as the most helpful. On June 9, 2020, Papers, Please had a total number of 30.667 user reviews on Steam, 96% of which are positive. For the official page of Papers, Please on Steam, see: https://store.steampowered.com/app/239030/Papers_Please/, accessed September 30, 2020.

"[…] the setting and stories teach a painful lesson about life and work in a totalitarian state. The difficult choices you have to make will have you notice that, in certain situations, you might be more ruthless than you had imagined."[65]

"While playing it you will not only be confronted with moral dilemmas and unexpected inspections, you might also be encouraged to think about oppressive regimes and what they mean for the people that have to live in them."[66]

"You are doing your job and suddenly all hell breaks loose when a terrorist explodes a bomb on the frontier. This [sic] moments are terrifying, as it may be because of you that the terrorist is in the frontier, because you let him pass, and you don't know how the government will react to that."[67]

Taken together, these observations point to a significant potential of the digital game PP to foster reflection on experiences of liminality in times of political oppression, in a way that is directly reminiscent of conceptual frameworks that have been put forward in recent years in the historiography of the Second World War and the Holocaust in particular. As such, PP's design and gameplay should serve as a meaningful source of inspiration for games that aim to tackle this topic.

4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I first discussed how for several decades, digital games about the Second World War mostly omitted references to the Holocaust, due to the sensitive character of this history and the often-trivial reputation of games among wider publics. As a result, digital games have long offered sanitized depictions of the Second World War, in which instances of mass violence, and the genocidal violence of the Nazi regime in particular, have been continuously rendered invisible. Secondly, I discussed how this situation has gradually changed over the past decade, as illustrated by the fact that two popular and commercially successful FPS-games, *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Call of Duty: WWII*, have recently included more visible depictions of aspects of the Holocaust. However, throughout my analysis of these two games, I have argued that they instrumentalize the Holocaust by either adopting explicit imagery of (fictionalized) Nazi atrocities to motivate cathartic virtual revenge against Nazism or by integrating this imagery into a reiteration of dominant patriotic cultural narratives. As such, both games

65 AllOutWout, "Review for Papers, Please," November 25, 2017, https://steamcommunity.com/id/alloutwout/recommended/239030, accessed September 30, 2020.

66 Alexspeed, "Review for Papers, Please," November 24, 2016, https://steamcommunity.com/id/alexspeed/recommended/239030, accessed September 30, 2020.

67 Craxzy $, "Review for Papers, Please," January 30, 2018, https://steamcommunity.com/id/craxzy/recommended/239030, accessed September 30, 2020.

do not diverge far from their previous incarnations, in that they reiterate upon the same binary notions of good and evil and (nationalist) mythologies of heroic sacrifice.

However, in light of this observation, I have equally argued that digital games do not only have the potential to undermine, but enrich our critical engagement with the Second World War, and the involvement of European societies in the genocidal violence implemented by the Nazi regime in particular. Digital games can do so by leveraging a power that other forms of 'textuality' do not directly possess: an ability to let players experientially engage in moment-to-moment decision making and face the consequences of their simulated actions in a safe virtual environment. In a digital game such as *Papers, Please*, this is done by confronting players with a fictional narrative centred on dictatorial oppression and sudden societal change, which can illustrate how people react dynamically when forced into a position of liminal uncertainty, in a way that directly connects to historiographical approaches recently proposed by historians of the Second World War.

Based on these observations, a number of recommendations can be formulated, especially for game developers and educators as key stakeholders. For game developers, the current analysis not only shows the potential of liminal ludic designs. It also illustrates the need to further reflect on their possibilities and limitations when creating games that aim to contribute to a critical reflection on the social dynamics that characterize (historical) episodes of violent conflict and dictatorial rule, and the history of the Nazi regime and the Holocaust in particular.

For educators, the current analysis illustrates how it is significant to critically assess the historical representations presented in digital games, as they for example perpetuate binary understandings of good and evil or present distinct causal models of historical change. At the same time, the analysis has shown that it can be meaningful to integrate digital games centred around dynamic social action and experiences of liminality into their teaching and knowledge dissemination efforts, as the activity of playing them has a significant potential to stimulate critical historical reflection. As games such as *Papers, Please* are centred on forms of experientiality that can only indirectly be expressed through other cultural forms, it can be advantageous as well as ethical to adopt similar digital games to foster reflection on the Holocaust.

In chapter five, I turn my attention to how players reflect on their engagement with the Second World War and the Holocaust through gameplay.

A mind that is stretched by a new experience can never go back to its old dimensions.

Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.

Chapter 5: 'Press Escape to Skip Concentration Camp'? Studying Player Reflections on Engagements with the Holocaust through Digital Gaming[1]

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I study how players reflect on playing the digital entertainment games *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Call of Duty: WWII*. I do so in response to the second central question of this dissertation. Historically-themed digital games not only represent the past, but they also actively invite players to directly become actors in historical events that are "made available as interactive experiences."[2] This raises the question how ludic engagements with the Second World War, and the Holocaust in particular as a sensitive and potentially contentious historical topic, resonate with the historical awareness of players. This question is especially significant in countries where the Holocaust has taken up an increasingly central position in how the Second World War is remembered.[3] As highlighted in the introductory chapter of this dissertation, this is also the case in the Netherlands, the country where this study was carried out, since the 1960s.[4]

This chapter presents a focus group study on what it meant for players to ludically engage with the Second World War, and the Holocaust in particular, when playing the digital entertainment games *Wolfenstein: The New Order* (hereafter: WTNO) and *Call of Duty: WWII* (hereafter: CODWWII). I aim to achieve two central goals. Firstly, I analyse how the participants of the focus group sessions reflected on playing these two digital entertainment games from a historical perspective in general. I do so because player reflections in relation to historical digital games, also in particular about the Second

1 A modified version of this chapter was submitted to a journal as: Pieter J.B.J. Van den Heede, "'Press Escape to Skip Concentration'? Studying Player Reflections on Engagements with the Holocaust through Digital Gaming."

2 For the quote, see: Holger Pötzsch and Vit Šisler, "Playing Cultural Memory: Framing History in Call of Duty: Black Ops and Czechoslovakia 38-89: Assassination," *Games and Culture* 14, no. 1 (2019): 6. See also: Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History* (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 30-55.

3 Richard N. Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner, and Claudio Fogu, eds., *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006); Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006); Aleida Assmann, "The Holocaust - A Global Memory? Extensions and Limits of a New Memory Community," in Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad, eds., *Memory in a Global Age: Discourses, Practices and Trajectories* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 97-117.

4 See for example: Frank van Vree, "De Dynamiek van de Herinnering: Nederland in Een Internationale Context," in Frank van Vree and Rob van der Laarse, eds., *De Dynamiek van de Herinnering: Nederland en de Tweede Wereldoorlog in een Internationale Context* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Bert Bakker, 2009), 17-40.

Figure 5.1: Marketing image for 'The Reality', one of the gaming events in the Netherlands attended for this study (Copyright: Stichting The Reality)

Source: https://www.facebook.com/therealitylan/photos/2010626005647559, accessed October 19, 2020.

World War, have only been studied to a limited extent.[5] Secondly, I analyse how the participants of the study reflected on their engagement with the sensitive history of the Holocaust through gameplay. To do so, and to study ludic engagements with sensitive and/or contentious pasts more generally, I develop a new concept, 'gaming fever', based on the notion 'simulation fever' formulated by American game scholar Ian Bogost.[6] This concept allows for the study of ludic engagements with sensitive and contentious historical topics, a significant aspect of meaning-making in relation to digital gaming that has remained underexplored until now. I apply gaming fever as a category of analysis when studying how participants of the focus group study reflected on their gameplay activities.

In what follows, I first discuss how both historians and media- and educational scholars have studied player experiences and reflections in relation to historically-themed digital entertainment games set during the Second World War. Next, I discuss the notion gaming fever and how it relates to the set-up of this study. Thirdly, I present my research methodology, which is based on focus group discussions held during

5 Sian Beavers, The Informal Learning of History with Digital Games (PhD dissertation, The Open University UK, 2020), http://oro.open.ac.uk/69919/, accessed September 30, 2020; Stephanie Fisher, "Playing with World War II: A Small-Scale Study of Learning in Video Games," *Loading… The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association* 8, no. 5 (2011): 71-89; 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: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 16, no. 2 (2016), http://gamestudies.org/1602/articles/oneilfeenstra, accessed September 30, 2020; Joel Penney, "'No Better Way to Experience World War II': Authenticity and Ideology in the Call of Duty and Medal of Honor Player Communities," in Nina B. Huntemann and Matthew T. Payne, eds., *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 191-205.

6 Ian Bogost, *Unit Operations. An Approach to Video Game Criticism* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2006), 106-109.

gaming events in the Netherlands (**Figure 5.1**). This rich qualitative method is well-suited for an in-depth exploration of topics about which only little is known. Given that the focus group sessions were in part centred on the discussion of specific scenes from WTNO and CODWWII, I also discuss the affordances of these scenes, i.e. the ways in which they allow for player engagement in the context of a fictional ludic narration.[7] Finally, I present my findings, where I discuss how players reflected on WTNO and CODWWII as historical ludic representations in general and as ludic representations of the Holocaust in particular.

5.2 Literature Review: Player Reflections on Ludic Engagements with the History of the Second World War

Only little research has been carried out on how player reflect on their ludic engagements with historical digital games outside formal learning environments. Most of the available studies assess the use of digital games in formal history education. These studies have pointed to positive learning outcomes in relation to the promotion of historical thinking skills, but also to significant obstacles to achieve those learning outcomes and several necessary preconditions for the successful implementation of digital entertainment games in the history classroom.[8] A lack of attention to how players reflect on their play activities outside of the classroom also applies specifically to digital entertainment games about the Second World War, even though some studies are available on how players reflect on playing the games from the *Medal of Honor*- and *Call of Duty*-series about this war that were published between 1999 and 2008. These studies point to shared observations.

Based on a survey-study, American media scholar Joel Penney has analysed how players negotiate the ideological meanings that are embedded in the ludic historical narratives of the aforementioned *Medal of Honor*- and *Call of Duty*-games, as discussed in the previous chapter. Based on cultural theorist Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, Penney shows how *Medal of Honor*- and *Call of Duty*-players tend to interpret the

7 Jonas Linderoth, "Beyond the Digital Divide: An Ecological Approach to Gameplay," *ToDIGRA: Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association* 1, no. 1 (2013), http://todigra.org/index.php/todigra/article/view/9, accessed September 30, 2020. The notion 'affordance' was first introduced by American psychologist James Gibson. See: James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Hillsdale NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1986).

8 For a reflection on how digital games can be used to foster historical learning, see: Jeremiah B. McCall, "Teaching History With Digital Historical Games," *Simulation and Gaming* 47, no. 4 (2016): 517-542; Karen L. Schrier, *Learning, Education & Games Volume 1: Curricular and Design Considerations* (Pittsburgh PA: ETC Press, 2014). For a discussion of opportunities and obstacles when using historical digital games in the history classroom, see for example: Kurt Squire, *Replaying History: Learning World History Through Playing* Civilization III (PhD dissertation, Indiana University, 2004), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259532960_Replaying_History_Learning_World_History_through_playing_Civilization_III, accessed September 30, 2020; William R. Watson, Christopher J. Mong, and Constance A. Harris, "A Case Study of the In-Class Use of a Video Game for Teaching High School History," *Computers & Education* 56 (2011): 466-474. For an overview of the literature on the use of digital games for learning in general, see for example: Nicola Whitton, *Digital Games and Learning: Research and Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

ideological layer of these games, centred on militaristic and patriotic values, in divergent ways: while for some players, playing the games reinforces their pro-military and patriotic attitudes, others actively reject such a reading. It leads Penney to conclude that *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty* should not be characterized as "agents of propaganda but rather as instruments of 'soft power' – small pieces of a larger cultural system which promotes hegemonic western ideology around the world in a persuasively credible but decidedly non-coercive fashion."[9]

Secondly, educational scholars Kevin O'Neill and Bill Feenstra have studied to what extent players consider digital entertainment games such as *Medal of Honor* to be trustworthy sources of historical knowledge. Based on guided gameplay sessions and follow-up interviews with 12 university students, O'Neill and Feenstra observed that players can be very critical of the potential of games such as *Medal of Honor* to serve as a source for historical knowledge. They also highlight how the participants of the study actively pointed to ludic and commercial considerations of the involved game creators as reasons why *Medal of Honor* and other digital entertainment games in general might be less trustworthy than other sources of historical information such as non-fiction books and documentaries.[10]

Both Penney and O'Neill and Feenstra emphasize different aspects of how players reflect on playing games from the *Medal of Honor*- and *Call of Duty*-series, but they also make the following shared observation: players tend to appreciate the perceived authenticity of both game series, in that players indicate that playing *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty* allowed them to experience the violence of wartime combat more directly than other media representations and helped them to reflect on what it must have been like to participate in wartime battles.[11] Even though this perceived authenticity can be interrogated in significant ways,[12] it as an important aspect of how players appreciate *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty*. I will identify it as an appreciation for the 'reenactive potential' of the aforementioned games, in line with how American literary scholar Brian Rejack discusses FPS-games about the Second World War as sites for 'virtual re-enactment'.[13]

A final set of observations on how players reflect on ludically engaging with the Second World War through *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty* is made by educational researcher Stephanie Fisher, who has studied how players adopt these games for learning.

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9 For the entire paragraph, see: Joel Penney, "'No Better Way to Experience World War II'," 191-205. For the quote, see: Ibidem, 203.

10 For the entire paragraph, see: Kevin O'Neill and Bill Feenstra, "'Honestly, I Would Stick with the Books'."

11 Joel Penney, op.cit., 197-199; Kevin O'Neill and Bill Feenstra, art. cit.

12 See for example: Pieter J.B.J. Van den Heede, "Gaming," in Vanessa Agnew, Jonathan Lamb and Juliane Tomann, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies: Key Terms in the Field* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 84-88.

13 Brian Rejack, "Toward a Virtual Reenactment of History: Video Games and the Recreation of the Past," *Rethinking History* 11, no. 3 (2007): 411-425.

In her analysis, Fisher demonstrates how playing the games from both series not only shaped the prior expectations with which players entered the history classroom to learn about the Second World War. She also demonstrates how playing *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty* can facilitate forms of 'tangential learning', whereby players, through their ludic engagement with the game, are introduced to a new body of knowledge which motivates them to engage in further exploration.[14] This especially applies to the various military technologies and battles that are depicted in both game series, as Fisher, Penney and O'Neill and Feenstra equally demonstrate how players were particularly keen to learn more about these elements of the *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty*-games.[15]

Taken together, the aforementioned studies already shed significant light into how players reflect on their ludic engagements with FPS-games about the Second World War. At the same time, they overlook other digital entertainment games such as *Wolfenstein*, which provide more explicitly fictional representations of this war, as discussed in the previous chapter. In addition, the aforementioned *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty*-games do not include explicit depictions of the Holocaust, which makes it meaningful to explore how players reflect on playing WTNO and CODWWII. I will do so by applying the concept 'gaming fever'. In what follows, I further develop this concept.

5.3 Gaming Fever and Sensitive/Contentious Pasts

To carry out the current study, I expand on the concept of 'simulation fever' as defined by game scholar Ian Bogost. Simulation fever refers to a sense of unease that players can experience when ludically engaging with a digital game in general as a procedural artefact. As argued by Bogost, this unease is related to a referential disconnect that can manifest itself between the procedural core of (a section of) a game as a selective modelling of real processes and behaviours, and the conceptions that players have of these processes and behaviours prior to playing the game. An example thereof is when players have a different understanding of how frontline combat unfolds in comparison to how frontline combat is simulated in a game. According to Bogost, this disconnect can lead to two possible meaning-making outcomes: 'simulation resignation', i.e. the acceptance of (an aspect of) a simulation without further interrogation of its underlying premises, or 'simulation denial', i.e. the active rejection of (an aspect of) a simulation as an inadequate modelling of reality. Bogost states that, to arrive at either one of these meaning-making outcomes, players 'work through' a sense of discomfort or 'simulation fever', when subjectively experiencing the simulation.[16]

In this study, I expand on Bogost's notion of simulation fever in a twofold manner. Firstly, I argue that it is important to speak of a sense of 'gaming fever' rather than

14 For the entire paragraph, see: Stephanie Fisher, "Playing with World War II," 77-82.
15 Joel Penney, op. cit., 197-199; Kevin O'Neill and Bill Feenstra, art. cit.; Stephanie Fisher, op. cit., 77-82.
16 For the entire paragraph, see: Ian Bogost, *Unit Operations*, 106-109.

'simulation fever' when studying games. I do so because simulation fever underexposes the fact that the procedurality of a game is both inherently embedded in a semiotic layer of sounds, images and narrative building blocks, and actively and creatively interpreted by players, as argued by game scholar Miguel Sicart.[17] As the procedurality of a digital game can only be communicated through its semiotic layer and both layers are simultaneously appropriated by players, a sense of 'fever' will always result from the subjective player experience of engaging with both the procedurality and semiosis of a game in their mutual interconnection. Secondly, I argue that a sense of 'gaming fever' as a broader notion not only results from 'working through' referential gaps between the simulational model of reality embedded in a game and a player's prior conceptions of this reality. Following the observations made by Chapman and Linderoth about how games are often perceived to inherently trivialize sensitive and contentious (historical) topics by recontextualizing them within a ludic frame,[18] I argue that a sense of gaming fever can also result from ludic engagements with topics that are considered to be taboo or controversial in a given socio-cultural context and historical culture. This is especially the case since games cast players as active agents in an unfolding narration of events, which can lead players to experience responsibility or even complicity in how the narration unfolds based on their in-game actions.[19] In what follows, I analyse whether or not, and in what ways, players identify feelings of gaming fever that can be related to their ludic engagement with the Holocaust.

5.4 Research Methodology

To analyse how players reflect on playing the digital entertainment games WTNO and CODWWII from a historical perspective, and whether players experience a sense of gaming fever when they ludically engage with the Holocaust and if so, what this experience amounts to, I carried out a focus group study. I attended two dedicated gaming events in the Netherlands, where I set up six focus group discussions (three discussions for WTNO and three for CODWWII), based on an on-site opportunity sample of players who had played the games or other games in the series and expressed an active interest to

17 For both arguments, see: Miguel Sicart, *Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2013), 49-56; 61-82.

18 Adam Chapman and Jonas Linderoth, "Exploring the Limits of Play: A Case Study of Representations of Nazism in Games," in Torill E. Mortensen, Jonas Linderoth and Ashley M.L. Brown, eds., *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), 140-145.

19 Jeroen Jansz, "The Emotional Appeal of Violent Video Games for Adolescent Males," *Communication Theory* 15, no. 3 (2005): 229-235. See also: Miguel Sicart, *Beyond Choices*, 21-23; Tobi Smethurst and Stef Craps, "Playing with Trauma: Interreactivity, Empathy, and Complicity in The Walking Dead Video Game," *Games and Culture* 10, no. 3 (2015): 269-290; Kristine Jørgensen, "The Positive Discomfort of Spec Ops: The Line," *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 16, no. 2, http://gamestudies.org/1602/articles/jorgensenkristine, accessed September 30, 2020; Stephanie de Smale, *Ludic Memory Networks: Following Translations and Circulations of War Memory in Digital Popular Culture* (PhD dissertation, Utrecht University, 2019), 143-165.

participate in the discussions. I adopted this qualitative method because it allows for an in-depth exploration of relatively unknown topics. It is particularly suited as a method to study how people construe meanings of cultural texts through group interaction, since focus group discussions can be characterized as contexts in which everyday forms of communication are simulated. This means that focus groups tend to more directly "reflect the processes through which meaning is constructed in everyday life."[20] I carried out the focus group discussions on-site during gaming events to allow for a higher degree of ecological validity, which is concerned with whether or not research findings are "applicable to people's every day, natural social settings."[21]

Prior to the focus group discussions, the participants were informed about the main goal of the study, i.e. to discuss how they reflected on playing the games WTNO and CODWWII from a historical perspective, and how they reflected on the distinct scenes in both games that depict the Holocaust (see below). They were given an overview of the set-up of the study and asked to sign a consent form if they were interested to participate (**Appendix 3**). During each focus group session, I used the following protocol. In a first phase, the participants were asked to reflect on their experiences of playing WTNO and CODWWII, and other games from the *Wolfenstein*- and *Call of Duty*-series. During this phase, I used a PowerPoint-presentation to project promotional images of games from the *Wolfenstein*- and *Call of Duty*-series, as a visual reminder to support the discussion, as the participants did not play the games during the focus group session. In a second phase, the participants were shown and asked to reflect on three pre-recorded YouTube-videos of scenes in WTNO and CODWWII that offer a ludic representation of the Holocaust (see below; each scene had a duration of approximately one to five minutes). To structure the focus group sessions, I used a series of guiding questions centred on the interest of the participants in history, their appreciation of the games from the *Wolfenstein*- and *Call of Duty*-series and their reflections on the selected scenes form WTNO and CODWWII (**Appendix 4**).

To analyse the discussions, which lasted between one hour and one hour and a half in total, I made on-site audio- and video recordings. I made verbatim transcripts of these recordings, which I analysed by carrying out a thematic analysis as outlined by psychologists Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke.[22] This thematic analysis was inductive in nature, but it is also important to emphasize that the analysis was actively informed by the concepts identified in the literature review and when discussing the ludic affordances of the selected scenes from WTNO and CODWWII (see below). To analyse how the participants reflected on their ludic engagements with the Holocaust

20 For the entire paragraph, see: Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods* (5th edition) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 500-524. For the quote, see: Ibidem, 502.
21 Alan Bryman, Ibidem, 41-44. For the quote, see: Ibidem, 42.
22 Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77-101.

when playing WTNO and CODWWII, I applied the concept gaming fever, as defined above. This means that especially this part of the thematic analysis was to a significant extent deductive in nature. While carrying out the thematic analysis, I identified broader themes that were rooted in the data. Epistemologically, I carried out the analysis from a constructionist perspective. I adopted an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)-approach as defined by psychologist Jonathan Smith, to shed light into how players subjectively interpret and construct meanings about their play experiences.[23]

I held focus group discussions with 29 players in total (14 players for WTNO, 15 for CODWWII; four to five participants for each focus group session). Nearly all participants were born in the Netherlands (one of the participants was born in Belgium). In terms of gender distribution, most of the participants were male (27 of the 29). This is reflective of existing gender disparities in terms of game genre preferences, as highlighted in the previous chapters of this dissertation. A majority of the participants were in their twenties or thirties (14 and 8 of the 29 participants respectively) and had pursued or were pursuing a secondary or higher professional education (15 and 9 of the 29 participants respectively). When asked to rate their overall interest in history on a scale of one to five, a majority of the participants (24 of the 29) gave scores of three or more out of five, referring to an above average to high interest in history. When asked about the historical topics that interested them most, a majority of the participants (22 of the 29) explicitly referred to the Second World War as a key topic. Finally, most participants expressed an active interest in gaming, as exemplified by their attendance of gaming events, and self-identified as 'gamers'. This gamer identity can be characterized as a very distinct type of socially constructed identity that is strongly tied to particular forms of cultural capital (or, as defined by Mia Consalvo, gaming capital)[24] and patterns of consumption.[25] However, several participants also mentioned that they were no longer able to dedicate as much time to playing games as they used to or would like to, due to school-related or professional obligations.

During the focus group sessions, the participants reflected on three scenes in WTNO and CODWWII that allowed them to ludically engage with the Holocaust. In relation to WTNO, the participants reflected on two scenes taken from 'Chapter 8: Camp Belica', a level in the game during which the game protagonist, and with him the player, infiltrates a fictional Nazi concentration camp to save a Jewish inmate. The participants were first shown the introductory part of this section of the game, during which the protagonist/

23 See: Jonathan A. Smith, Paul Flowers, and Michael Larkin, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research* (London: SAGE Publications, 2009). For the entire paragraph, see: Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," 79-86.

24 For the notion 'gaming capital', see: Mia Consalvo, *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2007), 3-5.

25 See: Adrienne Shaw, "Do You Identify as a Gamer? Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Gamer Identity," *New Media & Society* 14, no. 1 (2011): 28-44; Frederik De Grove, Cédric Courtois, and Jan Van Looy, "How to Be a Gamer! Exploring Personal and Social Indicators of Gamer Identity," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 20, no. 3 (2015): 346-361.

player is forced down a corridor inside the camp to undergo a selection process, in reference to the selections carried out at the unloading ramps near the Auschwitz-Birkenau killing centre (see **Figure 4.1,** page 87).[26] Secondly, the participants were shown a scene in which the protagonist/player is virtually tortured by a Nazi 'doctor' and subsequently nearly burnt alive in an incinerator together with the dead bodies of other victims (see **Figure 4.2,** page 88).

In terms of ludic 'affordances', these two sections can be characterized as follows. They cast the player as a disempowered first-person observer of what media scholar Holger Pötzsch identifies as 'evil deeds', i.e. atrocities committed by antagonists in a media text in front of the protagonist, and in this case also the player as a direct participant, as a means to legitimize violence against these antagonists (in this case fictional Nazi guards and camp personnel).[27] In the two scenes discussed above, the protagonist/player is transformed into a disempowered observer in distinct ways. When entering the concentration camp, the player can only manipulate the camera to observe how anonymous victims undergo a selection process, while being forced to move forward to avoid beatings from Nazi guards. After being selected, the protagonist/player enters a room where a number is tattooed on the protagonist's arm, in reference to the system of tattooed registration implemented at the Auschwitz camp complex.[28] In the second scene, the agency of the player is restricted to the ability to observe and undergo torture, as well as to press a button to escape a burning incinerator. After this, the protagonist/player is again given the ability to kill guards and explore the environment. All this is done in the context of a narrative in which the protagonist/player is made aware of the atrocities of the camp in an introductory cinematic clip and given a task that is central to the progression of the main narrative. This results in a protagonist/player who is likely to be a 'prepared and distracted observer' of atrocities rather than a 'shocked' one, and who engages in a narratively contextualized form of virtual 'dark tourism'.[29]

26 See for example: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, "The Unloading Ramps and Selections," http://auschwitz.org/en/history/auschwitz-and-shoah/the-unloading-ramps-and-selections, accessed September 30, 2020.

27 For a discussion of the concept 'evil deed' in relation to cinema, see: Holger Pötzsch, "Ubiquitous Absence: Character Engagement in the Contemporary War Film," *Nordicom Review* 34, no. 1 (2013): 126-134.

28 USHMM, "Tattoos and Numbers: The System of Identifying Prisoners at Auschwitz," https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/tattoos-and-numbers-the-system-of-identifying-prisoners-at-auschwitz, accessed September 30, 2020.

29 See for example: John J. Lennon and Malcolm Foley, *Dark Tourism* (Cornwall: Continuum, 2000).

Concerning CODWWII, the participants watched and reflected on one of the final scenes from the game, 'Epilogue', during which the protagonist (a US infantry soldier), and with him the player, enters Berga, a subcamp of Buchenwald,[30] to search for a Jewish US soldier who went missing. In terms of affordances, this scene can be characterized as follows. It transforms the protagonist/player into a 'shocked discoverer of atrocities', who investigates the genocidal violence committed by the Nazi regime inside the Berga camp to testify about it. During the scene, most forms of player agency are disabled. For example, even though the protagonist is carrying a firearm, the player cannot use it inside the camp. In addition, the protagonist/player can walk around in the camp, together with a squad mate who takes pictures as evidence of the atrocities. When the protagonist/player approaches certain parts of the camp such as one of the barracks, a (non-authentic) black-and-white photograph appears, accompanied by commentary given by the protagonist (see **Figure 4.3,** page 93). Overall, the scene is reminiscent of a similar one in the ninth episode of the TV-series *Band of Brothers* (entitled 'Why We Fight') (David Frankel, 2001) and as such meant to express a similar message about the involvement of US soldiers during the Second World War. However, the scene's reference to the Holocaust is partly indirect, in that the scene not only revolves around Jewish victims, but also the suffering of American POWs.

5.5 Results

5.5.1 General player reflections on *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Call of Duty: WWII* as historical ludic artefacts

When asked what it meant for the participants to play WTNO and CODWWII, the participants first referred to several elements of appreciation that were not or only indirectly related to the historical dimension of the two games. Concerning WTNO, several participants mentioned that they appreciated the fast pace and intensity of WTNO's gameplay, as well as the high quality and visual fidelity of the graphics. They also referred to feelings of nostalgia as an important reason to play WTNO, since many participants had been playing older *Wolfenstein*-games since they were young. Here, some participants explicitly highlighted that WTNO actively reminded them of older FPS-games such as *Doom* (id Software, 1993) and *Quake* (id Software, 1996):

> *[WTNO: FG3]*
> *Participant 4: "[…] for me, it's a bit of nostalgia, I think. I played the first games to death. And now, every time a new game [in the Wolfenstein-series] comes out, I play it anyhow."*

30 USHMM, "Berga-Elster ('Schwalbe V')," https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/berga-elster-schwalbe-v, accessed September 30, 2020.

Part. 3: "Yes, also pure nostalgia for me. I also grew up with [the Wolfenstein-games]. Just like Doom and Quake, it actually was just, purely, one of my first real games."

Concerning CODWWII and the *Call of Duty*-series in general, several participants equally referred to the high quality and visual fidelity of the graphics, as well as the intensity and the tactical and absorbing nature of the gameplay, especially in relation to the game's competitive multiplayer component. Apart from these reasons, many participants also explicitly referred to elements with a historical dimension, as embedded in both WTNO and CODWWII as depictions of the Second World War. I will discuss these elements below.

5.5.1.1 Wolfenstein: The New Order

A majority of the participants first expressed their appreciation for how WTNO reinterpreted various eccentric and lugubrious aspects of the history of the Nazi regime within the context of a humorous and transgressive fictional ludic alternate history. This is illustrated in the quotes below:

[WTNO: FG2]
Part. 2: "I think I mostly like the 'alternate history'-part of it. Because… there were situations during the real war where Nazis were doing things, abject things. And I like how they carried this all the way forward to a complete sort of 'Steampunk'/'Electropunk'-style thing."

[WTNO: FG1]
Part. 5: "[…] there are reasonable hooks to what Hitler actually intended, and they've simply built on that. And I think it's cool how they designed it further. They have made it nice and over-the-top, and that connects well with the humour they use in it."

Based on these statements, a first broader theme can be identified. Participants appreciated WTNO's narrative reinterpretation of (very distinct) aspects of the history of the Second World War, and as such gave expression to a historically informed sense of narrative enjoyment.

Secondly, several participants mentioned that they appreciated how *Wolfenstein*-games, and WTNO in particular, straightforwardly represented the Nazis as 'bad guys' and allowed players to engage in satisfying and justified virtual violence against an 'evil' opponent. This potential can be identified as a second major theme. This is illustrated below:

[WTNO: FG2]
Part. 1: "I also think it is nice that, emotionally, they beat it down a whole lot, because… Often, when I read about the Germans, they will say that there were many of them who had no choice. But this game pushes this… In general, it makes it very flat. Like, the Germans are the enemy, and we're just going to kill Nazis."

Thirdly, when asked whether or not the participants considered WTNO to be a game that is historical in nature, they gave a twofold answer. Most participants acknowledged that the game presented an exaggerated and fantastical interpretation of the past. However, when asked whether or not this fiction was rooted in history, the participants emphasized different elements. On the one hand, some participants were very critical of WTNO's historical representation. They primarily interpreted it as a reflection of how Nazism is perceived today as the ultimate incarnation of evil. On the other hand, several participants stated that the game was 'mixed' from a historical perspective, in that WTNO exaggerated history, but also referred to historical ideas, actions and events. Here, the participants referred to elements such as the attempts of the Nazi regime to create 'wonder weapons' during the war, the ideology of racial superiority of the Nazis, the Holocaust, and a series of eccentric aspects of Nazism and Adolf Hitler in particular, which are often of limited historical significance, but are used in the *Wolfenstein*-games to show the 'craziness' of the Nazi regime. This twofold characterization is illustrated below:

[WTNO: FG2]
Interviewer: "Would you view [WTNO] as a historical game, or a game that says something about history?"

Part. 4: "I don't think so. Uhm, certainly because… it actually takes place in the sixties, after the Nazis have taken over the entire world. So then, then it's actually more of a fantasy-game or alternate history-game with only very little history behind it. Certainly, because the caricature that [the creators] set up is super and super evil, a parody of a parody of a parody, [WTNO] only has very little actual historical value, in my opinion."

[WTNO: FG1]
Interviewer: "Would you see [WTNO] as a historical game, or not?

Part. 5: "Mixed. […] Because it contains a number of points of truth, but all of it is exaggerated in an over-the-top manner. So, you can't take it too seriously.

Interviewer: "What points of truth does [WTNO] contain, according to you?

Part. 1: […] "Especially [WTNO] also shows you the concentration camps, and the kinds of horror you could expect in those camps. […] They also brought back what Mengele did in Auschwitz in [WTNO] […]. They put that in the game very well."

Part. 3: "Yes, they did change it a bit. You don't really have, uhm, gas chambers and those things for example, and it's not directly about Jews. But it is about a sort of sick prison where humans are treated like garbage. Yes, apart from that, … [WTNO] is alternate history of course, but the cool thing is that it does build very much on what it was. And now with advanced technology, and so on."

In other words, when the participants reflected on WTNO as a historical representation, an awareness of historical ambiguity could be identified, where players either prioritized the fictional or historical dimension of the game. I identify this ambiguity as a third prominent broader theme.

Taken together, this allows for the general characterization of how the participants reflected on WTNO as a ludic historical representation. They appreciated how WTNO and other *Wolfenstein*-games fictionally reconfigured the history of Nazism and allowed them to engage in pleasurable virtual violence against an 'evil' opponent. The participants also actively rejected WTNO as a historical representation sometimes, which shows how players critically appropriate game content. At the same time, a significant number of participants pointed to how the game actively builds on distinct aspects of the history of Nazism and the Second World War, which lays bare a clear ambiguity in how players perceive WTNO historically.

5.5.1.2 *Call of Duty: WWII*

A significant number of participants first stated that they appreciated how the *Call of Duty*-games allowed them to experience the atmosphere of being involved in a war as a (US) soldier in an active and direct manner. Participants would also regularly refer to sections such as one of the first scenes in CODWWII, during which the player has to virtually land on the beaches of Normandy on D-Day. When discussing this scene, the participants would emphasize how they were impressed by the difficulty they experienced while playing, which made them think about what soldiers must have experienced when taking part in the Normandy beach landings. This is shown in the quotes below:

[CODWWII: FG2]
Interviewer: "I want to return to you a bit, [Part. 5]. Earlier, when we were talking about [the idea that] Call of Duty expresses the chaos of battle well. Is that something you would agree with? Or…?"

Part. 5: "Yes. Indeed. Especially when you… Just take the part [in CODWWII] where you storm the Normandy beaches: when you play that on the highest [difficulty] level, then you've got the real thing. It's like: you cannot run five meters across the beach without catching a bullet, it's that simple. And that's what it really was. It was a crapshoot whether you survived or not. […] By chance, I started to play it on the highest difficulty level yesterday. It took me almost two hours to get across the beach. That's how often I died."

This can be characterized as a direct reference to the appreciation for the 'reenactive potential' of the *Medal of Honor*- and *Call of Duty*-games identified in the literature review. Given that the participants explicitly identified similar experiences, I identify this 'reenactive potential' as a first significant broader theme.

In relation to CODWWII's reenactive potential, some participants expressed explicit criticisms, in particular by reflecting on lacking aspects of 'realism'. Here, participants highlighted elements such as the functionality of weapons and the implementation of military strategy. They also referred to how ludic elements could make the game predictable, thus undermining the historical dimension. However, despite these criticisms, players would still acknowledge CODWWII's reenactive potential. This is shown in the quotes below:

[CODWWII: FG2]
Part. 4: "I think that they… Starting with the first [Call of Duty-] game, they have emphasized the details very well actually. What type of sound does the first weapon make that you [carry].

Part. 1: "Yes, but… Still, those sounds do not match the ones from the real weapons. If you watch videos on YouTube, then you see people who literally have the real weapons, and [when they fire them], then you hear very big differences."

[CODWWII: FG2]
Part. 1: "[…] if you play [the D-Day level] on the highest difficulty level, then you know… Because you die so often, you know exactly: now [the Germans are] going to shoot that, so now I can run that way. And then I have to wait a moment, and then someone will run over there, and then I can run over there, and then you have to…"

Part. 5: "Well, you know what the joke is? It is partially 'scripted' indeed. You know you can walk a certain safe path. But make no mistake: you play it five times, maybe ten times, and then you realize it. […] But if in reality, you run up the beach for the first time…"

Part. 1: "Everyone dies."

Secondly, apart from this emphasis on the ability to experience warfare in a more direct manner when playing CODWWII, several participants also highlighted that historical *Call of Duty*-games allowed them to learn about the history of the Second World War by offering additional sources of information, or by motivating them to consult additional information elsewhere. As such, several participants pointed to *Call of Duty* and CODWWII in particular as a means to keep the memory of the war alive. This is illustrated in the quotes below:

[CODWWII: FG3]
Part. 1: "[…] I usually play the single player together with a friend, and then we watch all the additional movie clips […]. Because you also partly learn about history through the movie clips. You partly see how all the maps change, and how everything, well, changes throughout the war."

Part. 5: "I bought all of them, simply to play the single player. Also the story… […] It's partly about Japan, partly about the Russians, and say, that's the other side. And that makes me want to know more. Also for young people, [it] makes them want to know more. […] For me, it's a new means to not forget what happened."

These statements can be seen as a direct reference to *Call of Duty*'s potential to introduce learners to a new body of knowledge through 'tangential learning', as discussed by Fisher. I therefore identify *Call of Duty*'s 'tangential potential' as a source of appreciation as a second major theme. In close connection, I also identify *Call of Duty*'s 'memory potential' as a third significant theme, as the games are also actively identified as a means to counter the fleeting nature of a (very distinct) memory of the war.

Finally, when asked whether or not the participants considered *Call of Duty* and CODWWII in particular to be a game that is 'historical' in nature, two opposing views could be identified. Some participants, in particular ones that were primarily interested in the competitive multiplayer-component of CODWWII, were very critical of how the game depicted history. They identified it as a depiction that is explicitly fictional. However, many other participants, in particular ones that were interested in the narrative component of the game, stated that, despite some limitations, the game could certainly be seen as one that is historical in nature. This is illustrated in the quotes below:

[CODWWII: FG1]
Part. 4: "Well, nothing is correct about [Call of Duty]. Really nothing at all. You tell the story [of the Second World War], say, but instead of talking about what's in the book, you only give the title. And apart from that, they turn it into something themselves."

[CODWWII: FG3]
Interviewer: […]. "Is this a historical game, according to you? Does it say something about history?"

Part. 5: "To a lesser extent of course, because, as [Part. 4] also said: if you make it one hundred percent realistic, then people won't play it, because it is just too terrible and too inhumane. But it certainly is… Things like this just happened. So I think it is a fairly accurate history lesson, so to speak."

Taken together, this allows for the following general characterization of how players reflected on CODWWII, and other *Call of Duty*-games about the Second World War. A majority of the participants appreciated the ability to 'experience' and virtually 're-enact' historical battles, and as such learn about and remember key events of the Second World War. In addition, whereas several participants actively reflected on the 'realistic' nature of the game and how its ludic structure shaped its historical representation, many participants embraced *Call of Duty* and CODWWII in particular as a meaningful platform for historical engagement.

5.5.2 Player reflections on the ludic representation of the Holocaust in *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Call of Duty: WWII*

In what follows, I describe and analyse how the participants reflected on scenes that allowed to ludically engage with the Holocaust. As such, I also analyse whether or not, and how, the participants gave expression to feelings of gaming fever when they reflected on these scenes, due to the sensitive nature of the Holocaust.

5.5.2.1 *Wolfenstein: The New Order* – Scene 1 (Camp 'Belica': selection)

Concerning the first selected scene in WTNO, during which the character/player undergoes a 'selection' inside the fictional concentration camp 'Belica', the participants first reflected on the level of 'realism' of the scene. Here, although some of them were critical, a majority of the participants expressed that the scene referred to what had happened to Jewish and other victims inside the concentration camps during the Second World War, albeit in an exaggerated way and as part of a fictional narrative. This is illustrated in the quotes below:

[*WTNO: FG1]*
Part. 5: "The choice between types of people was made in exactly the same way. Does [a victim] eat too much: not good. [Is he] a good worker: then you go to a labour camp. And the rest was just killed. Corresponds with [what happened]. Also the tattooing of the arm. So, good detail."

[WTNO: FG3]
Part. 4: "Babies were separated from the parents. Uhm yes, I don't know […]. It really sets a clear picture that [the Nazis] are immediately hitting people with whips of course […]. If of course already adds a more dramatic effect to it a bit, I think. I wonder whether really everyone who was a guard there [in the camps] was actually abusing people."

These statements show how players mostly embraced the scene as a historical representation, despite some reservations. This primarily points to experiences of 'simulation resignation' concerning the scene's historical dimension, as discussed by Bogost.

Secondly, when asked what the scene meant for the participants, some of them explicitly mentioned that it showed the dehumanizing nature of the 'selections' carried out by the Nazis. These participants stated that they experienced the scene as confronting because of their direct involvement as players. This is shown in the quotes below:

[WTNO: FG2]
Part. 4: "[…]. You can feel that people are actually more treated like animals […] in that scene. You see […] a crowd of people that is simply led to the slaughterhouse."

Part. 1: […]. "In that respect, it is somewhat confrontational, yes. Suddenly, you are the one who controls the mouse and presses play and walks through that world […]."

Here, the participants referred to a 'positive negative experience', i.e. an experience that is unsettling but at the same time partly gratifying in that it leads to new insights. Game scholar Kristine Jørgensen identifies these as experiences of 'positive discomfort',[31] which can be seen as one possible way in which players reflect on their ludic engagement with the sensitive history of the Holocaust, as enabled by the ludic affordances of the scene. As such, I identify this as a first additional form of 'gaming fever'.

31 Kristine Jørgensen, "The Positive Discomfort of Spec Ops: The Line."

However, apart from this reference to a simulated experience of dehumanization and the accompanying sense of 'positive discomfort', many other participants highlighted that the scene only resonated with them to a limited extent, for several reasons. Firstly, some participants mentioned that the introductory cinematic clip shown prior to entering camp 'Belica' had alerted them to what they would get to see. As a result, they were not surprised when they virtually entered the camp, also because the scene corresponded to what the participants expected to see inside. This refers to the discussion above of the character/player as a 'prepared and distracted observer' of atrocities during this section. Several participants also interpreted the scene in a functional manner, in that they discussed what role it played in the narrative. Several participants described how the scene was meant to introduce the fictional concentration camp as the setting and show the cruelty of the Nazis. As such, they actively identified the selection as a ludic 'evil deed', as discussed above.

Secondly, some players stated that they did not feel emotionally connected with the other victims during the selection because of their anonymity. As such, the participants stated that they did not feel the impact of the scene. This is illustrated in the quote below:

> *[WTNO: FG2]*
> *Part. 3: "It has no emotional impact because you don't have a connection [with the other victims], I also think. All those heads you see [walking] in front of you are all more or less the same. They are all the same prisoners and you don't know them; you don't know who they are… Not that they deserve it therefore, of course not, but… [The scene] lacks emotional impact because of it.*

As such, the sense of dehumanization expressed in the scene, which can be identified as a central aspect of how victims were treated by the Nazis, was not actively identified by these participants. Finally, several players also highlighted that they thought the scene was less meaningful because they were forced to act in a certain manner. This becomes visible in the discussion below:

> *[WTNO: FG1]*
> *Interviewer: […]. "How did you feel when you saw this scene?"*
> *Part. 4: "You […] have to follow that row. I find that annoying. I'd rather watch a cutscene than [being] forced to run at a certain pace that doesn't match your character."*
>
> *Part. 2: "Yes, or that you can just type in a combination. As in: fuck it, I know what is happening here, done, let me pass. Or simply built-in as [a standard feature], that you just press 'escape' and you're done, you can start."*

Part. 1: "That would be a great cheat-code." [Comment made as a quip, in reference to how the victims during the war did not have this option; laughter among the participants].

Part. 3: "I thought it was ok. Yes, you have to queue up. You wait for your turn, you have to listen and […] do what they tell you."

Here, the participants came to the insight that the scene tried to express a sense of disempowerment similar to what camp inmates must have experienced during the war. However, for some participants, this was not how they had reflected on the scene prior to the discussion. It was an emergent outcome of the latter. As such, the quotes point to a different manifestation of experiences of 'gaming fever' in relation to ludic engagements with sensitive historical topics such as the Holocaust: a sense of 'ludic indifference', or a neutral acceptance of/disinterest in how a (section of) a game ludically represents a sensitive past and casts players as active participants therein, which is secondary to other interests and desires, such as a longing for more player agency.

In sum, the observations made above allow for the following overall characterization of how the participants reflected on their ludic engagement with the Holocaust, and whether or not they experienced gaming fever when doing so. Firstly, most of the participants referred to a sense of 'simulation resignation', in that they primarily embraced the historical reality of the scene. Secondly, based on the affordances of the scene, mostly reflections on what can be defined as experiences of 'positive discomfort' and 'ludic indifference' could be identified, as two distinct forms of gaming fever.

5.5.2.2 *Wolfenstein: The New Order* – Scene 2 (Camp 'Belica': torture)

Concerning the second scene in WTNO, during which the character/player is tortured by a Nazi 'doctor' inside camp 'Belica' and nearly burnt alive in an incinerator, many participants also first stated that it depicted the reality of how Jewish and other victims were treated inside the concentration camps during the Second World War. In addition, some participants stated that the scene again left them disempowered, something they also identified as unsettling in a 'positive negative' sense. They also mentioned that the scene clearly depicted the 'evil' nature of the Nazi regime. This is shown in the quotes below:

[WTNO: FG1]
Part. 3: "[…]. I thought it was a pretty horrific scene, that you just lay there among the corpses to be burned. Yes, and I think it is cool that they actually show the kind of horror that [is actually happening there] in the game. How [the Nazis] experiment a little, stab people and then simply burn them."

[WTNO: FG 3]
Part. 3: "Again that feeling of disempowerment, because you can't do anything. You are simply stabbed, and you can do nothing against it. Eventually, you open your eyes, and then you actually lie in between the bodies. Ready to be burned, so to say."

These statements can also be identified as references to experiences of 'simulation resignation' and 'positive discomfort'. However, the participants also emphasized other elements. Firstly, they equally referred to experiences of 'ludic indifference' as discussed above, for several reasons. Some participants mentioned that they were preoccupied with gameplay considerations during the scene and therefore paid little attention to it while playing. Other participants reflected on the scene functionally and stated that it was meant as a transition to a new section of the game. This is shown in the quotes below:

[WTNO: FG1]
Interviewer: How did you feel when you played this [part of the game]?
Part. 5: "Nothing. It is all about the next objective. You wake up, [then] you kill the first [guard] as soon as possible, and on to the next one."

[WTNO: FG2]
Part. 2: "For me, it feels more as if they needed an excuse to actually get out of the prison. Because… You enter as part of a [group of prisoners], without any weapons, while under surveillance and without the possibility to react. I think they needed this scene as an excuse to let you stab a guard and to let the fighting start again."

Secondly, some participants stated that the scene was unrealistic and unnecessary in its ludic depiction of Nazi violence. This is illustrated in the quotes below:

[WTNO: FG2]
Part. 1: "I think the contrast is too big. On the one hand, I'm like: this is indeed already very intense. […] I can certainly see that these are the things that happened during the Second World War. But then […] the first thing you do is: you just step out of the furnace and you simply stab someone […]. Even though you should really be seriously injured."

Part. 4: "I also think it's just a bit unnecessary. I mean, indeed, what [Part. 3] says: […] you simply do something else, you're simply watching something. And yes: we already know that Nazis are really evil. And then, being tortured like that, that's not necessary. That will give any additional impact, I thought."

These statements not only refer to reflections that result from experiences of 'simulation denial', when players reject (an aspect of) a simulation as an inadequate model of (historical) reality, as discussed by Bogost. They also point to a refusal by some participants to embrace this section of WTNO as a fitting way to engage with the sensitive history of the Holocaust, in particular due to the exploitative nature of the torture scene and the explicit depiction of dead bodies. I identify these refusals as an expressions of 'ludic rejection', a third form of gaming fever in relation to ludic engagements with sensitive pasts.

Taken together, these observations allow for the following characterization of how the participants reflected on their ludic engagement with the Holocaust during this scene. Whereas some participants again referred to both a sense of 'simulation resignation' and 'positive discomfort', in that they thought that the scene expressed historical realities in a confronting but enriching manner, several others referred to experiences of 'ludic indifference', and both 'simulation denial' and 'ludic rejection' in an interconnected manner. These reactions can be attributed to distinct transgressive affordances of the scene.

5.2.2.3 *Call of Duty: WWII* – Epilogue

Concerning the scene in CODWWII during which the character/player can walk around in the Berga concentration camp as an American soldier, the participants also first referred to its level of 'realism'. Here, a majority of the participants stated that it certainly depicted the reality of what had happened inside the concentration camps during the Second World War, even though some participants also mentioned that more information was needed to understand the depicted events. This is illustrated in the quotes below:

> *[CODWWII: FG2]*
> *Part. 3: "I think this scene very much shows the reality. Really, just, dead soldiers who are still hanging there, the nooses, […] the details in those houses, the beds, all of it."*

> *[CODWWII: FG1]*
> *Part. 4: "For such a game, it is perfect of course to show it in such a way. […] And it's very concise, but told in an ok way […] how things were going there. Only when you have actually read books about it, you understand precisely what the horrors were, but I could certainly imagine that people, a lot of people, had literally been murdered there."*

These statements demonstrate how the participants mostly referred to a sense of 'simulation resignation' when discussing the scene from a historical perspective. In addition, a majority of participants stated that they appreciated the scene's interactivity, which gave them more freedom to explore the camp. Several participants also indicated

that they thought the scene was both unsettling and beautiful, in statements that refer to experiences of 'positive discomfort'. This is illustrated in the quotes below:

> *[CODWWII: FG2]*
> *Interviewer: "What you're doing here is: you walk around inside the camp yourself. What do you think about that: does it add something, or…?"*
> *Part. 3: "Yes, it does, actually. Because if you can only walk [the same] fixed route [of the character], then you cannot specifically go and take a closer look. If you can walk yourself you can also see the details better. I think that is a nice [aspect]."*

> *[CODWWII: FG3]*
> *Part. 3: "Well, I found it […] very shocking. […] I thought it was beautiful how they put that together […]. I actually thought … It actually gave me adrenaline, my heart started racing. As in: wow. I thought it was a very beautiful scene."*

Finally, some participants were also critical about the scene. Two older participants in particular (male, 57 and 45 years old respectively), stated that the scene was either too grave to be included in a game such as *Call of Duty*, or too superficial in its depiction of the horrors of the camps. This latter opinion was expressed by a participant who had visited Auschwitz and had read a lot about the Holocaust. In addition, both participants highlighted that they had experienced a lack of player agency while playing this section. This is shown in the quotes below:

> *[CODWWII: FG3]*
> *Part. 2: "I thought it was a bit too invasive for a game. In that I think: this is going a bit too far for me. I mean, I know how terrible it is. I've seen films about the Holocaust […]. It just wasn't necessary for me. […] I think it's a bit over-the-top."*

> *Part. 5: "[…] For the game, it doesn't have an added value; historically, yes, but then it doesn't go [deep enough]. […] I've already read and seen a lot about the Holocaust […]. I thought: yes, if you want to do it, then you have to be willing to shock."*

> *Part. 2: "It is terrible and so on, but I'm waiting for people we can shoot at, inside the camp. […] You enter such a camp, and then you expect, perhaps, a number of remaining guards. […] It is not active enough for me. No matter how terrible it is – I realize that."*

As such, the following general characterization can be given of how the participants reflected on their ludic engagement with the Holocaust. In relation to this scene, a majority of participants referred to experiences of 'simulation resignation' and 'positive discomfort', in that they actively acknowledged the historical dimension of the scene and positively reflected on ludically being confronted with a shocking past. However, also here, alternative reflections could be identified, in which both an acknowledgment of the realism of the scene or a critical view on it ('simulation denial') would be combined with a desire for more player agency. These observations were especially made by older participants who had already gained more prior knowledge about the Holocaust through other sources. It can also be seen as an expression of 'ludic indifference' as a form of gaming fever.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter presented the results of a focus group study on how players reflected on playing *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Call of Duty: WWII*, two digital entertainment games that include ludic representations of aspects of the Holocaust. The goal of the study was twofold: to shed light into how players reflect on playing the two games from a historical perspective and how players reflect on their ludic engagement with the Holocaust. 'Gaming fever', a new central concept I developed in this chapter, was helpful to get a better understanding of this engagement. This notion not only draws attention to the referential disconnect that players can experience between their preconceptions of reality and a game's selective modelling of it. It also draws attention to experiences of unease that players might experience when ludically engaging with sensitive and contentious (historical) topics, in this case the Holocaust, an aspect of meaning-making in relation to digital entertainment gaming that has remained un(der)explored. A qualitative focus group-methodology was applied to carry out this study, which resulted in rich qualitative data and a deeper insight into this aspect of ludic engagements with the Second World War. The focus group discussions were held with a relatively homogeneous group of participants, consisting of mostly white, male and young to middle-aged Dutch players who self-identified as gamers and reported above average to high levels of interest in history in general, and of the Second World War in particular.

The focus groups resulted in a distinct set of themes as main findings. Firstly, concerning how the participants appreciated *Wolfenstein* and *Call of Duty* as ludic historical representations, the following player reflections could be identified. Participants appreciated both *Wolfenstein's* humorous and transgressive fictional reimagination of the history of Nazism as a context for 'pleasurable' violence against it, and *Call of Duty*'s ability to offer players a site for virtual re-enactments, learning and remembrance. As such, players were often critical of these games, while also embracing them as historical representations. This demonstrates that players actively interrogate their ludic engagements with the past, but also that they regularly embrace ludic

historical depictions without much further interrogation, or interrogation on a surface level, in relation to specific factual elements. This points to a desirability to promote the ability to critically read historical representations put forward in (these) digital entertainment games. One way to do so is to actively integrate these readings into school history curricula, which requires further didactic research on how to translate this into instruction designs.

A second set of findings revolved around experiences of 'gaming fever' when ludically engaging with the Holocaust. Here, it is useful to highlight that the participants actively identified the historical realities underlying *Wolfenstein* and *Call of Duty*'s representation and therefore did not question the reality of the Holocaust as a historical event. In that respect, no explicit disagreements or conflicts of opinion among the participants could be identified. This means that among these participants, the Holocaust was not seen as a contentious historical topic.

In relation to the sensitivity of ludically engaging with the Holocaust, three distinct forms of 'gaming fever' could be identified, which were directly tied to *Wolfenstein's* and *Call of Duty*'s distinct ludic affordances. Several players referred to 'positive negative' experiences when being confronted with the atrocities of the Holocaust in these two games. This points to a significant potential of ludic designs to activate gratifying emotional responses, which can motivate players to expand on their historical engagement with the Holocaust. However, the outcome of these 'negative positive' experiences can also be attributed to the moral clarity in which they were embedded: when playing *Wolfenstein* and *Call of Duty*, players were always on the 'right side of history'. This raises the question how players would reflect on ludic historical engagements where this is not explicitly the case. Apart from these experiences of 'positive discomfort', and perhaps more surprisingly, several participants referred to a notions of 'ludic indifference': they either did not pay attention to the depicted historical atrocities, or expressed a desire to skip them. This can be explained by two factors. On the one hand, when playing a digital entertainment game, players are often preoccupied with the moment-to-moment gameplay in an instrumental manner, which draws the attention away from the game's historical representation.[32] On the other hand, given the preference of the participants for game genres such as the FPS, which revolve around virtual violence, one can assume that the former were familiar with similar violent imagery, and therefore did not express additional discomfort. This argument is contradicted by participants who referred to experiences of 'ludic rejection', a third identified form of gaming fever in reaction to ludic engagements with sensitive pasts. These were especially expressed when players were confronted with scenes in which the emaciated dead bodies of victims of virtual genocidal violence were explicitly shown. In the context of a representation of the Holocaust, players discussed this more readily as an undesirable ludic transgression.

32 See for example T.L. Taylor's notion of 'instrumental play': T.L. Taylor, *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2006), 67-92.

The focus group sessions were held with a relatively homogenous group of players who expressed high levels of interest in history. As such, few significant differences among age, gender and ethnicity stood out. As the group of participants was ethnically homogeneous, no differences among ethnic lines could be observed. Similar observations can be made in terms of gender: for all of the participants, whether male or female, their 'gamer' identity superseded their gender identity. Some differences could be identified concerning age and the extent to which the participants were familiar with the history of the Holocaust. When participants had gained more extensive prior knowledge about the events elsewhere, they would be more critical about the game's historical representation. However, as these opinions were only expressed by two participants, one should be reluctant to generalize this observation. Other significant differences could not be observed. This raises the question how other and more diversified groups would reflect on playing *Wolfenstein* and *Call of Duty*.

The analysis presented in this chapter contributes significantly to the study of historical digital (entertainment) games in several ways. Firstly, it sheds further light into how players reflect on their engagements with ludic historical representations, including ones that are more explicitly fictional in nature. This topic has long remained un(der)explored in both the field of game studies and in historical research about popular culture. Secondly, this study presents an extended conceptual toolkit to analyse ludic engagements with sensitive and/or contentious pasts that is rooted in qualitative empirical data. This toolkit, consisting of the notions 'simulation resignation', 'simulation denial', 'positive discomfort', 'ludic indifference' and 'ludic rejection', can be used and refined in subsequent studies.

The study was based on a qualitative focus group-method, which offers several significant advantages. Not only does it result in rich qualitative data about topics of which little is known as highlighted above, in a research setting that more closely than other settings mimics day-to-day social meaning-making practices among players. In addition, focus groups offered the participants of this study an engaging venue for vivid discussions about the historical understandings they draw from two games they appreciate, together with their peers. A possible disadvantage of this method is that the participants might have felt constrained by social norms when discussing this sensitive topic, which led them to refrain from certain undesirable responses. This can be alleviated in future studies by adopting more individualized methods, which for example involve in-depth personal interviews with individual players.

The study offers a rich starting point for further research, especially about meaning-making practices among other groups of players. For example, the question arises how players in other socio-cultural contexts who have different identities and different play habits reflect on their ludic engagements with the Second World War and the Holocaust in particular. One interesting venue for further research is to explore how other players in the Netherlands, as well as for example players in Germany, i.e. the country that is most directly confronted with the legacy of perpetratorship concerning the Holocaust, reflect on these ludic engagements.

If we are to preserve culture we must continue to create it.

Johan Huizinga

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations[1]

In this dissertation, I studied how digital entertainment gaming, as a central expression of a contemporary 'popular historical culture', allows for engagements with the history of the Second World War. I did so by asking how the Second World War is represented through digital entertainment games, and how players in the Netherlands reflect on playing these games from a historical perspective. To answer these two questions, I identified digital gaming as a distinct form of textuality that is both representational and performative in nature, and that is co-configured by players as positioned and, to a significant extent autonomous, cultural agents. In addition, I highlighted how digital gaming as a form of textuality is embedded in a layer of paratextuality, which can serve as a significant point of reference for players when engaging in meaning-making in relation to their gameplay activities. To carry out my research project, I adopted a mixed-methods approach that is rooted in both a hermeneutic historical and a qualitative social scientific tradition.

In what follows, I discuss the main findings of this dissertation. I do so by first answering the two research questions mentioned above, and by reflecting on both the limitations of this study and possible venues for further research. Secondly, I use the answers to the two first two questions as a starting point to answer a third one: which recommendations can be formulated to foster critical reflection on the Second World War through digital gaming in both formal and informal learning environments. Finally, following this assessment, I offer a critical reflection on one of the key concepts of this dissertation: the notion 'popular historical culture.'

6.1 Main Findings

6.1.1 How is the Second World War represented through digital entertainment gaming?

In response to the first central question of this dissertation, several key observations were made. In chapter two of this dissertation, I presented an analysis of the marketing paratextuality that accompanies the digital entertainment games about the Second World War that are commercially distributed in the Netherlands. I did so to highlight that game creators adopt this marketing paratextuality to act as 'developer-historians': they use it to render explicit the historical and memory-related discourses they wish to express through their games. I further contextualized this analysis by identifying the game companies (i.e. game developers and -publishers) that were involved in creating the studied games and their marketing materials. Concerning the involved game companies, I made the following observation: the digital entertainment games about the Second World War that are distributed in the Netherlands were mostly made by companies that are headquartered in the United States, Russia, the

United Kingdom, and to a lesser extent, Canada and other European countries. This means that game companies located in Asian countries such as China, Japan and South Korea, which today count as some of the most significant contexts and growth markets for digital gameplay around the world, were significantly underrepresented. This by itself has important implications for how the Second World War is depicted in the digital entertainment games that are distributed in the Netherlands: they mostly lack an Asian perspective on the war, whereas North American, European and Russian game makers do present games that depict the war in Asia. An explanation for this absence of an Asian perspective in the studied games can be found in a combination of factors. Concerning China, locally-produced digital entertainment games that depict the Second World War are made in active collaboration with the Chinese government. This results in games that closely adhere to the propagandistic nationalist narratives that are formulated by the Chinese government about China's 'War of Resistance' against Japan between 1937 and 1945. In addition, as stated by Chinese scholar Hongping Annie Nie, these games are primarily made for a Chinese market in response to a significant local demand for more nationalist games. Both factors make Chinese digital entertainment games less attractive for more global communities of players.[2] Concerning Japan, one can refer to the ongoing controversies surrounding Japan's involvement in the Second World War, as well as the observation that digital entertainment games belonging to war-themed genres such as the FPS or strategy are not really popular on the Japanese game market, especially in comparison to other genres.[3]

In light of these findings, I studied the marketing paratextuality itself. Here, I identified a representation of the Second World War that transnationally converged on the following distinct historical and memory-related themes, narratives and audio-visual aesthetics, which are at least also partly reflected in the games themselves:

(1) An emphasis on 'militaria fetishism', as exemplified through 'narratives of technological operation' that offer detailed renditions of the inner workings of various pieces of military technology, as well as 'battle-centred' narratives not dissimilar to those found in military historiography. These highlighted the heroism and strategic ingenuity of mostly white and male military and political figures, working on behalf of the US, the Soviet Union, the UK and Germany as the major wartime powers. Other (civilian) perspectives were mostly absent.
(2) 'Nazisploitation'-themes that not only reinforce mythological dichotomies between 'good' and 'evil', but also play into the fascination and abhorrence of players and their desire to engage in playful subversion and cathartic revenge against the Nazi regime

2 For this discussion, see: Hongping Annie Nie, "Gaming, Nationalism, and Ideological Work in Contemporary China: Online Games Based on the War of Resistance against Japan," *Journal of Contemporary China* 22, no. 81 (2013), 499-517.

3 See for example: Rachael Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture through Videogames* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), in particular 181-206.

and Nazism more generally.

(3) Audio-visual aesthetics that are directly inspired by the formal properties of other media depictions related to the Second World War, both produced during the war itself and afterwards. Examples include the conventions of the propagandistic iconography of the Nazi regime, as well as the conventions of post-war military-themed cinema.

The overall prevalence of these themes, narratives and aesthetics could be explained by referring to two major factors. On the one hand, I highlighted how the transnational production of digital entertainment games about the Second World War is strongly embedded in a militarized mnemonic infrastructure (i.e. a 'military-entertainment complex'). Many of the companies responsible for creating the most commercially successful digital entertainment games in the studied corpus actively work together with military advisors (formerly) connected to national armies, military museums and heritage institutions, as well as weapons manufacturers, to create their games. On the other hand, the persistence of the themes, narratives and aesthetics identified above could be explained by referring to various design- and marketing considerations. I not only highlighted the perceived clarity of the Second World War in moral and military terms, as well as the observation that the aforementioned themes and narratives are the least contentious in marketing terms. I also referred to a 'perceived burden of interactivity', which means that game companies continue to be reluctant to explore game designs that deviate from the combat-centred ones that have proven to be consistently profitable. This has been challenged by several games made in recent years, but only to a limited extent.

What are the broader implications of the findings outlined above? On the one hand, they highlight how digital entertainment gaming continues to be a platform where a very homogenous (Western) representation of the Second World War persists. This can be contrasted to other cultural forms, where representations of the war are more open to local and other perspectives, including Dutch ones. In this context, also the following observation can be made: military institutions have long embraced commercially distributed digital entertainment games as a form of cultural expression, despite their shortcomings as a medium for representing (historical) war. They have done so for several reasons: to educate, but even more so for propaganda purposes and to actively contribute to recruitment efforts. In contrast, other mnemonic infrastructures, for example dedicated to the history and memory of the Holocaust, often still shy away from adopting (commercially distributed) digital games as a format for historical and commemorative expression. This contributes to the perpetuation of the homogeneously militarized game representations identified above.

A second significant implication of the aforementioned findings relates to the

philosophical reflection on digital games as a format for history. Whereas media scholars such as William Uricchio have argued that historical digital (entertainment) games, due to their simulational and open-ended nature, have a significant potential to subvert the authority of historical 'master narratives' and familiarize players with a deconstructionist understanding of the past,[4] my analysis points to a contrasting dimension of digital games as broader textual entities. Through marketing paratexts, digital games are embedded in sometimes elaborate factual accounts about, for example, military technology and wartime battles. These paratexts root the historical configurations put forward in the games themselves in a reconstructionist historical understanding, which departs from the premise that there is a singular past that exists independently of the researcher and that can be accurately 'reconstructed'.[5] In light of prior observations that reconstructionist understandings continue to be important for players of historical digital games,[6] this serves as a reaffirmation that the deconstructionist potential of digital games is present, but cannot be taken for granted. It needs to be actively cultivated, through formal history education or in other informal contexts.

In chapter three and four of this dissertation, I moved beyond the analysis of the marketing paratextuality that accompanies digital entertainment games, by analysing the digital games themselves as a hybrid form of both representational and performative historical configuration. I studied which historical representations and forms of mediated performativity could be identified in three commercially distributed digital entertainment games: *The Saboteur* (Pandemic Studios, 2009), *Wolfenstein: The New Order* (MachineGames, 2014) and *Call of Duty: WWII* (Sledgehammer Games, 2017). I chose these three games because they offer an explicit ludic representation of two aspects of the Second World War that have long been, and are often still, avoided in digital entertainment games about the Second World War: the occupation of (Western) Europe by the Nazi regime and the Holocaust. In addition to an analysis of these three games, I also reflected on how other digital games have the potential to place players in a fictionalized and dynamic position of 'liminality' in times of socio-political transformation. I further discuss these latter games in paragraph **6.3**.
Several observations about *The Saboteur*, *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Call of Duty: WWII* could be made. Firstly, they were all centred on violent conquest and domination. Whether they allowed players to play as an Irish 'ordinary-guy-turned-resistance fighter'

4 William Uricchio, "Simulation, History, and Computer Games," in Jeffrey H. Goldstein and Joost Raessens, eds., *Handbook of Computer Game Studies* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2005), 327-338, in particular 331-336.

5 For a more elaborate discussion of the distinction between a reconstructionist, constructionist and deconstructionist historical epistemology, see: Alun Munslow, *Narrative and History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

6 See in particular: Tara J. 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 (2017): 415-438, in particular 421-430.

in occupied France, an American hero who confronts the Nazi regime in an alternate history universe where the latter has won the Second World War, or a US infantry soldier who partakes in the liberation of Western Europe between 1944 and 1945, they all placed players in virtual combat positions. As such, the three games adopted designs that requires players to perform the following limited set of actions: apply visual, motoric and tactical skills to kill virtual enemies, engage in spatial orientation to navigate the game world, and apply strategic thinking to overcome additional challenges.

Secondly, in relation to the representation of the Nazi occupation of Western European countries (in this case France) and the Holocaust, I found that the three studied digital entertainment games reinterpreted and instrumentalized these two topics in significant ways. They did so by adopting distinct ludic designs and modes of mediated performativity that were further contextualized through narrative content. In *The Saboteur*, several ludic and algorithmic systems were implemented that ludify, simplify or render invisible the consequences of violent resistance against the Nazi occupier. Through the design of the NPC's in particular, the occupation was reduced to a presence of a-historically violent Nazi soldiers who do not receive local French support and only pose a ludic challenge to players. In addition, when the latter carry out acts of violence against the Nazi occupier, the consequences of these actions are solely projected onto the players themselves and not the local virtual citizens. This stands in contrast to the reprisal policies adopted by the Nazi regime during the war itself.

In relation to the ludic representation of the Holocaust, I found that in 'big budget' digital entertainment games such as *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Call of Duty: WWII*, the former could primarily be 'observed' or 'discovered' by players, as a means to legitimize the (subsequent) virtual violence carried out by the latter. In *Wolfenstein*, depictions of Nazi atrocities were meant to motivate players to engage in cathartic ludic revenge, whereas in *Call of Duty*, they were meant to demonstrate the nobility of America's involvement in the Second World War, in reference to cultural narratives about the war that have been dominant in the US since the 1990s. In addition, to represent (fictionalized) aspects of the Holocaust in *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Call of Duty: WWII*, fundamentally restricted affordances were adopted, to further attempt to confront players with the gravity of (fictionalized renditions of) these wartime atrocities.

A final element that can be highlighted in relation to how digital entertainment games such as *The Saboteur*, *Wolfenstein* and *Call of Duty* reconfigure the Second World War, is that the ludic representations put forward in these games could often be identified as remediations of much older (transnational) cultural narratives and fictional representations, whose origins can often be traced back to the Second World War itself or the immediate post-war period, in particular in cinema. I identified *Call of Duty: WWII* as a remediation of the 'World War II combat film', which emerged as a distinct genre of Hollywood cinema between 1941 and 1945. I identified *The Saboteur* as offering a ludic remediation of the transnational cultural narrative of France as a

'nation of resisters' propagated by Charles de Gaulle and his 'Free French'-movement during and after the Second World War, a cultural narrative that also found its way to the US in the period 1944-1945. In addition, I showed how the game was inspired by American 'films noir' made since the 1940s, as well as action/adventure films made since the 1960s, including *Indiana Jones* (Steven Spielberg, 1981-present) and *Die Hard* (John McTiernan, 1988). And I identified *Wolfenstein: The New Order* as a remediation of the North American pornographic Nazisploitation-cinema of the 1970s, whose origins some scholars have traced further back to the war period itself. The creation of the game was further inspired by both films that offer fictionalized representations of the Second World War such as *Inglourious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino, 2009), as well as science fiction- and cyberpunk cinema. Taken together, this shows that commercially distributed digital entertainment games are not only embedded in broader (cinematic) intertextual imaginations, but also serve as a prominent venue for the transnational perpetuation of older (and by historians often refuted) cultural narratives about the Second World War.

6.1.2 How do players reflect on their ludic engagements with the Second World War through digital entertainment gaming?

Apart from an analysis of digital entertainment games as a distinct textual form and the marketing paratextuality in which they are embedded, I also investigated how the people who play digital entertainment games about the Second World War reflect on their ludic engagements with this war. Here, it is important to highlight that digital entertainment games allow for various forms of engagement.[7] In addition, digital games are often aimed at relatively wide and diverse communities of players, who play games for various reasons.[8] In chapter five of this dissertation, I studied the meaning-making practices of a specific target group of players: people in the Netherlands who self-identified as 'gamers' as a distinct socially constructed identity; who self-reported an above average to high level of interest in history and the Second World War in particular; and who enjoyed playing digital entertainment games about this war. I did so in relation to two previously discussed games, i.e. *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Call of Duty: WWII*. I chose these two games because they not only allow players to ludically engage with the Second World War, but with the Holocaust in particular. Ludic engagements with this sensitive history

7 For a conceptual model that offers an overview of various possible forms of game involvement, see: Gordon Calleja, *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2011).

8 See for example: Jeroen Jansz and Martin Tanis, "Appeal of Playing Online First Person Shooter Games," *Cyberpsychology & Behavior* 10, no. 1 (2007): 133-136; Jeroen Jansz and Lonneke Martens, "Gaming at a LAN Event: The Social Context of Playing Video Games," *New Media & Society* 7, no. 3 (2005): 333-355. See also multiple contributions on motivations for playing digital games in: Peter Vorderer and Jennings Bryant, eds., *Playing Video Games: Motives, Responses, and Consequences* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), in particular 91-194. For a more recent overview, see for example: Daniel Possler, Anna Sophie Kümpel, and Julian Unkel, "Entertainment Motivations and Gaming-Specific Gratifications as Antecedents of Digital Game Enjoyment and Appreciation," *Psychology of Popular Media* 9, no. 4 (2020): 541-552.

have not been extensively explored until now.

I made the following observations about how the aforementioned players reflected on playing these two digital entertainment games (and by extension, the other games from the *Wolfenstein*- and *Call of Duty*-series) from a historical perspective. Firstly, the participating players actively identified playing the games from the *Wolfenstein*- and *Call of Duty*-series as a meaningful way to engage with the Second World War. Concerning *Wolfenstein*, a game series that offers a more directly fictional ludic representation of the war, the players appreciated how the series allowed for enjoyable excessive virtual violence against Nazism in the context of a humorous and transgressive fictional narration. The *Wolfenstein*-games played into the prior conceptions of these players about the Nazi regime and Nazism in general, which the games reinterpreted in a compelling manner. And concerning *Call of Duty*, a game series that its creators aim to market more directly as a historical ludic representation, players expressed their appreciation of the games as a site for virtual re-enactment, learning and remembrance. The participating players not only highlighted how they had learned more about the events of the war through playing *Call of Duty*, but also that playing the games had allowed them to develop a distinct performative and embodied understanding of certain events of the war. This understanding needs to be critically interrogated, but can also be adopted as a starting point for further reflection. I elaborate on this point in paragraph **6.3**.

Secondly, it is significant to highlight that the participating players regularly expressed critical opinions about the two games, but also that they actively embraced them as historical configurations, even when they were more explicitly fictional in nature. This points to a desirability of further critical engagements with the historical representations put forward in these games. I also further elaborate on this point in paragraph **6.3**.

Apart from this analysis, I studied how players reflected on their ludic engagement with the sensitive history of the Holocaust through playing *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Call of Duty: WWII*. Here, I developed a new concept, 'gaming fever'. This concept was meant to not only shed light into the referential disconnects that players potentially experience when comparing their preconceptions of (historical) reality with how a game selectively models this reality. It also refers to an unease that players can experience when ludically engaging with (historical) topics that are considered to be sensitive, contentious or taboo in a given socio-cultural context. My analysis allowed for the following central observation: depending on the ludic affordances of the scenes that allowed players to engage with the Holocaust through gameplay, I identified three additional forms of 'gaming fever': (1) 'positive discomfort', experienced in relation to ludic engagements that are unsettling at first, but ultimately gratifying; (2) 'ludic indifference', or a neutral acceptance of/disinterest in how (an aspect of) a digital game represents a (historical) topic; and (3) 'ludic rejection', or an unwillingness to embrace (an aspect of) a digital game as a fitting way to engage with a sensitive and/or contentious topic. When the players reflected on

their ludic engagements with the Holocaust through *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Call of Duty: WWII*, I found that they mostly referred to experiences of 'positive discomfort' as well as 'ludic indifference'. The former were expressed when players stated that they derived a certain performative/embodied understanding of the atrocities of the Holocaust from playing the games (see above). However, also the latter were regularly expressed, for example because players were preoccupied with the moment-to-moment gameplay in an instrumental manner. This has significant implications for when one wants to adopt digital (entertainment) games to stimulate critical historical reflection (see paragraph **6.3**). Finally, experiences of 'ludic rejection' were primarily expressed when a scene adopted specific transgressive aesthetics, such as an explicit depiction of the emaciated dead bodies of the victims of Nazi brutality.

6.2 Limitations and Possibilities for Further Research

In this dissertation, I studied digital entertainment gaming as a distinct form of textuality in circulation. As I identified the marketing paratextuality of these games, the games themselves and player-driven meaning-making as three focal points for analysis, I adopted a mixed-methods approach to carry out a tailored analysis of each of these elements. In light of these choices, a number of limitations can be identified. In what follows, I discuss these, as well as some venues for further research.

Firstly, a number of limitations of my paratextual analysis can be highlighted. As discussed above, it allowed me to gain insight into the specific historical discourses that are embedded in digital games as a broader textual form. In addition, it highlighted how games are part of a broader (social) media ecology, especially in our contemporary 'culture of connectivity'. However, throughout this analysis, I did not explicitly analyse how the consumers of these paratextual materials engage with the themes, narratives and aesthetics the paratexts put forward. This opens up several venues for continued investigation, as it is meaningful to shed light into how diverse communities of players express their appreciation as well as varied criticisms of the historical and mnemonic themes and narratives that the paratextual materials put forward. Here, also the following methodological observation can be made. To study the paratextual materials in my corpus, I adopted an open-ended interpretative approach. This allowed for the necessary flexibility to analyse a multi-modal body of sources, in the form of press releases and blog posts (textual materials), screenshots (visual materials) and promotional videos (audio-visual materials). When extending this paratextual analysis, it becomes significant to explore the usefulness of automated digital methodologies, including opinion mining and sentiment analysis.[9]

Secondly, to analyse digital games as both a representational and performative form of historical configuration, I developed a new analytical framework. This framework consisted of three central tools. I emphasized the significance of the perspective of the

9 See for example: Bing Liu, *Sentiment Analysis: Mining Opinions, Sentiments, and Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

creators of a game by studying a game's 'paratextual positioning', i.e. the extent to which game creators explicitly aim to represent the past or contribute to the remembrance of distinct past events. I studied this in light of what I identified as the 'double-faced nature' of popular historical representation, as creators of popular cultural productions inherently aim to position their productions on a multivariate spectrum of fact and fiction. I also highlighted the significance of systematically interrogating the historical discourses that are embedded in a game's ludic design. And I rendered explicit my personal perspective as a researcher, by introducing the concept 'perceived ludonarrative dissonance'. This concept refers to the inherently subjective experience of identifying a meaning-making conflict between the central narrative of a digital game and its core ludic design. This threefold analytical framework allows for a systematic assessment of the historical and memory-related meaning-making potential of a game. However, it should always be used in a flexible manner, as an analysis of, for example, genres that were not extensively discussed in this dissertation might require scholars to further tailor the framework to their specific analytical needs.

Thirdly, I studied how players reflected on their ludic engagements with the Second World War and the Holocaust. I did so by setting up a series of focus group discussions at dedicated gaming events. As such, several limitations of this method need to be taken into account, as discussed in chapter five. I held the focus group discussions with a relatively homogeneous target group of players, which means that players who have different play habits and identities potentially reflect very differently on their gameplay activities. This makes it significant to study how these other players reflect on engaging with the Second World War through gameplay, as it can significantly deepen our understanding of digital gaming as a historical meaning-making practice. More generally, qualitative research methods allow for rich insights into meaning-making practices, but their findings cannot straightforwardly be generalized; they primarily serve as a starting point for further inquiry. Also other limitations of a focus group-methodology need to be considered. Focus groups are identified as contexts where everyday social interactions are closely mimicked, and where people can engage in lively discussions. At the same time, they serve as settings where participants can feel uncomfortable to share opinions due to social constraints. As stated in chapter five, this limitation can be tackled by adopting more individualized qualitative methods, such as semi-structured interviews. An additional significant limitation of this study is the following: I studied how players engaged in meaning-making not while, but after they had played the digital games in question. This means that the findings of my focus group study do not directly shed light into how players engaged with the studied digital entertainment games about the Second World War on a moment-to-moment basis. This should be further studied by adopting ethnographic methodologies, such as

participatory observation in relation to gaming practices.[10]

A final observation that can be made about possible venues for further research is the following: throughout this dissertation, I primarily focused on digital entertainment games as a distinct cultural form. As such, I did not entirely ignore social manifestations of play, but I did side-step several of them. This includes forms of play where players engage with digital entertainment games, either in competitive or co-operative form, as well as livestreaming activities, where players perform various play activities in front of live audiences. As game companies continue to invest in these social forms of play, by adopting new business models and by encouraging and accommodating livestream activities, an important venue for future research lies exactly here: in the extended social engagements digital gaming gives rise to.

6.3 How Can Digital Entertainment Games be Adopted to Foster Critical Historical Reflection on the Second World War?

In the previous paragraphs of this concluding chapter, I highlighted how players actively identify playing digital entertainment games about the Second World War as a meaningful way to engage with the history of this war. In addition, throughout this dissertation, I made several observations on how digital games as broader textual entities can be used as a starting point to advance historical thinking skills, as well as stimulate critical engagements with history and the Second World War. In this paragraph, I bring these observations together to provide a more in-depth reflection on how digital (entertainment) games can be adopted to advance historical learning. I do so by discussing (1) digital games as (commercially distributed) cultural artefacts; (2) digital games as integrated into formal education; and (3) digital games as embedded in a broader digitized media ecology.

6.3.1 Digital games as (commercially distributed) standalone cultural artefacts

Throughout this dissertation, I adopted the premise that digital games can be identified as historical configurations that are both representational and performative in nature. As such, I made several observations on how players developed performative/embodied understandings of certain aspects and events of the Second World War through gameplay. When discussing the game *Call of Duty: WWII*, I observed how players highlighted the game's 're-enactive potential': the ability of the game to let players experience the chaos of battle and the sense of fear and vulnerability that Allied soldiers must have experienced during combat, for example when landing on Normandy beach during D-Day. When discussing how the games *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Call of Duty: WWII* allowed for ludic engagement with the Holocaust, I highlighted how players were sometimes rather disinterested in how the games did so. This could be

10 See for example: Tom Boellstorff et al., *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012).

explained by the fact that players were preoccupied with other aspects of the games, such as the moment-to-moment gameplay. However, when discussing the specific scenes that allowed for engagements with the Holocaust, I also highlighted how players identified these as historically meaningful. Players derived specific understandings about the genocidal violence perpetrated by the Nazi regime from these moments, through experiences of 'positive discomfort'. Thirdly, I discussed how the game *Papers, Please*, and by extension other digital games that adopt similar designs, could allow for reflections on a dynamic position of 'liminality' during wartime. This concept refers to experiences of uncertainty in light of occupation, oppression, and scarcity, which forces people to reassess their identities and make moral and other choices in light of this reassessment. Digital games such as *Papers, Please* offer meaningful contexts for such a reflection, because digital games directly confront players with the outcomes of their choices, while also serving as safe virtual laboratories for emotional experimentation.

To contextualize the observations made above, it is important to critically assess the specific performative and embodied understandings that players can derive from playing games. For example, when discussing the 're-enactive potential' of games such as *Call of Duty* (and other FPS-games in general), it is important to emphasize that this potential is inherently limited and indirect. As stated elsewhere, "players […] can [never fully] overcome their presentist epistemologies, as is also the case for most other forms or re-enactment."[11] While playing the D-Day section of the game *Call of Duty: WWII* might stimulate players to reflect on relatively ahistorical emotions such as fear, players are not encouraged to reflect on potentially divergent beliefs, motivations and values of the involved soldiers as historical actors. In addition, the 're-enactive potential' of digital games such as *Call of Duty* is indirect in its depiction of the Second World War, in that gaming as a form of re-enactment does not take on the form of a directly mimetic embodied experience, but that of a motoric, cognitive and emotional engagement with a computer as a fiction-producing piece of technology, as stated earlier in this dissertation. Thirdly, games such as *Call of Duty* tend to invite players to one-sidedly "ally themselves to soldiers working on behalf of ultimately benevolent forces."[12] This means that these games, when considered autonomously, potentially undermine the premises of a multi-perspective approach to history teaching.[13]

Despite this critical assessment, I use the findings of this dissertation as a starting point to present the following general argument: the act of playing a historical digital game revolves around at least two types of what I identify as 'ludic revelation'. On the

11 Pieter J.B.J. Van den Heede, "Gaming," in Vanessa Agnew, Jonathan Lamb and Juliane Tomann, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies: Key Terms in the Field* (New York and London: Routledge, 2019), 88.

12 Holger Pötzsch, "Selective Realism: Filtering Experiences of War and Violence in First- and Third-Person Shooters," *Games and Culture* 12, no. 2 (2017): 160.

13 Peter Seixas and Tom Morton, *The Big Six: Historical Thinking Concepts* (Toronto: Nelson Education, 2013), 138-167.

one hand, the activity of playing any game leads to forms of 'instrumental revelation': ongoing attempts at functionally mapping and domesticating the core components of a game, such as its characters and objects and the procedural rules that define the mutual relationships between them. To successfully engage with a game, players need to gain an embodied understanding of its rules and mechanics, usually through a process of trial and error. This sense of instrumental revelation for example became clear when discussing the preoccupation of certain players with the moment-to-moment gameplay when ludically engaging with the Holocaust in *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Call of Duty: WWII*. However, on the other hand, the characters, objects and procedural rules of a game can also be imbued with rich historical meanings that can resonate with the historical awareness of players, to result in experiences of 'historical revelation'. Through their semiotically contextualized procedurality, digital games have a significant potential to ludically convey historical meaning and emergently produce particular understandings of the past. These understandings can both subvert and contribute to critical engagements with the Second World War and the development of processual historical thinking skills.

In light of this characterization, a number of recommendations can be formulated on how to leverage the emergent historical learning potential of digital games. A first way to do so is to create digital games that actively allow for productive instances of historical revelation. Inspiration for this can be found in my analysis of the game *Papers, Please*, but also elsewhere. For example, in the aforementioned adventure game *Attentat 1942*, players need to uncover what happened to their grandfather during the Nazi-occupation of Prague during the Second World War. As such, players need to solve several puzzles, but also interview fictionalized survivors of the events. By doing so, the game actively invites players to critically assess, sometimes contradicting, sources. This serves as a compelling starting point to elaborate on the skill to engage in source criticism, a central component of historical thinking. In line with the practice of serious game design, game creators can use these and other games as a starting point to further reflect on designs that allow players to emergently develop historical thinking skills and critically engage with the events of the Second World War.

However, as my focus in this paragraph lies on digital games as standalone, commercially distributed cultural artefacts that are made for entertainment purposes, it is important to mention that many digital games that are explicitly designed to achieve learning outcomes or bring about societal change, also often struggle to reach larger publics in the global games market. In addition, it is important to characterize forms of historical revelation as meaning-making *potentials*, since players can, but not always actively do, identify the historicity embedded in a game's design. Therefore, it is useful to reflect on other ways in which entertainment-oriented historical digital games can be used to stimulate historical learning. A second way to achieve this is to strive towards what I identify as forms of 'integrated historical contextualization'.
When analysing how players reflected on playing *Call of Duty: WWII* from a historical

Figure 6.1: Screenshots taken from the game *Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway*

Screenshots taken during gameplay.

perspective, I referred to the game's 'tangential potential': its ability to introduce players to a body of knowledge, which motivates them to further explore this body of knowledge autonomously. As a result, a meaningful way to promote historical learning through commercially distributed digital (entertainment) games is to add complementary materials, such as primary sources, articles and documentary film clips, which can serve to contextualize the historicity of the game. Examples of this can be found in the

aforementioned game *Attentat 1942*, as well as games such as *Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway* (Ubisoft, 2008). In the latter, which represents operation 'Market Garden' in September 1944 in the Netherlands, players can unlock bonus materials which contextualize what players have encountered through play, by completing a series of in-game tasks and challenges (**Figure 6.1**). A variation of this approach can be found in *Assassin's Creed*, a games series that does not represent the Second World War, but is still significant to briefly highlight in this context. For the most recent instalments of the series, *Assassin's Creed: Origins* (Ubisoft, 2017) and *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (Ubisoft, 2018), set in Ancient Egypt and the world of the Greek city states during the Peloponnesian War respectively, the game developers created a 'Discovery Tour'-mode. This mode allows players to follow a guided tour through virtually recreated landmark monuments such as the Pyramid of Giza and the Parthenon in Athens. As such, this Discovery Tour-mode can equally be characterized as a form of integrated historical contextualization. However, what sets the *Assassin's Creed*-games apart from previously discussed games about the Second World War is that *Assassin's Creed*'s gameplay primarily revolves around fighting and exploration activities that are not explicitly imbued with historical meaning. This means that the creators of the *Assassin's Creed*-games have adopted what I identify as a form of 'ludic captivation': an approach to entertainment-oriented game creation where genre conventions of for example action games are used to attract players, who are subsequently invited to explore the game's historical dimension through forms of integrated contextualization, as discussed above. As an alternative to designing games that allow for forms of historical revelation, this can be adopted by creators as an alternative approach to historical game development.

6.3.2 Digital games as sites for learning in history classrooms

Apart from creating digital games that can be distributed commercially, it is also important to reflect on how digital games about the Second World War can be used in formal history education. Here, many observations made above retain their relevance. However, as formal education is characterized by unique possibilities and constraints, it is relevant to discuss what educators should take into account when integrating digital games into their teaching. In what follows, I highlight a number of general prerequisites for the use of digital games in the history classroom. In addition, I expand on other observations I made about the use of digital games to promote historical learning, for example in relation to the marketing paratextuality of digital games about the Second World War.

When reflecting on how digital games can be integrated in the history classroom, several contextual factors need to be taken into account. Firstly, it is important to emphasize the central position taken up by teachers. Within the confines of (nationally) determined history school curricula, they are key agents. In light of this observation, digital games need to be identified as one possible tool in a teacher's instructional

toolkit. When engaging in instructional design, teachers need to determine whether or not the use of digital games fits their teaching style. This observation is based on studies into the perceptions of students about the 'authenticity' of teachers. Secondary school students consider it to be significant that teachers put a personal stamp on their teaching practice while staying true to their personality.[14] Secondly, it is important to discuss the perceptions of students regarding the usefulness of digital games in education. Educational scholars have shown how students can be sceptical about the use of games in class, as they consider gaming to be a leisure activity. The willingness of secondary school students to use digital games in classroom settings depends on several factors: (1) the perceived usefulness of digital games, i.e. whether or not games can provide clear opportunities for learning; (2) the perceived ease of use of digital games, i.e. whether or not students believe they are capable of successfully interacting with a game; and (3) the extent to which students have prior experiences with gaming.[15] Taking these factors into account, it becomes important for teachers who want to use digital games in history classes to: (1) render explicit the added value of a digital game in the context of their instruction; (2) schedule in sufficient time during the instruction for students to learn how to play the game; and (3) take into account the varying levels of experience students have with gaming, and modify the instruction accordingly. A final contextual factor that teachers need to take into account is whether or not they can access the necessary technological infrastructure to properly integrate digital games into their teaching.

In light of these prior observations, several general strategies can be recommended when integrating digital games into the history classroom. Firstly, teachers are advised to develop a broader lesson plan, in which the use of a digital game supports the achievement of a set of clearly defined learning outcomes, for example concerning the advancement of historical thinking skills. Secondly, teachers are advised to let players adopt a reflective approach while playing a historical digital game. It is easy for students to become engrossed in the activity of playing the game itself, without making further observations. American historian Jeremiah McCall recommends adopting a play style where students are asked to actively reflect on their activities and make notes, for example when experiencing moments of historical revelation. This requires teachers to act as a coach and organize a moment of debriefing at the end of the instruction to establish explicit connections with the learning goals. Thirdly, teachers are encouraged to discuss historical digital games as distinct interpretations of the past, like other forms of historical representation. Here, I want to refer back to the observations made about the notion procedural rhetoric as well as the semiotic contextualization of a game highlighted in chapter two and five of this dissertation (in paragraph **3.3.2** and **5.3**

14 Pedro De Bruyckere and Paul A. Kirschner, "Authentic Teachers: Student Criteria Perceiving Authenticity of Teachers," *Cogent Education* 3, no. 1 (2016): 1-15.

15 See for example: Jeroen Bourgonjon et al., "Students' Perceptions about the Use of Video Games in the Classroom," *Computers & Education* 54, no. 4 (2010): 1145-1156.

respectively).[16]

Most of these observations are relevant for the use of digital games to foster historical thinking and historical learning more broadly. As such, they serve as significant points of attention for when teachers want to adopt and critically discuss games such as *Call of Duty*, *Papers, Please* or *Attentat 1942*, in the ways highlighted in the previous paragraph. To complement these observations, I want to refer back to the observations I made about the learning potential of the marketing paratexts of digital entertainment games about the Second World War in chapter two of this dissertation. There, I discussed how, for example, the 'narratives of technological operation' put forward in promotional videos could be used as a starting point for a reflection on aspects of historical significance; how the emphasis on agency in paratexts could be used for a reflection on the nature of historical causality; how the adoption of binary notions of 'good' and 'evil' in games such as *Wolfenstein* could be used as a starting point for further reflections on historical perspective-taking and ethical reflection; and how the adoption of distinct audio-visual tropes in marketing trailers and other materials should be used as a starting point for a thorough reflection on the role played by imageries in shaping our understandings of the past. All of these suggestions fit well in a deconstructionist approach to history teaching: they can be used to highlight and critically evaluate the conventions of historical representation itself, while also interrogating prior understandings learners might have gained when engaging with digital entertainment games about the Second World War and other historical topics.

6.3.3 Digital games as an expression of a broader digitized and networked culture

In the previous two paragraphs, I formulated a number of recommendations by discussing games as standalone cultural artefacts and as tools for formal history teaching. In this paragraph, I want to add a final set of recommendations, by broadening the scope and identifying digital gaming as only a single cultural form in a broader ecosystem of contemporary digitized expression. Over the past three decades, various digital technologies, services and platforms have been developed and integrated into socio-culturally contingent everyday practices by individuals, organizations and society at large. As such, it is useful to reflect on how individuals who play historical digital games develop broader (online) 'media repertoires', or "relatively stable cross-media patterns of media practices" to engage with history;[17] how, by extension, game companies who create historical games do the same to communicate with their players and other external collectivities; and how history educators can develop meaningful strategies to

16 For the entire paragraph, see: Jeremiah McCall, "Teaching History With Digital Historical Games," *Simulation & Gaming* 47, no. 4 (2016): 517-542; Karen L. Schrier, *Learning, Education & Games Volume 1: Curricular and Design Considerations* (Pittsburgh PA: ETC Press, 2014).

17 See for example: Hasebrink and Hepp, "How to Research Cross-Media Practices? Investigating Media Repertoires and Media Ensembles," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 23, no. 4 (2017): 362-377. For the quote, see: Ibidem, p. 367.

interact with both players and game companies to advance historical learning in online spaces outside formal education. Even though only little research has been done to answer these questions, the approach aligns with existing efforts in the field of public history to develop proper practices to engage in public history projects in various digital environments.[18]

A first way to advance historical thinking and historical learning more generally in game-related online spaces lies in the establishment and sustenance of institutionally anchored digital infrastructures that allow for productive forms of historical interaction, also with players and game creators in particular. As stated by American historian Sam Wineburg, historical thinking "is neither a natural process nor something that springs automatically from psychological development."[19] This means that historical thinking skills need to be systematically cultivated. In informal contexts, this often becomes difficult, since informal engagements are fleeting in nature and participants are usually not challenged to systematically re-think their historical preconceptions. A possible approach to exceed these limitations lies in the creation of dedicated online community infrastructures, spread across multiple social media platforms and with close ties to pre-existing gaming communities, where constructive historical interactions can be initiated and sustained. Here, scholars can draw inspiration from existing online infrastructures for public history such as for example the online community r/AskHistorians.[20]

A second approach to stimulate the development of historical thinking skills in gaming-related online environments lies in adopting a repertoire of event-based initiatives in cooperation with player communities and game companies. As I have highlighted throughout my dissertation, game companies have increasingly started to adopt a 'games as a service' business model, which entails that game companies no longer limit themselves to creating games as singular cultural commodities. Instead, they continue to provide additional content and upgrades to their games long after the initial release, in order to keep players engaged with the game and generate additional profits. In addition, game companies have started to set up broader in-game events to attract players. A remarkable example of this trend is the live music performance given by DJ Marshmello in February 2019 in the popular game *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017), which was attended by millions of players simultaneously.[21] In line with this trend, a potential approach to stimulate productive engagements with history in gaming-

18 See for example: Sharon M. Leon, "Complexity and Collaboration: Doing Public History in Digital Environments," in James B. Gardner and Paula Hamilton, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Public History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 44-68.

19 Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 21.

20 Lisa A. Gilbert, "'I Run the World's Largest Historical Outreach Project and It's on a Cesspool of a Website.' Moderating a Public Scholarship Site on Reddit: A Case Study of r/AskHistorians," https://drum.lib.umd.edu/handle/1903/25576, accessed October 9, 2020.

21 Andrew Webster, "Fortnite's Marshmello Concert Was the Game's Biggest Event Ever," The Verge, https://www.theverge.com/2019/2/21/18234980/fortnite-marshmello-concert-viewer-numbers, accessed October 9, 2020.

related online spaces lies in setting up events in the context of the 'media repertoires' of the targeted player communities and game companies. Here, it becomes important to identify fitting partners, and to find a balance between community outreach and a retention of scientific standards.

6.4 Reflections on The 'Popular' in a Diffuse Historical Culture

In the previous paragraphs, I presented my main findings, a number of limitations as well as venues for future research, and several recommendations from the perspective of historical learning. Now, on the closing pages of this dissertation, I want to present a final, overarching, theoretical reflection that touches upon the heart of this research project.

In this dissertation, I studied digital gaming as a central contemporary popular cultural expression. I did so by making a straightforward choice: despite the fact that the notion 'popular culture' is an incredibly contested one in the field of cultural studies and beyond,[22] I adopted the following definition of a 'popular historical culture', in line with the one presented by historian Kees Ribbens. A popular historical culture can be characterized as a multidimensional entirety of historical expressions through cultural forms such as cinema, (subscription) television, graphic novels and re-enactments, which operate as entertainment-oriented cultural manifestations that are shaped by distinct (genre) conventions, largely produced and enacted for commercial gain and often aimed at transnational publics. I adopted this definition because it is helpful in shining a light on various cultural formats and venues for historical engagement that have long remained un(der)explored, especially by historians. The definition therefore served as a kind of invitation: it asked historians to genuinely investigate what is often looked down upon, to become fully acquainted with the distortions, but also potential new understandings, that can be found in the 'popular'. However, having gone through the motions of studying engagements with the Second World War through digital (entertainment) gaming as a cultural expression that, according to the adopted framework, directly fits in a popular historical culture, I argue that the time has come to reject this notion, or at least a particular understanding of it.

The adopted definition of a 'popular' historical culture departs from the assumption that certain cultural forms can relatively clearly be separated from other institutional ones. Other scholars in the field of cultural studies have elaborated on this distinction

22 See for example: John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction* (7nd edition) (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 2-17; Toby Miller, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Global Popular Culture* (New York and London: Routledge: 2015) (in particular the section on the different theories on popular culture: Ibidem, 9-171).

by, for example, stating that 'popular' cultural forms can be seen as an expression of a homogeneous, simplistic mass culture.[23] In this final reflection, I argue that such a clear-cut distinction between 'popular' and 'institutional' culture has become untenable.[24] In contemporary society, historical representations and performances, as produced by various mnemonic infrastructures, have become increasingly aware of one another and have therefore become fundamentally interconnected, in such a way that they are nearly inseparable. It is perhaps best illustrated by the developments brought about by the advent of the internet and related digital infrastructures. For example, due to the emergence and widespread adoption of social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter, in particular in Western countries but also in many other parts of the world, these platforms have given rise to a culture of connectivity in which existing mnemonic infrastructures actively participate. To give but a few examples: governments, national broadcasters, museums and remembrance institutions alike all currently develop active presences on the aforementioned social media platforms. In addition, institutions for formal education such as schools and universities are undertaking attempts to meaningfully adopt cultural forms such as films, comics and games to enrich their formal instruction and make it more appealing.[25] In a reverse trend, history professionals working at museums, universities and research institutions regularly provide consultancy services to film producers, comic book creators and authors of accessible history books aimed at broader publics.[26] At the same time, these same film producers, comic book creators and authors actively seek the advice of history professionals and remembrance institutions, while also providing them support.[27]

23 For a discussion of this view, see: John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, 5-13.

24 Ribbens already partly refers to existing interconnections between various expressions of contemporary historical culture. See: Kees Ribbens, "Strijdtonelen: De Tweede Wereldoorlog in de Populaire Historische Cultuur," *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 127, no. 1 (2014): 85-106, in particular 106.

25 An example of this is the online platform 'Platform WO2', the result of a collaboration between several Dutch research-, heritage and memory institutions (NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, 'Netwerk Oorlogsbronnen', the 'Stichting Musea en Herinneringscentra 40-45', the 'Oorlogsgravenstichting', the Liberation Route Europe Foundation and the National Committee 4 and 5 May). On this platform, several instructional modules can be found that revolve around the use of comic books, film clips, and various other materials. See: Platform WO2, "Over Deze Portal," https://www.tweedewereldoorlog.nl/over-deze-portal/, accessed October 9, 2020. Another example of this trend is a special screening of the film *Bankier van het Verzet* (Joram Lürsen, 2018) organized by the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies in collaboration with the Tuschinski movie theatre in Amsterdam: NIOD, "'Is het erg dat "Bankier van Het Verzet" verder gaat dan historische feiten?'," https://www.niod.nl/nl/nieuws/het-erg-dat-bankier-van-het-verzet-verder-gaat-dan-historische-feiten, accessed October 9, 2020.

26 See for example a recent series of books aimed at a broader (Dutch-speaking) public on the Netherlands during the Second World War: NIOD, "Leven in Bezet Nederland (1940-1945)," https://www.niod.nl/nl/leven-bezet-nederland-1940-1945, accessed October 9, 2020.

27 An interesting recent example of this trend is that the transnational player communities of two FPS-games that depict the events of operation Market Garden, *Post Scriptum* (Periscope Games, 2018) and *Hell Let Loose* (Black Matter, 2019) brought together a sum of over 12.000 euro through crowdfunding to financially support the Airborne Museum 'Hartenstein' in the Dutch

All these examples illustrate how contemporary historical culture is fundamentally (and most likely, increasingly) diffuse, a socio-cultural reality that can be obscured by an outspoken singular focus on cultural formats. It is one of the primary reasons the broader marketing paratextuality accompanying digital games about the Second World War was studied in this dissertation: to render explicit the broader networks in which ludic historical configurations reside. Scholars who study 'popular' historical culture have highlighted this diffuse nature of contemporary historical culture as well, by arguing that history professionals and laypeople alike should be identified as active participants in a popular culture. However, by primarily associating the notion 'popular' with distinct cultural formats, the notion itself perpetuates a distinction that is often distorting and un- or even counterproductive.

The observation made above raises the question how the 'popular' can still meaningfully be adopted as a category for analysis. Here, I first argue that it is not useful for scholars themselves to actively categorize cultural forms and broader expressions as 'popular', as it inevitably introduces unnecessary and distorting binary oppositions. The concept historical culture, as defined in the introductory chapter of this dissertation, implies the interaction between all forms of historical configuration, making us aware that the boundaries between them are historical and fluid.[28] Instead, I argue that it is better for scholars who study historical culture to identify why any textual configuration, whether through historical non-fiction, film or gaming, is formulated and appropriated by human beings as cultural agents, and what goals the latter aim to achieve when they produce these configurations. Here, my assessment of the 'paratextual positioning' of historically-themed digital entertainment games can be used as a starting point and applied to historical configurations more generally: whenever it is a primary goal for the producers of a cultural text to represent the past, it becomes useful for scholars to investigate to what extent these producers aim to achieve other goals as well, such as turning a profit or providing entertainment. By carefully assessing the various motivations that underpin any cultural 'text', expressed in any possible context, it becomes possible to properly weigh the historical meaning of a cultural expression, without requiring the introduction of the 'popular' as a categorizing notion. Secondly, I argue that, when scholars analyse textual configurations, it is important to investigate to what extent the formats through which these configurations are expressed, carry within themselves distorting properties. This is equally a critique that can be applied to efforts at historical configuration in general, as more traditional written forms

city Oosterbeek. See: Alkas, "Gamers Halen Ruim 12.000 Euro Op Voor Airborne Museum in Oosterbeek: 'Enorm Dankbaar,' *De Gelderlander*, " https://www.gelderlander.nl/renkum/gamers-halen-ruim-12-000-euro-op-voor-airborne-museum-in-oosterbeek-enorm-dankbaar~aabb8e97/, accessed October 9, 2020.

28 Maria Grever and Robbert-Jan Adriaansen, "Historical Culture: A Concept Revisited," in Mario Carretero, Stefan Berger and Maria Grever, eds., *Palgrave Handbook of Research in Historical Culture and Education* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 73-89.

of historical representation also carry within themselves distorting properties, as demonstrated by American historian and literary critic Hayden White as well as other postmodern philosophers of history.[29] A third point relates to the fact that, when thinking in terms of the 'popular', people quickly operate both in- and outside of it. A historian might be knowledgeable about a certain historical topic but know little about what came before and after. As people nevertheless develop preconceptions about this before and after, through various 'popular' and 'institutional' expressions alike that might both be distorting, it becomes useful for every person to further interrogate their preconceptions, regardless of whether they operate in academic circles or not.

A final observation that can be made about the 'popular' is this: regardless of the position adopted by scholars, the notion 'popular' will most likely remain present as a discursive construct that others continue to use. Here, a study of 'popular culture' retains its relevance: whenever any cultural agent invokes the category 'popular culture', it becomes useful to further interrogate what exactly they mean when they do. Scholars of historical culture and others alike must continue to investigate this in the future.

29 See for example: Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1973).

Appendices

Appendix 1

WWII-games: owners of popular games about the Second World War (Steam, 06/09/2018)

Games / Game series with more than 1,000,000 owners (Steam, 06-09-2018)			
Games / Game series: Title	**Number of owners**	**Involved countries (Developer / Publisher)**	**Involved countries (Developer / Publisher): Total**
Heroes & Generals	16.103.000	Denmark	United States: 6
War Thunder	14.066.000	Russia	Russia: 2
Day of Defeat	13.876.000	United States	United Kingdom: 2
Company of Heroes	13.001.000	Canada; United States, Japan	Sweden: 2
Sniper Elite	7.495.000	United Kingdom	Belarus: 1
Red Orchestra	4.135.000	United States	Canada: 1
Wolfenstein	3.850.000	United States, Sweden	Denmark: 1
Call of Duty	3.566.000	United States	Japan: 1
World of Tanks	3.320.000	Belarus	Spain: 1
Commandos	2.465.000	Spain, United Kingdom	
Men of War	2.108.000	Russia	
Hearts of Iron	1.901.000	Sweden	
Dino D-Day	1.474.000	United States	

Appendix 2

Overview consulted online available interviews with the creators of the game *The Saboteur*

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Appendix 3

Consent form focus group study (in Dutch)

Toestemmingsformulier

Titel van het project:
PhD-project: 'Engaging with the Second World War through Digital Gaming'
Onderzoeksprogramma: 'War! Popular Culture and European Heritage of Major Armed Conflicts'

Onderzoeker:
Naam: Pieter Van den Heede
Adres: ANONIEM
Tel: ANONIEM
Email: ANONIEM

Organisatie:
Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication (ESHCC), Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam

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Hallo! Dank voor je interesse in dit onderzoeksproject van de Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam. We willen je vragen om dit document grondig door te nemen en eventuele vragen te stellen voor je instemt om aan de studie deel te nemen.

Doel van de studie:
Aan de Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam onderzoeken we momenteel waarom we in Nederland games spelen over de Tweede Wereldoorlog, en hoe we over die games nadenken. Wat betekent het voor mensen als ze een spel als *Call of Duty* spelen, zovele jaren na het einde van de Tweede Wereldoorlog?

Om die vragen te beantwoorden, willen we een aantal gamers uitnodigen voor een groepsgesprek. We willen in het bijzonder praten met gamers die zelf niet in aanraking zijn gekomen met oorlog (persoonlijk of via directe familieleden), en die één van de volgende spellen spelen: *Call of Duty WWII*, *Wolfenstein The New Order* / *The New Colossus*, en/of *Hearts of Iron*.

Opzet van de studie:
Deelname aan het onderzoek duurt ongeveer één tot anderhalf uur. Tijdens het gesprek zullen we vragen stellen over je algemene historische interesse en je interesse in de aangehaalde games. Indien je ermee akkoord gaat, worden er van het groepsgesprek audio- en video-opnames gemaakt.

Tijdens het gesprek zullen we ook enkele specifieke fragmenten uit de games bespreken. Deze fragmenten kunnen confronterend zijn. Indien je niet wenst deel te nemen aan de bespreking van de fragmenten, dan mag je dit steeds aangeven. We willen benadrukken dat je deelname aan het onderzoek vrijwillig is, en dat je je deelname op elk moment kan stopzetten.

Delen van de onderzoeksresultaten en vertrouwelijkheid:
Alle gegevens die verzameld worden tijdens het onderzoek worden vertrouwelijk behandeld, en alleen voor wetenschappelijke doeleinden gebruikt. De gegevens worden ook geanonimiseerd in de verdere rapportage. Alle opnames en andere gegevens worden op een beveiligde locatie bewaard door de onderzoeker en de Erasmus Universiteit, en worden na een periode van tien jaar vernietigd.

Indien je er na afloop van het gesprek de voorkeur aan zou geven dat je gegevens niet gebruikt worden, dan mag je dit altijd aangeven. Indien gewenst, kan de onderzoeker achteraf contact met je opnemen om je de kans te geven de informatie te corrigeren en/ of terug te trekken. Indien je vragen, bedenkingen of klachten zou hebben, gelieve de onderzoeker te contacteren via de vermeldde contactgegevens.

Toestemmingsverklaring:
Door het plaatsen van je handtekening geef je aan dat je minstens 18 jaar oud bent; dat je dit formulier gelezen of laten voorgelezen hebt; dat je vragen naar tevredenheid beantwoord zijn, en dat je er mee instemt om aan het onderzoek deel te nemen. Je ontvangt een kopie van dit ondertekende toestemmingsformulier.

Indien je bijkomende vragen zou hebben, kun je steeds contact opnemen met het secretariaat van de ethische commissie van de Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication (ESHCC).
Dit kan via het volgende mailadres: ethicsreview@eshcc.eur.nl.

Als je akkoord gaat dat er audio- en video-opnames gemaakt worden van het groepsgesprek, en dat je geanonimiseerde gegevens gebruikt worden voor verder onderzoek, duid dan hieronder de gewenste opties aan:

Ik stem ermee in dat er een audio- en video-opname gemaakt wordt van het groepsgesprek:

☐ ja

☐ nee

Ik stem ermee in dat de geanonimiseerde gegevens gebruikt worden voor verder onderzoek:

☐ ja

☐ nee

Als je akkoord gaat om deel te nemen, plaats dan hieronder je naam en handtekening:

Naam deelnemer:

Handtekening en datum:

Naam onderzoeker:

Handtekening en datum:

Appendix 4

Topic list / impulse questions focus group study

(0) ELUCIDATION RESEARCH

(1) INTEREST IN HISTORY (GENERAL)

GOAL: Determine to what extent players are interested in history; determine in which aspects of history players are interested; determine which associations players have when hearing the words 'war' / 'Second World War'

Impulse-questions:
- On a scale from 1 to 5, how big is your interest in history?
- When talking about history in general, which topics/time periods interest you the most? Which ones interest you the least?
- Association: What do you think of when you hear the word 'war'?
- Association: What do you think of when you hear the word 'Second World War'?
- When talking about the Second World War, which topics/time periods interest you the most? Which ones interest you the least?

(2) GAME SERIES / GAMES / GAME SCENES

GOAL: Gain insight into why players appreciate games (*Wolfenstein*, *Call of Duty*) from a historical perspective.

Impulse-questions: **game series**
- Which games from the series have you played? You can go back to the very first games in the series.
- When you think about the games of [game series x], are there specific moments that have stayed with you? Why? What made these moments memorable? Did it make you think about something specific? Are there other people who remember this moment? What did you think about it? Did it make you think about something specific?

Impulse-questions: **game**
- Why do you play this game? What are the main reasons for you to play this game?
- Do you consider this to be a historical game? Do you think the game says something about history? Why/why not?
  If yes: What do you think is historical about the game? Does the interactivity of the game add anything? What does it add? If no: You could argue that the game offers a depiction of aspects of history. Would you agree with this statement or not? What would you say about this statement?

- Are there aspects of this game/game series that you especially like, or find to be well-made/ interesting? Which ones? Why do you prefer this game/game series over others?
- Are there aspects of this game/game series that you don't like or find annoying? Which ones? Why do you dislike these aspects?

Impulse-questions: **specific game scenes**
- How did you feel when you saw this scene?
- Does the scene fit in the game? Why/why not?
- Does the interactivity add anything to the scene? What does it add?

Call of Duty: WWII
- Epilogue (Liberation POW-camp): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8QGVxEVZwnQ

Wolfenstein: The New Order
- WOLF TNO – Chapter 8: Camp Belica (Entrance) (Begin: 01:43 – End: 03:12): https://youtu.be/1dDuHCZpqoY?t=1m43s
- WOLF TNO – Chapter 8: Camp Belica (Camp Torture Scene): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FUhTfZznY3Q

(3) CLOSURE / AFTERCARE (if a participant wants to end the discussion)

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Summary

How is the Second World War portrayed and remembered in contemporary society? This topic has been studied extensively over the past decades, also in the Netherlands. Most of this research has focused on institutionalized ways of engaging with the Second World War, through (national) commemorations, monuments, exhibitions and education. What has long remained underexplored, is how people engage with the war through popular culture: depictions of the past as encountered in films and series on Netflix and other TV channels, musicals, graphic novels and re-enactments. These depictions often rely on specific genre conventions and tend to prioritize entertainment and commercial gain. They reach a wide transnational public and potentially have a significant impact on how people think about the Second World War today. In this dissertation, I contribute to the study of contemporary popular culture by researching a cultural expression that today is often identified as a central part of it: gaming. I analyse how digital games allow people in the 21st century to engage with the Second World War.

In this dissertation, two central aspects of digital games are empirically investigated. Firstly, I analyse how the Second World is represented in commercial digital games. What interpretations and forms of (mediated) action do digital games put forward to portray the Second World War? Secondly, I study what it means for players to play digital games about the Second World War. Why do people play these games and what impact does it have on their understanding of the war? Based on this twofold analysis, I formulate a number of recommendations in relation to the use of games to promote historical learning, also in particular concerning the Second World War.

To carry out this study, I adopt a combination of a hermeneutic historical and a qualitative social scientific approach. To do so, I depart from the following central theoretical premise: I define digital games as a distinct form of embedded textuality that is actively co-configured by players as positioned and, to a significant extent, autonomous cultural agents. In line with the work of French literary theorist and semiotician Roland Barthes, the concept of textuality functions as an umbrella term for various cultural expressions such as literature, film and music. This textuality is embedded more broadly, in that it is accompanied by forms of paratextuality, such as promotional trailers and other marketing materials. The notion cultural agent refers to the fact that historical representations are not just passively consumed, but rather actively experienced by people as participants in contemporary historical culture. These participants not only have a specific socio-cultural background, but also possess a significant level of autonomy in giving meaning to these historical representations. In this dissertation, I therefore investigate the following three aspects of digital games about the Second World War: the marketing that surrounds these games as a form of paratextuality (chapter 2), the games themselves as a specific form of textuality (chapter 3 and 4); and the way in which players, as positioned cultural agents, give meaning to playing these games (chapter 5).

This dissertation is rooted in multiple research traditions. Firstly, it is embedded in the study of contemporary historical culture, which seeks to offer insight into how people in the present engage with and relate to the past. Secondly, it contributes to the study of digital games as a historical format. This dissertation not only provides an analysis of digital games as a contemporary cultural expression. It also provides starting points to understand how games, in light of recent historiographical debates, can give insight into aspects of the Second World War as a historical event. Thirdly, this dissertation is based on insights into historical learning, historical thinking and history didactics. The dissertation contains a number of recommendations for the use of digital games to promote historical learning in both formal and informal educational contexts. Finally, the research is embedded in the interdisciplinary field of game studies, to which it makes a theoretical contribution.

After discussing the theoretical and methodological premises of this dissertation in chapter 1, I present an empirical analysis in the following four chapters. In chapter 2, I present an interpretative content analysis of the marketing paratexts (such as press releases and promotional trailers) of the digital games about the Second World War that are commercially available in the Netherlands. I do so for two reasons. On the one hand, this analysis shines a light into how marketing paratexts, especially in today's digital age, can by themselves function as sites where distinct historical discourses are formulated. On the other hand, it provides a starting point to identify which game developers and publishers are involved in creating digital games about the Second World War, and where these companies are located. The analysis in this chapter shows that the digital games about the Second World War that are available in the Netherlands are primarily made by game companies located in the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom and, to a lesser extent, Canada and other European countries. Game companies located in Asian countries such as China, Japan and South Korea play a much less prominent role in this, even though these countries are among the most important growth markets for digital games worldwide. This observation allows for the conclusion that the games about the Second World War that are available in the Netherlands mostly lack an Asian perspective. In addition, the analysis in this chapter demonstrates that the representation of the Second World War in the marketing materials of digital games about this war tends to transnationally converge on a specific and limited set of historical discourses and aesthetic elements. (1) Expressions of "military fetishism", as reflected in promotional video clips that present elaborate discussions of the workings of firearms and other forms of military technology, and multimodal narratives about specific battles. In these expressions, the emphasis lies on the heroism of white male military and political figures who fight for the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and Nazi Germany as wartime superpowers in particular, while other perspectives are mostly lacking. (2) Conventions from the "Nazisploitation" genre, in which mythological dichotomies between good and evil are reinforced and adopted to play into the

fascination of players for (supposed) eccentric aspects of Nazism. This invites players to playfully undermine Nazism and avenge the crimes committed by the Nazi regime it in a cathartic way. (3) Audio-visual designs of marketing materials that primarily reproduce formal properties of other audio-visual representations of the Second World War, such as wartime newsreels, Nazi propaganda and post-war feature films about the Second World War. The prevalence of these discourses and aesthetic elements can be explained in two ways. On the one hand, the transnational production of digital games about the Second World War is strongly embedded in a militaristic infrastructure (the so-called military entertainment complex). On the other hand, several considerations regarding game design and marketing play a central role. Examples of this are the perceived moral and military clarity of the Second World War (Nazi Germany as the embodiment of mythological evil and the Second World War as a war between clearly recognizable (national) standing armies), which lends itself very well for game design. In addition, the prevalence of combat-centred designs can be explained by what I call a "presumed burden of interactivity": the assumption that designs centred on existing genre conventions is seen as commercially 'safe', often causing game companies to not explore other design principles.

In chapter 3 and 4, I analyse digital games about the Second World War themselves as a form of textuality that is not only representational but also performative in nature. Digital games allow players to perform actions within the context of their representation. I focus on how three 'blockbuster' games, namely *The Saboteur* (Pandemic Studios, 2009), *Wolfenstein: The New Order* (MachineGames, 2014) and *Call of Duty: WWII* (Sledgehammer Games, 2017) depicts two aspects of the Second World War that are often still avoided in digital games about the war: the occupation of Western Europe by Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. In chapter 3, I demonstrate how *The Saboteur*, a game set in Paris during the wartime occupation of France, offers a highly romanticised depiction of this occupation. In it, the emphasis lies on exciting, hetero-normative heroic male violence against a Nazi occupier that is a-historically represented as the embodiment of mythological evil. In this context, also various stereotypical (and historiographically outdated) assumptions about the Nazi occupation of France as a historical event can be distinguished, such as the fact that the game reduces the occupation to a purely German affair in which the French population was not structurally involved. In addition to this substantive analysis, I introduce a new methodological framework in chapter 3 that allows for a systematic analysis of digital games as performative historical representations. To this end, I introduce three central analytical instruments. Firstly, I emphasize the importance of an analysis of the "paratextual positioning" of historically-themed digital games. This term refers to the extent to which the creators of a game actively claim to want to represent the past, for example through marketing. An analysis of this positioning provides an important context for the analysis of the game itself. Secondly, I stress the importance of a systematic analysis of the discourses

embedded in the rules of a digital game and its overall design. And thirdly, I emphasize my own positionality as a researcher by adopting the concept "perceived ludonarrative dissonance", which refers to a tension between the narrativity and performativity of a game that players, including myself as a researcher, can experience based on their personal historical knowledge and broader cultural capital.

In chapter 4, I analyse how the Holocaust is represented in *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Call of Duty: WWII*. Based on my analysis, I conclude that both games instrumentalize the Holocaust to achieve secondary goals. In *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, the iconography of the Holocaust, consisting of images of concentration camps, executions, torture and the emaciated dead bodies of victims, is used to motivate players to engage in cathartic ludic revenge against an enemy that can straightforwardly be recognized and easily defeated. In *Call of Duty: WWII*, the reference to the Holocaust serves as a reaffirmation of the American narrative of the Second World War as an unequivocal "good" war fought by the soldiers of the "greatest generation." Following this observation, I reflect on the question of how digital games can be adopted more directly from a learning perspective to contribute to a critical reflection on the Holocaust as a historical event. Based on an analysis of the game *Papers, Please* (Lucas Pope, 2013) I demonstrate how digital games can place the player in a position of "liminality" in the context of a fictional ludic narrative. Games like *Papers, Please* are able to do this because, as a textual form, they have two advantages over other cultural expressions. Firstly, they offer players a kind of private laboratory in which the latter can engage in emotional experimentation. Players can do so in a safe manner because their actions unfold within the context of a virtual and fictional narrative, which means that players do not cause damage in the real world. Secondly, because of their focus on moment-to-moment interaction, digital games are very suited to illustrate the dynamic nature of human agency, also in particular in times of uncertainty due to war.

Finally, in chapter 5, I focus on how players give meaning to playing digital games about the Second World War. I do so by examining how players reflect on playing *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Call of Duty: WWII*, two of the games discussed above. In relation to these two games, I focus on two aspects of meaning-making. Firstly, I analyse why players play these games, and how they think about them as representations of the Second World War in general. Secondly, I analyse how players reflect on engaging with the Holocaust through playing these two games. To do so, I develop a new concept, "gaming fever". This concept offers insight into how players make sense of playing digital games about historical topics that are potentially sensitive and contentious in nature. This is also the case for the Holocaust, which in the Netherlands has come to take up an increasingly central place in how the Second World War is remembered since the 1960 and which, due to the venerable nature of this dramatic past, at first stands at odds with the playfulness of digital gaming. I study the two aforementioned elements based on a series of focus group conversations I set up during gaming events

in the Netherlands, with a group of primarily male Dutch gamers (as an indicator of a specific socially constructed identity) who had an above average to high interest in history. Based on this study, I first conclude that these players actively identify playing *Wolfenstein* and *Call of Duty* as a meaningful way to engage with the Second World War. The participating players appreciate how *Wolfenstein* allows them to engage in entertaining virtual violence against an evil enemy as part of a broader transgressive and humorous narrative. In doing so, they explicitly identify *Wolfenstein* as a fictional representation of the Second World War, but also indicate that the game is rooted in (specific) aspects of the history of Nazism and the Second World War, and therefore a certain prior knowledge about this history. *Call of Duty* is explicitly referred to by the participating players as a game that allows them to relive historical battles and as such learn more about these events. Secondly, concerning how players reflect on their engagement with the Holocaust through gameplay, I conclude that this engagement with the Holocaust can give rise to three forms of 'gaming fever', depending on the specific action potential ('affordances') that players have in the game. (1) Positive discomfort ("positief ongemak"), i.e. an uncomfortable experience while playing a game about a sensitive historical subject that players subsequently identify as gratifying. (2) Ludic indifference ("ludieke onverschilligheid"), i.e. a sense of disinterest among players in how a game represents a sensitive historical topic, for example because the historical dimension of the game is secondary to gameplay considerations. (3) Ludic rejection ("ludieke afwijzing"), or an active rejection by players of how (part of a) game tries to depict a sensitive past.

In chapter 6, I make the following central observations based on my main empirical findings. Firstly, this study demonstrates that digital games about the Second World War function as a form of textuality that continues to provide a highly homogeneous (Western, militaristic, mythological and hypermedial) representation of the Second World War. In addition, it shows how games often perpetuate older (transnational) cultural narratives and fictional depictions of the Second World War whose (partly explicitly propagandistic) origins can often be traced back to the war period itself, such as the American genre of the "World War II combat film" and romanticised stories about the French resistance. Digital games act as texts that reinforce these narratives, even when they have been actively refuted by historians. At the same time, this research demonstrates that players also identify these games as historically meaningful and actively derive an understanding of the Second World War from them. In addition, I argue in this dissertation that digital games have the potential to not only undermine a critical approach to the Second World War, but also enrich such an approach, for example by offering an insight into "liminal" experiences during wartime through experiential engagement. I therefore formulate a number of recommendations of how digital games can be used to advance historical learning processes based on these findings. I first discuss the possibility of developing digital games that lend themselves to

productive forms of "historical revelation" and "integrated historical contextualization". Secondly, render explicit a number of necessary conditions for the successful use of historical digital games, also about the Second World War in particular, in education. Thirdly, I identify digital games as but one expression form in a wider contemporary ecosystem of digitized cultural expression. I reflect on how gaming-related (online) platforms and "media repertoires" can function as a starting point for productive engagements with the past. Finally, I discuss some of the limitations of this dissertation and possibilities for further research. I also offer a final reflection on the notion "popular historical culture", which takes up a central position in this dissertation. Based on my research, I argue that the term, as defined in this study, is increasingly in need of replacement as a scientific category.

Omgaan met de Tweede Wereldoorlog via gaming

Pieter Van den Heede

Samenvatting

Hoe wordt de Tweede Wereldoorlog verbeeld en herinnerd in onze hedendaagse samenleving? Naar die vraag is er de afgelopen decennia veel onderzoek verricht, ook in Nederland. Daarbij lag de klemtoon vaak op geïnstitutionaliseerde vormen van omgang met de Tweede Wereldoorlog, via (nationale) herdenkingen, monumenten, tentoonstellingen en het onderwijs. Wat onder historici lang onderbelicht bleef, is hoe mensen omgaan met de oorlog via de populaire historische cultuur: verbeeldingen van het verleden zoals we die tegenkomen in films en series op Netflix en andere Tv-kanalen, musicals, graphic novels en reenactments. Deze verbeeldingen bouwen vaak voort op specifieke genreconventies en zijn meestal gericht op entertainment en commercieel gewin. Ze bereiken een ruim transnationaal publiek en hebben potentieel een grote impact op hoe mensen vandaag denken over de Tweede Wereldoorlog. In dit proefschrift lever ik een bijdrage aan de studie van de hedendaagse populaire historische cultuur door me te richten op een culturele uitingsvorm die anno 2020 vaak terecht aangeduid wordt als een centraal onderdeel daarvan: gaming. Ik onderzoek hoe digitale spellen mensen in de 21ste eeuw in staat stellen om met de Tweede Wereldoorlog om te gaan.

In dit proefschrift worden twee centrale aspecten van digitale games empirisch onderzocht. Ten eerste analyseer ik hoe de Tweede Wereldoorlog gerepresenteerd wordt in commerciële digital games. Welke interpretaties en vormen van (gemedieerde) actie schuiven digitale games naar voren om de Tweede Wereldoorlog te verbeelden? Ten tweede bestudeer ik wat het voor spelers betekent om digitale games over de Tweede Wereldoorlog te spelen. Waarom spelen mensen deze games, en welke impact heeft dat op hun beeld van de oorlog? Op basis van deze tweeledige analyse formuleer ik een aantal aanbevelingen met betrekking tot het gebruik van games om historische leerprocessen te bevorderen, ook in het bijzonder voor het onderwijs over de Tweede Wereldoorlog.

Bij het uitvoeren van dit onderzoek hanteer ik een combinatie van een hermeneutisch historische en een kwalitatief sociaalwetenschappelijke benadering. Daarbij bouw ik voort op het volgende centrale theoretische uitgangspunt: ik definieer digitale games als een ruimer ingekaderde vorm van tekstualiteit die spelers zich, als gepositioneerde en relatief autonome culturele actoren, actief eigen maken. Het begrip tekstualiteit fungeert, in het verlengde van het werk van de Franse literatuurcriticus en semioticus Roland Barthes, als een koepelterm voor diverse culturele uitingsvormen zoals literatuur, film en muziek. Deze tekstualiteit is meestal ruimer ingekaderd, in de zin dat deze vaak omgeven wordt door vormen van paratekstualiteit, zoals bijvoorbeeld promotietrailers en andere marketingmaterialen. Met het begrip culturele actor verwijs ik naar het feit dat historische verbeeldingen niet zozeer passief geconsumeerd, maar eerder actief

beleefd worden door mensen als participanten in de hedendaagse historische cultuur. Deze participanten hebben niet alleen een specifieke socio-culturele achtergrond, maar beschikken ook over de nodige autonomie bij het verlenen van betekenis aan deze historische verbeeldingen. In dit proefschrift onderzoek ik daarom de volgende drie aspecten van digitale games over de Tweede Wereldoorlog: de marketing die deze games omringt als een vorm van paratekstualiteit (hoofdstuk 2); de games zelf als een specifieke vorm van tekstualiteit (hoofdstuk 3 en 4); en de manier waarop de mensen die de games spelen, als gepositioneerde culturele actoren betekenis verlenen aan het spelen van deze games (hoofdstuk 5).

Dit proefschrift bouwt voort op meerdere onderzoekstradities. Ten eerste is het ingebed in de studie van de hedendaagse historische cultuur, die inzicht probeert te verschaffen in hoe mensen in het heden omgaan met en zich verhouden tot het verleden. Ten tweede draagt het bij aan de studie van digitale games als een historisch format. Dit proefschrift biedt niet alleen een analyse van digitale games als een hedendaagse culturele uitingsvorm. Tevens biedt het aanknopingspunten om te begrijpen hoe games, in het licht van recente historiografische debatten, inzicht kunnen verschaffen in aspecten van de Tweede Wereldoorlog als een historische gebeurtenis. Ten derde steunt dit proefschrift op inzichten inzake historisch leren, historisch denken en vakdidactiek. Dit proefschrift bevat een aantal aanbevelingen voor het gebruik van digitale games om historisch leren te bevorderen, in zowel formele als informele educatieve contexten. Tenslotte is het onderzoek ingebed in het interdisciplinaire onderzoeksveld game studies, waaraan het een theoretische bijdrage levert.

Na in hoofdstuk 1 de theoretische en methodologische uitgangspunten van het proefschrift uiteengezet te hebben, presenteer ik in de vier daaropvolgende hoofdstukken een empirische analyse. In hoofdstuk 2 presenteer ik een inhoudsanalyse van marketing parateksten zoals persberichten en promotietrailers van in Nederland commercieel beschikbare digitale games over de Tweede Wereldoorlog. Dat doe ik om twee redenen. Aan de ene kant biedt deze analyse inzicht in hoe paratekstualiteit, zeker in het huidige digitale tijdperk, ook op zichzelf kan functioneren als een plaats waar specifieke historische vertogen geformuleerd worden. Aan de andere kant biedt het een vertrekpunt om te identificeren welke game-ontwikkelaars en -uitgevers betrokken zijn bij het creëren van digitale games over de Tweede Wereldoorlog, en waar deze bedrijven gelokaliseerd zijn. De analyse in dit hoofdstuk toont aan dat de in Nederland beschikbare digitale games over de Tweede Wereldoorlog hoofdzakelijk gemaakt worden door game-bedrijven die zich in de Verenigde Staten, Rusland, het Verenigd Koninkrijk en, in mindere mate, Canada en andere Europese landen bevinden. Game-bedrijven uit Aziatische landen zoals China, Japan en Zuid-Korea spelen hierbij een veel minder prominente rol, ook al behoren deze landen tot de belangrijkste groeimarkten voor digitale games ter wereld. Hieruit kan geconcludeerd worden dat in de games over de Tweede Wereldoorlog die in Nederland beschikbaar zijn, een Aziatisch

perspectief grotendeels ontbreekt. Daarnaast toont de analyse in dit hoofdstuk aan dat de representatie van de Tweede Wereldoorlog in de marketing van digitale games over deze oorlog transnationaal zich richt op een specifieke en beperkte set aan historische vertogen en esthetische elementen. (1) Vormen van "militair fetisjisme", zoals dat tot uiting komt in promotiefilmpjes waarin uitgebreid wordt ingegaan de werking van vuurwapens en andere vormen van militaire technologie, en multimodale narratieven over specifieke veldslagen. Daarbij ligt de nadruk op de heroïek van witte mannelijke militaire en politieke figuren die vechten voor de Verenigde Staten, de Sovjet-Unie, het Verenigd Koninkrijk en Nazi-Duitsland als grootmachten, terwijl andere perspectieven grotendeels ontbreken. (2) Conventies uit het "Nazisploitation"-genre, waarbij mythologische dichotomieën tussen goed en kwaad versterkt worden en er ingespeeld wordt op de fascinatie van spelers voor (vermeende) excentrieke aspecten van het nazisme. Daarmee worden spelers uitgenodigd om het nazisme op een speelse manier te ondermijnen en er op een louterende manier wraak op te nemen. (3) Een audiovisuele vormgeving van marketingmaterialen die vooral voortbouwt op de vormeigenschappen van andere audiovisuele representaties van de Tweede Wereldoorlog, zoals bioscoopjournaals uit de oorlogsperiode, propaganda van de nazi's en naoorlogse speelfilms over de Tweede Wereldoorlog. De dominantie van deze vertogen en esthetische elementen kan op twee manieren verklaard worden. Enerzijds is de transnationale productie van digitale games over de Tweede Wereldoorlog sterk ingebed in een militaristische infrastructuur (het zogeheten militair-entertainment complex). Anderzijds spelen ook meerdere overwegingen inzake game design en marketing een centrale rol. Zo leent de gepercipieerde morele en militaire helderheid van de Tweede Wereldoorlog (Nazi-Duitsland als belichaming van het mythologische kwaad en de Tweede Wereldoorlog als oorlog tussen duidelijk herkenbare (nationale) staande legers) zich heel goed voor game design. Daarnaast is er sprake van wat ik een "presumed burden of interactivity" noem: de veronderstelling dat game design gericht op bestaande genreconventies commercieel het veiligst is, waardoor andere designprincipes en bijhorende narratieven vaak niet worden overwogen.

In hoofdstuk 3 en 4 analyseer ik digitale games over de Tweede Wereldoorlog *an sich*, als een specifieke vorm van tekstualiteit die het verleden niet alleen representeert maar ook gericht is op vormen van performativiteit. Digitale games laten spelers ook toe om actief handelingen te verrichten binnen de context van hun representatie. Hierbij richt ik me op hoe drie 'blockbuster' games, namelijk *The Saboteur* (Pandemic Studios, 2009), *Wolfenstein: The New Order* (MachineGames, 2014) en *Call of Duty: WWII* (Sledgehammer Games, 2017) twee aspecten van de Tweede Wereldoorlog verbeelden die vaak nog steeds vermeden worden in digitale games over de oorlog: de bezetting van West-Europa door Nazi-Duitsland en de Holocaust. In hoofdstuk 3 toon ik aan hoe *The Saboteur*, een spel dat zich afspeelt in Parijs tijdens de bezetting van Frankrijk, een sterk geromantiseerd beeld biedt van deze bezetting. Daarbij ligt de nadruk op spannend,

hetero-normatief heroïsch mannelijk geweld tegen een nazi-bezetter die op een ahistorische manier voorgesteld wordt als de belichaming van het mythologische kwaad. In dat verband zijn ook verschillende stereotiepe (en historiografisch achterhaalde) veronderstellingen over de nazi-bezetting van Frankrijk als historische gebeurtenis te onderscheiden, zoals het feit dat het spel de bezetting reduceert tot een puur Duitse aangelegenheid waarbij de Franse bevolking niet structureel betrokken was. Naast deze inhoudelijke analyse introduceer ik in hoofdstuk 3 een nieuw methodologisch kader, dat de mogelijkheid biedt om games als historische performatieve representaties op een systematische manier te analyseren. Daartoe introduceer ik drie centrale analytische instrumenten. Ten eerste benadruk ik het belang van een analyse van de "paratekstuele positionering" van historisch getinte digitale games. Dit begrip verwijst naar de mate waarin de makers van een game door middel van bijvoorbeeld marketing actief beweren het verleden te willen representeren. Een analyse van deze positionering biedt een belangrijke context voor de analyse van het spel zelf. Ten tweede benadruk ik het belang van een systematische analyse van de vertogen die ingebed zijn in de spelregels en het algemene design van een game. En ten derde benadruk ik mijn eigen standplaats-gebondenheid als onderzoeker op basis van het begrip "gepercipieerde ludonarratieve dissonantie", waarmee ik verwijs naar een spanning die spelers, en dus ook ikzelf als onderzoeker, kunnen ervaren tussen de narrativiteit en performativiteit van een spel op basis van hun eigen historische kennis en bredere culturele kapitaal.

In hoofdstuk 4 analyseer ik hoe de Holocaust gerepresenteerd wordt in *Wolfenstein: The New Order* en *Call of Duty: WWII*. Op basis van mijn analyse concludeer ik dat de Holocaust in beide spellen geïnstrumentaliseerd wordt om secundaire doelen te bereiken. In *Wolfenstein: The New Order* wordt de iconografie van de Holocaust, bestaande uit beelden van concentratiekampen, executies, foltering en uitgemergelde dode lichamen van slachtoffers, gebruikt om spelers te motiveren om op een louterende manier symbolisch wraak te nemen op de nazi's als een vijand die op een eenvoudige manier herkend en verslagen kan worden. In *Call of Duty: WWII* dient de verwijzing naar de Holocaust als een herbevestiging van het Amerikaanse narratief over de Tweede Wereldoorlog als een ondubbelzinnig "goede" oorlog die werd uitgevochten door de nobele soldaten van de "greatest generation". Vervolgens reflecteer ik in hoofdstuk 4 op de vraag hoe digitale games op een productieve manier kunnen bijdragen aan een kritische reflectie op de Holocaust als historische gebeurtenis. Op basis van een analyse van het spel *Papers, Please* (Lucas Pope, 2013) toon ik aan hoe digitale games de speler in een positie van "liminaliteit" kunnen plaatsen in de context van een fictief ludiek narratief. Games zoals *Papers, Please* zijn in staat om dit te doen omdat ze als tekstuele vorm twee voordelen hebben ten opzichte van andere culturele uitingsvormen. Ten eerste bieden ze spelers een soort laboratorium waarin ze op een veilige manier kunnen experimenteren met hun emoties. Dit is mogelijk doordat de handelingen van spelers zich in een virtuele wereld afspelen binnen de context van een fictieve

narratief, waardoor spelers geen schade aanrichten in de echte wereld. Ten tweede zijn games, doordat ze gericht zijn op moment-gebonden interactie, heel geschikt om het dynamische karakter van menselijk handelen te illustreren, ook specifiek in tijden van onzekerheid als gevolg van oorlog.

In hoofdstuk 5 richt ik me tenslotte op hoe spelers betekenis verlenen aan het spelen van digitale games over de Tweede Wereldoorlog. Dat doe ik door te onderzoeken hoe spelers reflecteren op het spelen van *Wolfenstein: The New Order* en *Call of Duty: WWII*, twee van de hierboven genoemde spellen. Daarbij richt ik me op twee aspecten van betekenisverlening. Ten eerste analyseer ik waarom spelers deze games spelen, en hoe ze over deze games denken als verbeeldingen van de Tweede Wereldoorlog in het algemeen. Ten tweede analyseer ik hoe spelers reflecteren op het spelen van games waarin ook de Holocaust nadrukkelijk verbeeld wordt. Daartoe ontwikkel ik een nieuw concept, "gaming fever". Dit concept verschaft inzicht in hoe spelers betekenis verlenen aan het spelen van games over historische onderwerpen die potentieel gevoelig en omstreden van aard zijn. Dit geldt ook voor de Holocaust, die in Nederland sinds de jaren 1960 steeds centraler is komen te staan in hoe de Tweede Wereldoorlog wordt herinnerd en die door het ontzag voor dit dramatische verleden in beginsel op gespannen voet staat met een ludieke benadering zoals gebruikelijk in games. De twee aangehaalde aspecten onderzoek ik op basis van een reeks focusgroep-gesprekken die ik opzette tijdens gaming evenementen in Nederland, met hoofdzakelijk mannelijke Nederlandse gamers (als aanduiding voor een specifieke sociaal geconstrueerde identiteit) met een bovengemiddelde tot hoge interesse in geschiedenis. Op basis van deze studie concludeer ik ten eerste dat deze spelers het spelen van *Wolfenstein* en *Call of Duty* actief identificeren als een zinvolle manier om met de Tweede Wereldoorlog om te gaan. De spelers appreciëren erg hoe *Wolfenstein* hen de mogelijkheid biedt tot vermakelijk virtueel geweld tegen een kwaadaardige vijand in het kader van een transgressief en humoristisch narratief. Daarbij identificeren ze *Wolfenstein* expliciet als een fictieve representatie van de Tweede Wereldoorlog, maar geven ze ook aan dat het spel voortbouwt op (specifieke) aspecten van de geschiedenis van het nazisme en de Tweede Wereldoorlog, en dus op een bepaalde voorkennis hierover. *Call of Duty* wordt door spelers nadrukkelijk benoemd als een spel dat de mogelijkheid biedt om historische veldslagen te herbeleven, en op die manier meer over deze gebeurtenissen te leren. Met betrekking tot hoe spelers reflecteren op hun omgang met de Holocaust via het spelen van games concludeer ik ten tweede dat deze omgang met de Holocaust aanleiding kan geven tot drie vormen van "gaming fever", al naargelang de specifieke handelingsmogelijkheden ("affordances") die spelers in het spel hebben. (1) Positief ongemak ("positive discomfort"), d.i. een ongemakkelijke ervaring tijdens het spelen van een game over een gevoelig historisch onderwerp die achteraf door spelers als verrijkend worden ervaren. (2) Ludieke onverschilligheid ("ludic indifference"), d.i. een gevoel van desinteresse bij spelers in hoe een game een gevoelig historisch onderwerp representeert,

bijvoorbeeld omdat de historische dimensie van het spel voor hen ondergeschikt is aan de gameplay. (3) Ludieke afwijzing ("ludic rejection"), of een actieve verwerping door spelers van hoe een (deel van een) game een gevoelig verleden tracht te verbeelden.

In hoofdstuk 6 breng ik de bevindingen uit de voorgaande empirische hoofdstukken samen en maak ik de volgende centrale observaties. Ten eerste toont dit onderzoek aan dat digitale games over de Tweede Wereldoorlog fungeren als een vorm van tekstualiteit waarin nog steeds een sterk homogene (Westerse, militaristische, mythologische en hypermediale) verbeelding van de Tweede Wereldoorlog naar voren wordt geschoven. Daarbij bestendigen games ook vaak oudere (transnationale) culturele narratieve en fictieve verbeeldingen van de Tweede Wereldoorlog waarvan de (deels expliciet propagandistische) oorsprong veelal terug te voeren is tot de oorlogsperiode zelf, zoals het Amerikaanse genre van de "World War II combat film" en romantische verhalen over het Franse verzet. Digitale games fungeren als teksten die deze narratieven in stand houden, zelfs wanneer ze door historici actief zijn weerlegd. Tegelijk toont dit onderzoek aan dat spelers deze games ook vanuit een historisch perspectief als heel betekenisvol ervaren en er actief een begrip over de Tweede Wereldoorlog aan ontlenen. Bovendien beargumenteer ik in dit proefschrift dat digitale games niet alleen het vermogen hebben om een kritische omgang met de Tweede Wereldoorlog te ondermijnen, maar ook om die verrijken, door bijvoorbeeld op een ervaringsgerichte manier inzicht te verschaffen in de aard van "liminale" ervaringen in oorlogstijd. Daarom formuleer ik, op basis van de bevindingen van dit proefschrift, een aantal aanbevelingen over hoe digitale games ingezet kunnen worden om historische leerprocessen te bevorderen. Daarbij bespreek ik ten eerste de mogelijkheid om digitale games te ontwikkelen die zich lenen voor productieve vormen van "historische openbaring" en "geïntegreerde historische contextualisering". Ten tweede vestig ik de aandacht op enkele noodzakelijke contextfactoren voor het gebruik van historische digitale games, ook specifiek over de Tweede Wereldoorlog, in het onderwijs. Ten derde identificeer ik digitale games als één uitingsvorm in een ruimer hedendaags ecosysteem van gedigitaliseerde culturele expressie. Daarbij reflecteer ik op hoe gaming-gerelateerde (online) platformen en "media repertoires" eveneens een vertrekpunt kunnen zijn voor een productieve omgang met het verleden. Tenslotte bespreek ik in dit hoofdstuk een aantal beperkingen van dit proefschrift en mogelijkheden voor verder onderzoek, en bied ik een slotreflectie op het begrip "populaire historische cultuur", dat in dit proefschrift een centrale plaats inneemt. Op basis van mijn onderzoek beargumenteer ik dat dit begrip, zoals gedefinieerd in dit proefschrift, als wetenschappelijke categorie in toenemende mate aan vervanging toe is.

About the author

Pieter Van den Heede (°1990) obtained a Master's degree in History (greatest distinction) at Ghent University in 2012. He wrote a Master's thesis on the representation of the Second World War in digital games. This thesis laid the foundation for his PhD project on this topic. Upon obtaining his Master's degree, Pieter completed the Specific Teacher Training (SLO) in History at Ghent University in 2013. From 2013 to 2015, he worked as a teacher in history and geography at Sint-Barbaracollege and Vrije Handelsschool Sint-Joris in Ghent, while also working as a teaching assistant at the History Department of Ghent University. In the Summer of 2014, he attended the 'DARIAH-DE International Humanities Summer School' in Göttingen, Germany.

In 2015 Pieter started a PhD research project on engaging with the Second World War through digital gaming at the History Department of the Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication (ESHCC) at Erasmus University Rotterdam. It was a subproject of the broader interdisciplinary research excellence initiative (REI) 'War! Popular Culture and European Heritage of Major Armed Conflicts', funded by Erasmus University in 2015. During the period of the PhD-project, Pieter attended several conferences and seminars. In the Summer of 2017, he participated in the Summer School 'Remembrance Beyond Memory Politics: Recalling Mass Violence and the Roads to Reconciliation in Asia and Europe' in Nanjing, China. In the Spring of 2018, he was a visiting researcher at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (Department of Geography, Media and Communication) at Karlstad University, Sweden. Apart from his research activities, Pieter taught several courses in the Bachelor and Master programs in History at ESHCC, including courses on the philosophy of history and history as a social science. In 2019, Pieter was selected as one of the finalists for the competition 'Young Historian of the Year 2019-2020', organized by 'Stichting Jonge Historici' and 'Jong KNHG'. For this competition, Pieter formulated the project proposal '#DigistoriciOnAir: Geschiedenis maken via podcasts, vlogs en livestreaming'.

In his teenage years and early twenties, Pieter worked as a playground attendant at his local communal playground, 't Fluitje. Here, he learned how playfulness can be an incredibly rich source for meaning. He hopes to continue being playful in the future.

List of publications related to this project

Articles

Van den Heede, Pieter J.B.J., Kees Ribbens, and Jeroen Jansz. "Replaying Today's Wars? A Study of the Conceptualization of Post-1989 Conflict in Digital 'War' Games." *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 31, no. 3 (2018): 229–50. DOI: 10.1007/s10767-017-9267-5.

Van den Heede, Pieter J.B.J. "'Experience the Second World War like Never Before!' Game Paratextuality between Transnational Branding and Informal Learning" *Infancia y Aprendizaje - Journal for the Study of Education and Development* 43, no. 3 (2020): 606–51. DOI: 10.1080/02103702.2020.1771964.

Van den Heede, Pieter J.B.J., Pieter Mannak, and Daan van Leeuwen. "Gamen in de Klas: Een Update van de Onvoltooide Verleden Tijd." *Kleio: Tijdschrift van de Vereniging van Geschiedenisleraren in Nederland* 61, no. 3 (2020): 14-17.

Van den Heede, Pieter J.B.J. "Beleef het Verleden! Gaming en de Ludieke Historische Openbaring." *Groniek: Historisch Tijdschrift* 225, no. 4 (2020): 443-450.

Book chapters

Van den Heede, Pieter J.B.J. "'De Beste Oorlog Ooit' herbeleven? De verbeelding van de Tweede Wereldoorlog in digitale entertainment games." In *History@Erasmus: Histories of Encounters*, edited by Alex van Stipriaan Luïscius, Gijsbert Oonk, and Sandra K. Manickam, 112-115. Rotterdam: Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication (ESHCC), 2018.

Van den Heede, Pieter J.B.J. "Gaming." In *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies: Key Terms in the Field*, edited by Vanessa Agnew, Jonathan Lamb, and Juliane Tomann, 84–88. London and New York: Routledge, 2019. DOI: 10.4324/9780429445637-17.

Forthcoming

Van den Heede, Pieter J.B.J., "Digital entertainment gaming as a site for (informal) historical learning? A reflection on possibilities and limitations." (book chapter; forthcoming 2021).

Portfolio

Courses followed during the PhD project

2015
- 'How to survive your PhD' (EGSH, Sept.-Dec. 2015; 2,5 ECTS)
- Master Class 'Academic Integrity Day' (EGSH; Oct. 28 2015)

2016
- 'Research into Cultural History' (Huizinga Institute, Jan.-May 2016; 6 ECTS)
- Workshop 'How to Design a Game Set in History?' (Graduate School of Humanities VU Amsterdam together with Maxime Durand (Ubisoft); June 23 2016; 1 ECTS)
- Dean's Master Class Migration (EGSH, Jan. 15 2016) (awarded *The Dean's Award for Multidisciplinary Excellence (DAME)* for best research proposal)

2017
- Summer course 'Remembrance beyond Memory Politics: Recalling Mass Violence and the Roads to Reconciliation in Asia and Europe' (Nanjing, China) (NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Nanjing University NJU and The Institute of Nanjing Massacre History and International Peace Studies INMHIPS)
- 'Brush up your SPSS skills' (EGSH, Oct. 5 2017; 1 ECTS)
- 'Qualitative Coding with ATLAS.ti (EGSH, Oct. 2017; 1 ECTS)
- DRUPAL & Content Management Training (ESHCC, Dec. 13 2017)

2018
- Hands on Data Mining Workshop (EUR Library, Feb.-March 2018)
- Research visit at Karlstad University (Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Department of Geography, Media & Communication) (Erasmus+ Grant; April 2018)
- Heritage & Memory Theory Seminar (Huizinga Institute, June 5-7 2018; 1 ECTS)

2019
- Huizinga Promovendisymposium (Huizinga Institute, Oct. 2019; 3 ECTS)

Courses taught during the PhD project

2015-2016
CH1106 History & Social Sciences (BA; 2 tutorial groups, Dutch)
CH2208 Historical Representation & Imagination (BA; lecture, English)
CH4134 RWS History, Memory & National Identity (MA; lecture, English)
Supervision MA thesis (2 students)

2016-2017
CH1102 Rethinking History 1 (BA; 2 tutorial groups, Dutch)
CH1106 History & Social Sciences (BA; 1 tutorial group, English)
CH2208 Historical Representation & Imagination (BA; lecture, English)

2017-2018
CH1102 Rethinking History 1 (BA; 2 tutorial groups, Dutch/English)
CH2208 Historical Representation & Imagination (BA; lecture, English)
CH4134 RWS History, Memory & National Identity (MA; lecture, English
Supervision MA thesis (1 student)

2018-2019	CH1102 Rethinking History 1 (BA; 2 tutorial groups, Dutch/English)
	CH2208 Historical Representation & Imagination (BA; lecture, English)
2019-2020	CH1102 Rethinking History 1 (BA; 2 tutorial groups, English)
	CH2208 Historical Representation & Imagination (BA; lecture, English)
	CH2209 Total War (BA; 2 lectures, English)
	CH2217 Rethinking History 2 (BA; 1 tutorial groups, English)
	CH4001 Historical Culture in a Globalizing World (MA; 1 tutorial group, Dutch)
	CH4134 RWS History, Memory and National Identity (MA; seminar, English)
	Supervision MA thesis (3 students)

Institutional activities

2019-present	Co-organizer 'History@Erasmus' research meetings (together with Gijsbert Oonk), History Department ESHCC
2018-present	PhD representative VCW Research Advisory Committee, ESHCC
2015-2019	Content management website Centre for Historical Culture (CHC)
2015-2018	Representative (2015-2017) and Chair (2017-2018) PhD council EGSH Graduate School, Erasmus University Rotterdam
	***Description**: PhD advisory committee to the Erasmus Graduate School of Social Sciences and the Humanities (EGSH).*
	E.g. support in creating a 'PhD handbook' for PhD students (the handbook can be found at: https://www.egsh.eur.nl/doing-your-phd/phd-handbook-1/)

Other

Finalist competition 'Young Historian of the Year 2019-2020' (organized by 'Stichting Jonge Historici' and 'Jong KNHG')

***Description**: competition to become 'ambassador' for the History discipline in the Netherlands; project proposal: #DigistoriciOnAir: Geschiedenis maken via podcasts, vlogs and livestreaming*

Conferences and academic workshops attended during PhD project

Oct. 30 2015 *International kick-off meeting Research Excellence Initiative (REI) Program 'War! Popular Culture and European Heritage of Major Armed Conflicts'*, Rotterdam (Erasmus University Rotterdam)
Presentation: "Experiencing war through play? Digital games about modern wars (1939-present)"

Dec. 11 2015 *ECREA Digital Games Research Winter Workshop*, Ghent (Ghent University)
Presentation: (Session: 'Rich, qualitative methods for game research') "Recounting alternate histories. Towards a method for studying the After Action Reports in Hearts of Iron III"

Feb. 25 2016 *Conference 'Narratives of War': Huizinga Institute*, Amsterdam (Amsterdam University in collaboration with Huiziga Institute)
(Session: Popular Culture - WWII) "Playing the 'Good War'? World War II-themed digital games and their (narrative) perspectives on perpetratorship"

April 28 2016 *DiGRA Dutch Chapter Pitching Event*, Utrecht
Presentation: "DataQuest: Modern Warfare. A quantitative content analysis of games about modern wars (1939-present)."

May 17 2016 *Urban Transformation Conference UTC; Special Conference 'Vital Postwar Cities'*, Rotterdam (De Doelen Conference Building)
(Session: Video Games of War and War Simulations) "Video Games of War. Exploring 'realism' in the World War II-themed video game 'Brothers in Arms'"

June 10 2016 *Seminar 'Digitaal herinneren in de Stad'*, Rotterdam (Erasmus University Rotterdam; organised by ERMeCC & Erasmus Trustfonds)
Presentation: "Spelen met het verleden? Digital games en (stedelijk) cultureel erfgoed."

June 16 2016 *Symposium 'It's all in the game! Games als onderzoeks- en werkgebied voor historici'*, Rotterdam (Erasmus University Rotterdam; organized by 'Stichting Jonge Historici', ESHCC & Erasmus Trustfonds)
Presentation: "Reliving the 'greatest war ever'? De voorstelling van WOII in digitale games"

Nov. 10 2016 *6th European Communication Conference (ECREA): 'Mediated (Dis) Continuities: Contesting Pasts, Presents and Futures'*, Prague
Presentation: (Session: Beyond the Military Entertainment Complex. Towards a Next Step in Digital War-Gaming Research) "Experience World War II like never before! A systematic content analysis of promotional materials surrounding World War II-themed digital games" (Pieter J.B.J. Van den Heede, Ribbens C.R., and Jansz J.)

Jan. 26 2017 *'Etmaal van de Communicatiewetenschap'*, Tilburg (Tilburg University)
Presentation: (Session: Music, movie, and video game industry – Popular Communication) "Relive the Brutal Battles of World War II!: A qualitative analysis of promotional materials surrounding World War II-themed digital games" (Van den Heede, Pieter J.B.J., Ribbens, C.R., and Jansz J.)

Nov. 9 2017 *EHRI Workshop: 'Engaging New Generations. The Holocaust and Knowledge Dissemination in the Digital Age'*, Amsterdam (NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies)
Presentation: "Replaying war-time occupation? Towards a 'liminal' experience in digital games about World War II"

April 19 2018 *Research meeting Department of Political, Historical, Religious and Cultural Studies*, Karlstad (Karlstad University, Sweden)
Presentation: "The world's gotta know? Digital games and the violent legacies of the Second World War"

April 24 2018 *Research meeting KuFo Research Group for Cultural Studies*, Karlstad (Karlstad University, Sweden)
Presentation: "Livin' in a Nazi-infested world. Analyzing the ludic imagination of wartime occupation in the game The Saboteur"

June 28 2018 *Research workshop 'Playing Memory'*, Utrecht (Utrecht University; organized by the Utrecht Forum for Memory Studies & the Center for the Study of Digital Games and Play GAP)
Presentation: "Games and sensitive history/histories of mass violence: towards a 'liminal' perspective?"

July 24 2018 Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) Conference: 'The Game is the Message', Turin (University of Turin)
Presentation: (Doctoral Consortium) "Let's Play: Modern War! Representing and Appropriating 20th/21st-century war history through entertainment gaming"

Oct. 11 2018 *Central and Easter European Game Studies (CEEGS) Conference: 'Ludic Expressions'*, Prague (Charles University Prague)
Presentation: (Session: 'WAR/GAME: Ludic Expressions of Violent Conflict') "No one is ever ready for something like this. A critical assessment of ludonarrative imaginations of the Holocaust in digital entertainment games" (Van den Heede, Pieter J.B.J., Ribbens, C.R., and Jansz, J.)

Nov. 9 2018 *Lustrum Conference: '40 jaar Geschiedenis aan de Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam'*, Rotterdam (Erasmus University Rotterdam)
Presentation: "Let's Play: Modern War! Representing and Appropriating 20th/21st-century war history through entertainment gaming"

Nov. 30 2018 *Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) Nordic Conference: 'Subversion, Transgression, and Controversy in Play'*, Bergen (University of Bergen, Norway)
Presentation: "Wolfenstein, Call of Duty and the limits of historical play? A study on how players reflect on ludonarrative imaginations of the Holocaust" (Van den Heede, Pieter J.B.J., Ribbens, C.R., and Jansz, J.)

Mar. 15 2019 *VGN Jubileumcongres 'Terugblikken is Vooruitblikken: Geschiedenisonderwijs in Beweging'*, Poederoijen (Slot Loevestein)
Presentation: "Spelend leren over het verleden: hoe gebruik je digitale games in de geschiedenisles?"

June 28 2019 *Memory Studies Association Conference*, Madrid (Complutense University Madrid)
Presentation: (Session: Users in focus. Memory consumers in academic research to popular representations of war history) "Genocidal violence as the boundary of play? A focus group study on how players experience ludonarrative imaginations of the Holocaust in digital games"

Oct. 12 2019 *International Seminar on Innovative Digital Practices in History Education*, Madrid (Autónoma University of Madrid)
Presentation: (Session: Videogames and history education) "Digital entertainment gaming as a site for (informal) historical learning"