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Ten years of Historical Game Studies

Towards the intersection with memory studies

ABSTRACT

As a multidisciplinary field of study, historical game studies has become increasingly established as a stand-alone branch, albeit one having clear interdisciplinary links with (and significance for) both history and game studies. Recently, many historical game scholars have increasingly been dealing with the concept of memory. Concepts such as Landsberg's 'prosthetic memory' (2004), 'media memory' (Neiger et al. 2011; Erll & Rigney 2009), and the study of how digital games play a significant role in cultural memory-making processes have enlarged the field to include more open-ended and broader approaches and implications (see also Hammar 2019b; 2020). The article aims to deal with these recent developments within historical game studies. Recent debates and increasingly prominent topics in the literature (prosthetic memory, historical fantasy, pseudohistory, history as metaphor) will be framed in terms of their relation toward memory studies, and further possible developments and open questions within the field(s) will be identified and discussed.

KEYWORDS: Historical game studies, memory studies, digital games, prosthetic memory, pseudohistory.

1. INTRODUCTION.

Historical game studies has increasingly become “a distinct interest separable from the larger field of game studies by way of the theory, content and purposes with which it is concerned” (Chapman, Foka, & Westin, 2017, p. 359), and is now established as a stand-alone branch, albeit one having clear interdisciplinary links with (and significance for) both history and game studies.

We are in a rather privileged position, when looking back at the developments in the past decade, since this is when historical game studies really took off as a “field”. There were isolated but highly important efforts prior to this (e.g., Uricchio, 2005) that helped to pave the way, but the beginnings of a network of scholars, associated conferences, and an academic community fell within the decade. In 2017, Chapman, Foka, and Westin commented on his-

torical game studies as a field “that has only really started to properly cohere in the last few years” (2017, p. 359). Chapman, Foka and Westin chart the emergence of the field. The 2014 conference *Challenge the Past/Diversify the Future* (University of Gothenburg) was the first conference to include a track dedicated to historical games. Chapman, Foka, and Westin note that it “was probably the largest gathering of scholars working on these games so far” (p. 364). This event also laid the groundwork for establishing the Historical Game Studies Network.

Scholars within historical game studies focus on games that relate to the past in some way and are therefore interested in these games’ engagement with history and positioning within the historiographical debate, as well as with the possibility of their functioning as a distinct historical form (Chapman, 2016a, pp. 4-5). Some contributions already summarise and reflect upon historical game studies as a field; amongst its major interests, we may list, with Lundblade (2020, pp. 16-17): historical learning through games, historical depictions of a certain period within games, and close readings and textual analysis of historical games.

Most importantly for our present focus, historical game scholars usually frame historical games as interventions in a broader historiographical debate that concerns the complexity of history and its contingency. Games, after all, usually provide users with counterfactual “what ifs” that effectively accommodate the conception of past events (and history) as fluid, vulnerable (see, e.g., MacCallum-Stewart & Parsler, 2007), and in-the-making (see also Koski, 2017), rather than fixed, stable, and already-happened (Hammar, 2017, p. 375).

In furthering this approach, many historical game scholars have recently been increasingly dealing with the concept of memory (Begy, 2015; Chapman, 2016b; Cooke & Hubbell, 2015; de Smale, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c; Hammar, 2017, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c; Hammar & Woodcock, 2019; Kempshall, 2015; Kingsepp, 2007; Pöttsch & Šisler, 2016; Šisler, 2016; Sterczewska, 2016; 2019). Whilst the phenomenon of historical digital games is underexplored within memory studies itself (de Smale, 2019b, p. 20; Kansteiner, 2017), on the other hand, “an increasing amount of scholars researching historical digital games have applied knowledge from memory studies to highlight processes of memory-making through playing historical digital games” (Hammar, 2019b, p. 28). Concepts such as Landsberg’s “prosthetic memory” (2004), or “media memory” (Neiger et al., 2011; Erl & Rigney, 2009), and the study of how digital games can “play a significant part in cultural memory-making processes” (Hammar, 2019b, p. 28), have enlarged the field to include more open-ended and broader approaches or implications (see also Hammar, 2020). This has also allowed scholars to focus on the potential significance that even pseudohistorical games (including, e.g., fantasy and sci-fi games) may have for historical discourse and public forms of history-making.

The shift echoes an important change in game culture itself. For years, history was chiefly the province of strategy games such as the *Civilization* series (1991-2016), providing a distanced perspective on the historical process. With

the publication of the *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2007), history also became the province of open-world games, the genre hitherto dominated by fantasy and contemporary settings — and the series itself, spanning twelve entries (with three more in development) is considered to comprise the most important set of historical narratives within contemporary game culture. It is worth noting that the series not only offers the possibility to experience simulated historical realities from the perspective of an individual, but it also relies on the narrative device of the past being directly accessible through the genetic memory of the individual, calling the playing through narrative episodes “memory synchronisation” (on the matter, see also Mukherjee, 2017).

The present article aims to map the recent developments of historical game studies, pointing out a recent, increasing shift of the field towards memory studies. Such a shift can be observable and explicitly stated or implicit, arising from a convergence of interests and perspectives from both fields. First, we will introduce historical game studies and memory studies as converging. We will identify how and where historical game studies is increasingly inclining towards the concept of memory, pointing out three main areas in which memory studies and historical game studies intersect and overlap. We will then focus on three recent debates and increasingly prominent topics in the literature (prosthetic memory, historical fantasy and pseudohistory, public history), which will then be framed in terms of their relation toward memory studies. To conclude the article, further possible developments will be discussed.

2. HISTORY, MEMORY, AND HISTORICAL GAMES

Before dealing with the ways in which historical game studies are increasingly using memory as a concept and being inspired by memory studies as a scholarly field, it is worth considering, albeit briefly, how the two approaches can be conceived of as already converging.

If “memory” by definition proceeds from a point situated in the present, and therefore “the focus of memory studies rests, precisely, not on the ‘past as it really was’, but on the ‘past as a human construct’” (Erll, 2011, p. 5; see also Jaeger, 2020, p. 10), the term “history” covers two seemingly contradictory ideas and refers both to “simply what happened” (Clive, 1989, p. 7; Peterson et al., 2013, p. 35; Elliott, 2017, pp. 22-23), and to the knowledge and study of what happened (Gorman, 1992, ix). Jenkins suggests using “the past” to refer to what happened, and “historiography” when referring to the writings of historians (Jenkins, 1991, p. 7). It is this second meaning that, especially within critical historical theories, points in the direction of memory studies, by highlighting the inherent mediacy, contingency, and situatedness of all histories, and also gave rise to the memory paradigm within academia in the early-mid twentieth century (Klein, 2000, pp. 127-128; see also Baer, 2001). This also interacts with a focus on heritage that foregrounds the vibrant relationship between the past

and the present — creating links of solidarity between generations, in line with the definition of “cultural-heritage” adopted by Tara Coplestone, as linking past and present through a multiplicity of elements that may be tangible, intangible and/or natural, and that are “used, created, altered and passed between generations” (adapted from Coplestone, 2017, p. 417, adapting Vecco, Blake).

As also noted by Jenkins, the idea of historiography is exactly motivated by awareness of the mediacy of all histories. Chapman (2016a) refers back to the critical historiography of Hayden White and Alun Munslow amongst others (see White, 1973; 1978; 1980; 1990; Munslow, 1997; 2007a; 2007b; 2007c; 2013; see also Kramer, 1989; Berkhofer, 1995; also informed by Foucault, 1972); who emphasise this awareness, claiming that all history is a form of narrativisation.¹

1. This “linguistic turn” in historiography and historical theory (Paul, 2011) marks a significant turning point for contemporary history: on one hand, claiming that all history is narrativisation constitutes an invitation to reject realist histories and “objective” approaches to the past in their entirety, and therefore encourages us “to put hope” in novelists and film directors, novelists, and popular histories (idem, p. 80); on the other, it proposes to speak about historical realism in terms of language (ibid.) rather than of objectivity, therefore opening historical enquiries to whole new areas of interest. Historical theory is undoubtedly marked by the emergence of such positions, influenced by both postmodernism and poststructuralism (scholars refer to the “postmodernist challenge” posed to historicism: Berkhofer 1995; see also Chapman et al., 2016).

2. This is claimed by the memory studies’ pioneer Maurice Halbwachs. The author’s distinction between a universal and objective history on the one hand, and a group-specific collective memory on the other hand (see Ricoeur 2004 [2000], pp. 393–394) is echoed by another very influential memory scholar, Pierre Nora (1989), who similarly claims that far from being synonymous, the two terms are in fundamental opposition. For an in-depth look at the relationship between the two terms, see Klein 2000.

As a specific narrative form, history is a “narrative pursuit” that entails a selection of available “ascertained facts” (Carr, 1961, p. 9); a collection of those facts by the historian (constrained by the cultural framework she operates within – Carr, 1961; Chapman, 2016a, p. 49; Elliott & Kapell, 2013, p. 6); and an assemblage of those facts into a narrative “to tell a given story with a given ending” (Elliott & Kapell, 2013, p. 7) that often entails imposing current values, meanings, coherence, and motivations onto the past (Droysen, 1967, p. 219). Historians, as authors (Munslow, 1997, p. 3), “structure the chaos of the past” (Hammar, 2019b, p. 23) and inevitably impose subjective as well as cultural perspectives onto it (Munslow, 2007b). By acknowledging that we engage with the past through its representations, e.g., through narratives that historians provide to their audience by selecting and therefore assembling available historical facts, we acknowledge that our claims about what happened are “less absolute and much more humble in their alleged truth-value” (Hammar, 2019b, p. 23). In Adam Chapman’s words: “all representations have to leave something about the thing they represent out of their depiction. If they didn’t then they would cease to be representations at all and instead become the actual thing they try to represent!” (Chapman, in McCall & Chapman, 2017). It also, crucially, entails an awareness that “every narrative, however seemingly “full,” is constructed on the basis of a set of events which *might have been included but were left out*” (White, 1980, p. 14; original emphasis); for example, as Klara Sterczewska (2016) notes, a design choice to minimise the presence of civilians in a war game is “ideologically non-neutral”.

By reflecting on these aspects, we may agree with contemporary memory scholars in conceiving of history and memory as companions, rather than irreconcilable opposites.² Whilst memory is usually used as an antonym of history (Klein, 2000, pp. 128–9), and to point to more affective, open, and fluid accounts of the past in contrast to cold, clinical, truth-based empirical approaches to it (Bollmer, 2011, p. 453), “blocking out the memorial function of historiography appears strange in light of the discussions among historians [...] regarding

the constructed nature, subjectivity, and perspectivity of all history writing” (Erl, 2011, p. 25). According to contemporary memory scholars, the opposition “history versus memory” must be abandoned to correctly grasp the relationship between history and memory. Historical memory is better conceived of as one among various ways of remembering, from religion and literature to architecture, collective rituals, and any other media (Erl, 2011, p. 5), and history as “capturing the evidence of the past and transcoding it into an assimilable narrative” (Chapman, 2013b, p. 323) within a broader context of constantly narrating, imagining, and representing the past beyond the boundaries of the reference to historical evidence. This recognition is far from being recent: Siobhan Kattago remembers that “according to Greek mythology, Mnemosyne was the mother of the nine muses, one of whom was Clio, the muse of history” (Kattago, 2015, p. 1).

Nevertheless, we note that the two fields of history and memory studies focus their attention differently, despite both being interested in how we engage with the past. For this reason, we suggest that the two can be viewed as complementary. Whilst history and historiography are both focused on sources, evidence, and facts situated in the past, memory is concerned rather with present practices, performances, and media dealing with how the past is currently interpreted, re-enacted, and narrativised.

We observe that the fields tend to converge, especially when scholars analyse popular media that engage with the past. Both historical film scholars and historical game scholars agree in considering history as a narrative construct affected, constrained, and biased by current beliefs, ideologies, and arising within certain hermeneutic horizons. By acknowledging such dimensions, scholars interested in analysing popular historical media more or less explicitly or implicitly adopt or engage with the perspective of memory studies.

2.1 INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN HISTORICAL GAME STUDIES AND MEMORY STUDIES

Based on what has been observed so far, it is perhaps unsurprising to note that memory is also (implicitly or explicitly) entering the field of historical game scholarship. Contemporary historical game studies tends to be concerned with reflecting on popular forms of history, and therefore on the contingency of history and the situatedness of every historical discourse, prior to every analysis or discussion of particular gaming experiences. Over the last decade, memory studies has appeared as a companion to history in addressing games that (more or less literally) deal with the past. Previously, “memory” had usually appeared as a term isolated from history and only loosely associated with popular representations and re-enactments of the past.

We have identified three (often intertwining) sets of circumstances where historical game scholars especially tend to refer to memory: (1) in considering how the elements of historical games are framed in relation to a broader multimedia horizon of historical imaginings and representations; (2) in provid-

3. The intramedial level looks at the rhetorical and formal devices that media use to generate and support certain types of memory-making, i.e., to establish and enrich their historical world-building. This is the main field of application and study of historical game studies too, which often focuses on processes and “procedural representations” as well as on other rhetorical devices proper to digital games. Chapman’s formal framework for historical digital games (2016a), for example, is aimed at providing “concrete formal concepts and categorisations of core structures particularly appropriate to the analysis of digital historical games”, and it “concentrates on the elements that have a real role in meaning making, in terms of both the developer–historian’s production and the playful reception/construction of players” (Chapman 2016a, p. 268), i.e. on “individual core formal structures and characteristics of games” (idem, p. 269). The intermedial level instead relates the intramedial level to previous and different representations of the same historical period, or event. It considers of course the formal properties of a media text, but it dialogues with other established media. This level also resonates with historical game studies’ reuse of the concept of resonance (Hammar 2019b, p. 45). Lastly, the plurimedial level concerns the reception of media texts and focuses on the social practices that allow the circulation and remediation (Bolter & Grusin 1999; Erll & Rigney 2009) of cultural memory related to specific artefacts. It acknowledges the significance of the social contexts in which media texts are received, and the possibility that memory-relevant texts or media are made so by “what has been established around them” (Erll 2011, 138). Most importantly, it acknowledges the flexibility of interpretations that a particular media text may acquire in different cultural contexts (Hammar 2019b, p. 46). For a systematic application of the intra-inter-plurimedial levels of analysis to digital games, see also Caselli 2021.

ing an understanding of historical games that relies on interpretation; and (3) in emphasising the subjective engagement with simulated pasts that historical games provide.

1. Historical game scholars deal with how digital games relate to the broader historical media discourse they take part in, as well as with all those processes that contribute to shaping historical games’ engagement with the past. It is here that terms such as “popular memory”, “cultural memory”, and “collective memory” pop up more often, mostly to describe all those media processes that co-construct the way in which we imagine, describe, and narrate our shared past.

This use is already present in one of the most-referenced articles that anticipate historical game studies — William Uricchio’s (2005). The author uses the term “memory” only once, speaking of “specifically situated” historical games as “inculcated through encrusted layers of historical scholarship, training, and popular memory” (idem, p. 328). This take is furthered by many other scholars, especially in recent times (see, e.g., Begy, 2015; Chapman, 2016b; Cooke & Hubbell, 2015; Pötzsch & Šisler, 2016; Šisler, 2016): all borrow the concept of memory, or theoretical frameworks of memory studies, to frame historical games towards a broader ensemble of popular media, texts, or experiences, that engage (and allow us to engage) with the past (see also Chapman, 2016a, p. 12).

This broader multimedia historical discourse brings historical game studies closer to the focus of contemporary memory scholars: Pötzsch and Šisler (2016) and Hammar (2019b), for example, explicitly draw upon Astrid Erll’s (2008b) framework for the analysis of cultural expressions to tackle historical games, distinguishing between intramedial, intermedial, and plurimedial levels of analysis.³

2. In his *Digital Games as History*, Adam Chapman problematises history to the point of defining it as an “active process of remembering” (Chapman, 2016a, p. 5). The way in which such an influential work on historical games deals with memory is paradigmatic for the trend we are analysing here. Within the first pages, he contends that “we clearly need a definition of history, or at least the historical, that rests on more than only judgements of perceived accuracy or truth” (idem, p. 10), and he later occasionally uses memory and history as synonyms. Most significantly, with one of the most important definitions introduced by his book, that of historical games as “systems for historying”, Chapman counters “ontological” definitions of historical games and defines historicity as arising from the intertwining of interpretation, game experience, and historical resonance. By emphasising the role users have in recognising and enacting historicity in games, Chapman implies an understanding of the historical that closely recalls that of the

mnemonic given by one of the forerunners of contemporary memory studies, Pierre Nora, in introducing “sites of memory” (French: “lieux de memoire”). In defining how a cultural objectivation of any sort could become a site of memory, Pierre Nora gives primary importance to the role of the experiencer/interpreter: to become a site of memory, a cultural objectivation has to be perceived as fulfilling a memorial function in a given society (Nora, 1989, p. 19). The concept of “historical resonance” (see 3.2, below) Chapman introduces (2016a, p. 36) points in the same direction.

Whilst Chapman explicitly mentions memory studies, his account in *Digital Games as History* remains historical. Others, instead, explicitly borrow the framework of memory studies and approach games that deal with the past through the lens of memory. As we will see in section 3, such a hermeneutical broadening of the definition of historical games leads to an analysis of games engaging with the past in non-literal ways, including through historical metaphors, pseudohistories, and historical fantasies (Chapman, 2019; Hammar, 2017, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c; Hammar & Woodcock, 2019; Koski, 2017; Pfister, 2019).

3. Memory studies is also explicitly invoked when games are considered as artefacts that make “accessible a kaleidoscopic image of history as composed of multifaceted, intimate, and idiosyncratic personal recollections rather than a linear trajectory of events presented as the result of unambiguous chains of cause and effect” (Pötzsch & Sisler, 2016, p. 28). When historical games themselves explore the past as negotiated, contingent, shared, and vulnerable (see also de Smale, 2019a, 2019b; Hammar, 2020), approaching them through the lens of memory studies instead of history is increasingly becoming the preferred methodological option. This is also why reference is often made to memory when considering forms of historical playful subjectivation within digital games, as we will see in the section on prosthetic memory below.

3. RECENT APPROACHES

The overview provided throughout 2 and 2.1 allows us to consider how some recent approaches within historical game studies are increasingly shifting towards memory. Among them, we have identified the following (often interconnecting) trends: historical subjectivities and prosthetic memory; pseudohistory and public memory; and games as public history. These areas particularly demonstrate the two-way contributions and relationship between historical game studies and memory.

3.1 HISTORICAL SUBJECTIVITIES AND PROSTHETIC MEMORY

Many historical game scholars give primary importance to the potential alignment of historical games with historical subjectivities. This is also informed

by the broader interest, shared by game scholars more generally, in the game experience as leveraging the alignment with, or adoption of, virtual subjectivities and subjective standpoints internal to gameworlds (see, e.g., Bayliss, 2007a; 2007b; Calleja, 2011; Gee, 2008; Grodal & Gregersen, 2008; Grodal, 2003; Kania, 2017; Klevjer, 2006; Leino, 2010; Taylor, 2002; Vella, 2015; Vella & Gualeni, 2018; Wilhelmsson, 2008). This process is especially relevant if we consider historical games, where the alignment with in-game subjectivities becomes crucial for the game to be perceived as a “system for historying”. It is commonly contended that historical games allow a particular kind of subjectivity (King, 2007), i.e. they allow players to achieve historying by letting them engage with rules, constraints, and narratives that help them comprehend historical actors (Peterson et al., 2013, p. 39), therefore to some extent entering the mental universe of past actors to reconstruct the reality they lived in (see also: Gilderhus, 2003, pp. 45-46; Uricchio, 2005, p. 334).

Subjective engagement is especially considered when scholars deal with pseudohistorical games featuring visual novel and dating simulator elements. Such games provide an understanding of history as vulnerable and subjective (Koski, 2017), and often relativised by those who survived or won (ibid., pp. 14-15), by leveraging the relationships that they allow users to build with their characters. In this way, these games leverage the emotional engagement of users, be it emotional, romantic, and/or sexual (Hasegawa, 2013), and provide an engagement with history that relies less on the representation of historical processes and more on a free, open-ended, and often fetishising re-imagining of past contexts and characters (see also Caselli & Toniolo, 2021). Such focus on historical as well as pseudohistorical subjectivities allows Koski (2017), for example, to focus on the metahistorical dimension of *Valkyria Chronicles* (Sega, 2008), and Hasegawa on an engagement with history that inclines towards romance, diversity, and queerness, and which therefore embraces anachronism and fantasy (Hasegawa, 2013, p. 145).

Either way, historical game scholars’ focus on historical subjectivities allows them to analyse present practices, processes, and engagements with the past, with particular attention to affect and empathy. Some scholars have viewed historical empathy as primary in attempting to “understand the past on its own terms” (Hartman et al., 2021), especially in popular media (see e.g. Metzger, 2007, on the historical film’s ability to foster “historical empathy”, pointing out however that this is sometimes difficult to extricate from “presentism” and a felt “resonance between the past and the present”, p. 71). In relation to games, Sky LaRell Anderson observes how the game *Valiant Hearts* (Ubisoft Montpellier, 2014) “showcases personal stories to emphasise affect through empathy[, leaning] from both physical and political action toward the personal stories of everyday people involved in WWII” (Anderson, 2019, p. 191), relying on artefacts and items that convey lore, with the potential to enhance affective engagement (pp. 192-3).

Such emphasis on present empathetic ways to engage with the past is also central to memory studies. Prosthetic memory, as discussed by Alison Landsberg

(2004), is significant here. This kind of memory arises from mass media and derives from the engagement with a mediated representation (Landsberg mentions “seeing a film, visiting a museum, watching a television miniseries” among other examples, and adds even “perhaps [...] entering virtual worlds on the internet”; Landsberg, 2004, pp. 20; 48 respectively). We could add the memories derived from video games. Such memory is not the product of a lived experience. Like artificial limbs, prosthetic memories are technological, mediated memories that arise when a person interfaces with the past at an “experiential site” (Landsberg, 2004, p. 2), i.e., during the experience of a site of memory. During such an experience — highlighting another aspect of the “prosthesis” metaphor — individuals “suture themselves” (ibid.) into a larger history, both apprehending historical narratives and taking on “a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which [they] did not live” (ibid.). This mostly happens as the audience empathises with the depicted characters and their personal and communal pasts (Landsberg, 2015, p. 30). Prosthetic memories are therefore not premised on any claim of natural ownership and challenge “the essentialist logic of many group identities. Mass culture makes memories more widely available so that people who have no “natural” claim to them might nevertheless incorporate them into their own archive of experience” (idem, p. 9). At the same time,

[O]ne’s engagement with them begins from a position of difference, with the recognition that these images and narratives concerning the past are not one’s ‘heritage’ in any simple sense [...]. People who acquire these memories are led to feel a connection to [that] past but, all the while, to remember their position in the contemporary moment (ibid.).

The concept of prosthetic memory, in this regard, echoes that of ludic subjectivity in being at the same time felt as belonging to others as well as oneself during one’s engagement with a gameworld (see the double perspectival structure of ludic engagement, introduced by Vella, 2015, pp. 55-72). Prosthetic memory extends memory beyond the personal, and further blurs the distinction between “history” and “memory studies”. As observed by Hammar, “relatively little attention in both game and memory studies has been paid to Alison Landsberg’s concept of ‘prosthetic memory’ and its role in analyzing historical digital games” (Hammar, 2020). Nonetheless, the concept of prosthetic memory usefully draws attention to the affective relations we develop with the historical worlds that digital games depict and simulate — and especially to the social and political implications of such relations (ibid.). It is by borrowing and problematising the concept of “prosthetic memory” that, for example, Hammar analyses how the historical gameworld of *Mafia III* (Hangar 13, 2016) is ideologically, hegemonically, and politically situated towards the past depicted.

The focus on historical and pseudohistorical subjectivities, therefore, shares with the perspective of prosthetic memory both the emphasis on empathy and

the concern with present biases, hegemonic representations/simulations, and ideologically oriented ways to approach the past within digital games. This opens the possibility of counter-hegemonic play, with the player put in a position where they are able to challenge the hegemonic discourse about the past. The concept of hegemony, coined by Gramsci (1961), means the way the past is constructed as a means to justify existing power relations, and internalised to a degree where other perspectives become near-impossible to accept (Hammar, 2017). In multiple contemporary games there are attempts to present counter-hegemonic narrative, with *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry* (Ubisoft Quebec, 2013) — a game depicting the transatlantic slave trade — and *Through the Darkest of Times* (HandyGames 2020) — focusing on pre-WWII German resistance against the Nazi regime — serving as handy examples.

As Hammar (2017) argues in his analysis of *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry*, most counter-hegemonic attempts are located within game aesthetics and narrative. While the game indeed allows for playing the freedom fighter opposing Haitian slavery, it also forces the player into violent solutions, reinforcing the hegemonic narrative of Black masculinity. Souvik Mukherjee (2015) echoes this conclusion when analysing empire-building strategy games. He points out that reversing narrative perspective and allowing a historically colonised nation to act as an empire in a strategy game is hardly an attempt at decolonisation, rather reinforcing the hegemonic concept that imperialism is the only possible course of history, inevitable and imperative. This does not mean counter-hegemonic discourse cannot be introduced through digital games: but if the work of prosthetic memory is to be successful in this regard, the game should include gameplay that reinforces the counter-hegemonic message.

3.2 PSEUDOHISTORY AND PUBLIC MEMORY

While mediated memory, as discussed by both Landsberg and Erll, is easily internalised, it belongs to the broader category of public memory: the officially sanctioned way to remember the past, often in contradiction with the particular memories of individuals or communities. John Bodnar (1994) describes public memory as being produced through the interaction between various actors of the public sphere, both official and vernacular — sometimes characterised by conflict over the way the past should be remembered. He claims, however, that in public memory the past serves certain political uses: not only to provide the source of social cohesion but also to justify the power of social institutions:

Public memory speaks primarily about the structure of power in society because that power is always in question in a world of polarities and contradictions and because cultural understanding is always grounded in the material structure of society itself. Memory adds perspective and authenticity to the views articulated in this exchange; defenders of official and vernacular interests are selectively retrieved from the past to perform similar functions in the present. (p. 15)

In recent years, digital games culture and historical game studies have both become more aware of the role games play in the shaping of public memory, leading to numerous discussions regarding the ways the past is represented (and therefore — commemorated) on both aesthetical and algorithmic levels (Hammar, 2017, Kolek et al., 2021, Pfister, 2020, Šisler, 2016).

It is worth noting that such discussion stretches beyond the realm of direct historical representation, towards games set in pseudohistorical or alternate history settings. In game culture, the employment of fantasy is especially widespread in the presentation of the past, as digital games are still a relatively underused agent in the contested field of public memory. Therefore, their licence to present the past is limited by other agents and institutions, officially and unofficially. As Chapman and Linderoth (2015) claim, the introduction of several sensitive topics in a game was considered trivialising unless the game itself was labelled as serving interests of more prominent agents, such as state-sanctioned education or institutional art. Wulf Kansteiner (2017) echoes this observation, pointing out that the memory of the most sensitive and inflammatory aspects of the World War — such as Shoah — are regulated by specialised institutions, such as Yad Vashem, often considering games a tool unsuited to presenting such matter, and actively opposing the release of Shoah-themed games. As a globalised and commercial medium, games must further obey different legal regulations, governing the public memory, such as a ban on Nazi symbols in Germany or censorship of the Armenian genocide by Turkey. Analysing this phenomenon, Eugen Pfister (2019) observes that it leads not only to the absence of sensitive aspects of the past from history-themed games, but also caters to revisionist versions of public memory. For example, to avoid legal troubles multiple games depicting the European theatre of the Second World War focus on the German Army and completely omit references to the Nazi ideology, perpetuating the myth of “Clean Wehrmacht” — the revisionist belief that the regular army was mostly free of Nazi ideological influence and therefore innocent of the most horrible war crimes, including the Shoah (Pfister, 2019, 2020, Chapman & Linderoth, 2015).

For such reasons, numerous sensitive historical topics are either absent from game culture — despite their prominence in other audiovisual media — or relegated to the background. Holger Pötzsch (2017) identifies filters applied in game design that minimise or exclude problematic content and features — for example, the “consequence filter”, that filters out the costs of warfare, such as post-traumatic stress disorder; and the “conflict filter”, which often gives the impression that violent resolution is necessary and justified, by excluding peaceful alternatives. Games addressing the Shoah, the transatlantic slave trade or Native American population genocide can still raise uproar from other public memory institutions.

For these reasons, as well as for their traditional ties to fantasy and s-f culture (Frelík, 2017, Peterson, 2012), digital games readily use tropes of pseudohistory or alternate history to address sensitive aspects of the past, thus seeming to dis-

tance themselves from the public memory. This is often analysed in the context of World War II, routinely supplemented by the presence of zombies or fantastic products of Nazi pseudoscience — such as robots or spaceships — with Hitler in the battle mech from *Wolfenstein 3D* (id Software, 1992) serving as the paradigmatic example (Chapman, 2019; Jayemanne & Kunzelman, 2022). In such settings, the Shoah can be presented more openly without risking the outrage of memory-guarding institutions — indeed, the most direct depiction of Nazi war atrocities in recent games comes from *Wolfenstein: New Order* (Machine Games, 2014), an alternate history game set after Nazi Germany’s ultimate victory, and *My Memory of Us* (Juggler Games, 2018), a platformer utilising fable-like aesthetics replacing Nazis with robots, and coding persecuted Jews as people wearing red clothing. Such a narrative choice is not without consequences: it relegates Nazi atrocities to the realm of the fantastical, as an unrealised project inhabiting the same memory space Nazi spaceships occupy, perpetuating the ideological myth of evil Nazis and noble Axis soldiers (Pfister, 2019; 2020).

The use of pseudohistorical narrative is however not exclusively a way of escaping the scrutiny of public memory guardians. It also provides the space for challenging hegemonic discourse within the public memory. For example, Klara Sterczewska (2016) moves towards the question “Is different memory possible?” while considering the 2014 game *This War of Mine* (11 bit studios, 2014). The game focuses on civilian experience of war in a modern European city, and tries to respect the complexity of such situations, while creating a fictitious setting loosely tied to Balkan culture. Sterczewska notes that it is inspired by testimonies of those who lived through the sieges of Sarajevo, but also Leningrad, Monrovia, and the Warsaw Uprising. The game shows the toll (both physical and psychological) that war takes on civilians, and their daily struggle to manage scarce resources, which also place a strain on their relationship with each other. The game’s tagline is “In war, not everyone is a soldier”, emphasising the departure from the more “marketable” narrative. When considered in its local context, it also directly challenges the dominant trend in Polish public memory of World War II, especially the Warsaw Uprising, currently presented as a heroic and necessary (though doomed) sacrifice by the dominant political forces (see Kobielska, 2016).

“Historical branding”

Pseudohistorical, fantastical, and fictionalised representations still manage to effectively evoke a shared sense of “history”. As the idea of “prosthetic memory” underlines, reimaginings of history in popular media contribute to our collective perceptions and reception of history. Koski notes that *Valkyria Chronicles* “links its representations to a global textually mediated popular nostalgia or collective memory of the Second World War” (Koski, 2017, pp. 400-401) – it thus has “a general air of WW2-ness” (p. 403), rather than representing the historical context more literally. It taps into a public popular perception of history that

is pieced together from blockbuster films, and representations in other media, “creating what can be called [following Bullinger & Salvati, 2011] the cultural brand or mythology of the Second World War” (Koski, 2017, p. 398). Branding may also be a feature of the way history is commodified and consumed (de Groot, 2009); and “authenticity” may itself come in for commodification (see Goulding, 2000). The cultural memory of some (postmodern) periods may be even more associated with commodities and manufactured dreams than others. For example, Robin J.S. Sloan (2015) describes the nostalgic appeal of 80s-ness and 90s-ness in games as “not responding to consumers’ search for historical truth”, but instead “creat[ing] a virtual representation of consumer memories” (p. 29); Kathleen McClancy (2018) discusses the *Fallout* series (1997-2018) for its nostalgic 50s-ness, with its associated retrofuturism (nostalgia for a lost dream of technological progress, rather than for anything that actually occurred).

The popularity of neo-medievalist fantasy in games, heavily influenced by both fantasy fiction and tabletop role-playing games, provides another handy example of the aforementioned tendencies. While technically fictitious, they tend to borrow heavily from the popular imaginary of European medieval culture, reinforcing the public image of the Middle Ages and influencing public memory of the era by producing a general sense of “middle-agesness” without referencing any specific period or culture (see Eco, 1986; see e.g. Bonello Rutter Giappone & Vella, 2021, on neomedievalism in fantasy games). This strategy allows not only for the creation of a unique brand to be guarded as intellectual property (such as the world of Tamriel from *The Elder Scrolls* series (1994-2020) or Thedas from the *Dragon Age* series (2009-2014)), but also illuminates the way the past is constructed in popular discourse and highlights the most important tensions within the public memory sphere, as testified by numerous debates about the way neo-medievalist fantasy worlds are created.

One central discussion revolves around the projection of contemporary racial and ethnic divisions and discussions on the public memory of the past. The *Dungeons and Dragons* legacy results in the production of heavily-racialised game worlds, where folklore-based creatures such as elves are considered “races”, providing a handy tool to explore racial tensions without involving actual, real-world discrimination — or to safely introduce racist overtones catering to the far-right audience (Bjørkelo, 2020). Meanwhile, there is a tension between on the one hand, presenting past society as predominantly monoethnic, contributing to the political myth of “the white Middle Ages”, often providing justification for racist policies and ideologies today (Young, 2019; Bjørkelo, 2020), and on the other hand, modelling fictitious cultures on the ethnic composition of contemporary societies of former colonial empires, thus presenting the result of imperial policies as the natural and desired state of the world. This, in turn, provokes resistance against the hegemonic discourse of the Anglosphere, resulting in the creation of alternative visions of the distant past, rooted in various local idiosyncrasies, under an umbrella of ethnic fantasy (Majkowski, 2018).

Rather than simply discounting popular reception and even consumption of history, acknowledging it might — more positively — indicate ways forward. This kind of commemoration re-presents the past for the present, and in the present. The present therefore has a hand in creating the past as it is passed down. So it is no longer a case of simply examining the past context, but also of “widen[ing] the possibilities for thinking about how the past is constructed in different cultural contexts” (Hammar, 2017, p. 373). This can be related back to Salvati and Bullinger’s work on “selective authenticity”. They suggest that videogames as a popular cultural phenomenon function as sites aptly suited to examining how we “socially produce historical knowledge and derive meaning from the past” (Salvati and Bullinger, 2013, p. 163). The kind of memory (and its meaning) evoked in historical games may often have more in common with what Chapman (in McCall & Chapman, 2017) terms “authenticity”, than with “accuracy”:

If accuracy is alignment with the agreed upon facts of the past, authenticity is something much more ephemeral. It is often much more personal, much more subjective. And it is linked very much to collective memory and shared ideas (right or wrong) about what the past was like (ibid.).

Authenticity, according to Chapman, is “less about getting ‘it’ (the past) right and [more about] getting the feeling of it right” (Chapman in McCall & Chapman, 2017). By describing historicity in digital games as resulting from the recognition (through “historical resonance”), by users, of historical elements, narratives, and worlds, Chapman provides a hermeneutical understanding of historical games, reliant on narrativisation (on the one hand) and “historical” interpretation (on the other) (see Chapman, 2016a, p. 36). This opens up further avenues for exploring our ideas about the past and for engaging with it. A possible risk is that it may lead to approaches that comfortably confirm our assumptions — though it may also yield opportunities to challenge and subvert our expectations. The downside of selecting according to present criteria is the risk of reproducing and imposing, or only directly commenting upon, the viewpoint of one’s current moment (see Luke Holmes, 2020, p. 111; Jankowski, 2022).

3.3 GAMES AS PUBLIC HISTORY

In answer to these perceived risks, Luke Holmes (2020, p. 111) suggests the channelling of collective memory, where public participation is a formative element capable of collaborating with more scholarly endeavours:

if games can utilise *selective authenticity* to create a ‘feeling’ of history, and that history is one which is collectively constructed between academics and museum professions, on the one hand, and the public understanding of history, on the other, then this history is very unlikely to feel trivial. Indeed, it may be much more

reflective of our collective memory, and thus more reverential to controversial subjects (ibid.).

Of course, as we have seen, memory studies is concerned with the collective experience and public dimension of memory. A similar path is followed by the field of public history, which refers to the way the public co-creates historical experience, and as such directly engages with questions of memory. While the term “public history” initially referred primarily to outreach by historians sharing their expertise beyond the academy (Robert Kelley, 1978; Cauvin, 2018), the potential for a deeper and more equal collaboration with the public has since come to the fore, emphasising the participatory nature of public history as doing history not “for” but “with” the general public (Cauvin in Hartman et al., 2021). This has been particularly foregrounded in the study of historical games. For example, not only is the game *Valiant Hearts* greatly indebted to the expertise of consulted historians, but it is also indebted to documentaries (already an avenue for public history as outreach) for access to history (Kempshall, 2019, p. 237), and — significantly — also draws upon “personal archival material” sourced from the public (Hartman et al., 2021). Public history is therefore that which occurs outside the academy and formal educational institutions, through the participation of an interested public, as held by Hartman et al. (2021). Public history could, however, include other variously formalised and institutionalised frameworks such as museums and archives — Luke Holmes (2020), for example, focuses on “heritage organisations” such as museums. It may also take place through less “official” channels (Hartman et al., 2021), such as fan/player communities (McCall, 2018), and different kinds of memory institutions, such as smaller non-state museums (Holmes, 2020, p. 105) and independently curated collections open to the public (Bonello Rutter Giappone & Caselli, 2021).

More localised memory about the past as lived, experienced, and collectively constructed, has the potential to counter the state and the market’s monopoly on cultural heritage, and it would open onto that shared authority that is the condition for making public history (McCall, 2018). Public history, like prosthetic memory, extends memory beyond the personal by offering a basis for intergenerational and cultural memory.

Hartman, Tulloch and Young (2021) observe that this turn towards considering video games as public history is relatively new, and they identify three areas in which it has emerged: in relation to online play communities; history education; critical player engagement with the past and practices of history. They note that the question of whether historical games could or should be considered “public history” no longer needs addressing — “they are already operating in this role”; they look instead towards the next step in developing more nuanced approaches for historical games’ delivery of public history: “how can an informed and sophisticated narrative or experience be conveyed through this medium?”, perhaps updating MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler’s (2007) call

for greater complexity and sophistication in the ways games approach history, as a duty and responsibility that emerge from the increasingly complex technological affordances of the medium.

In a manner similar to memory studies, public history questions and examines the dependence of memory on social structures (see Erll, 2011, pp. 14-15), and is especially concerned with how our engagement with the past is (and cannot but be) constructed through communal stipulation, as observed also by Susan Sontag: “collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: [stipulating] that this is important and this is the story about how it happened” (Sontag, 2003, p. 86). In this respect, historical game studies shares the interest in how different communities share, create, and re-create mediated versions of the past with memory studies.

We can see, in the sharing of mods and the flourishing of internet forums and online communities dedicated to particular games, a kind of communal culture arising that has the potential to level authority (see McCall, 2018) and even to produce its own histories (Webber, 2016) — though of course, where academic historians engage in outreach (e.g. Whitaker, 2020), the implications of an “authoritative” voice may still be felt. Forums have been known to put pressure on developers to change certain aspects of the game. This suggests that there is potential for such radical participation within the player community more generally. According to Jeremiah McCall (2018), for example, participatory history is about “understanding the dialogue between the public and the past” (p. 406): game forum members are engaging critically in conversations about history sparked by the game and its medium, both developing and sharing playable mods of historical games and discussing them online, critically and/or cooperatively — such online discussions, McCall points out, may result in reinterpretations of the game and show that “the player takes an active role constructing their own historical meaning from the game” (2018, p. 415). McCall, furthermore – from within the “public history” framework – considers these engagements to be “authentic” and “historical”. There is therefore a growing interest in the possibility of interaction as “shared authority” emerging in ideas of participatory “public history”:

Work on public history talks of shared authority between historians and members of the public. When it comes to simulating the past with a historical game, authority is likewise shared between designers and players. (McCall, 2018, p. 409)

A framework specific to analysing games as public history has been proposed by Hartman, Tulloch, Young (2021), who offer the case study of *Valiant Hearts*, recognising both its exceptionalism in terms of “representation of war” and its exemplarity in terms of play mechanics. Their framework takes into account three concepts: the “interactive archive” — where historical games enable the player to explore a “catalogue of historical events, objects and scenar-

ios”; “historical empathy” (discussed in Section 3.1), which refers to “the way in which games create an emotional resonance and personal connection to the past”; and “affinity space”, which extends the participation outside play. These steps towards expanding the study and use of games as and for public history lead in multiple directions, with public involvement taking a variety of forms — including online communities, as well as games in public spaces and heritage sites. This builds on the idea of history and heritage being accessible at a co-productive level — with players being personally (and collectively) invested in the game as potential contributors to a shared historical experience.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This article has aimed to trace the theoretical and methodological orientation of recent historical game studies, which we term a *de facto* shift towards memory (and memory studies). We first observed how historical game studies and memory studies converge in some assumptions and perspectives; then, we identified three areas in which the dialogue between the two fields is particularly dynamic, and also particularly explicit: historical subjectivation (which dialogues with prosthetic memory); pseudohistory (in dialogue with public memory); and conceiving games as public history.

We identify the turn towards memory studies as a notable and promising trend within historical game studies. The switching of focus towards issues of personal perspective, along with the sense of historicity and amplification of marginalised voices, not only abolishes rigid borders between historical and fantastic fiction, but also allows us to expand our view to the large body of fantasy and sci-fi-themed games, to consider their relationship with history. In our opinion, it also contributed to transporting historical game studies beyond the debate surrounding the veracity and credibility of the representation of the past: the question of “how can the past be represented in an interactive digital medium?” is no longer the only or even the most relevant question, as the perhaps more pressing question of “how is it experienced by the player?” comes to be foregrounded. This in turn started the influx of studies on the social, cultural and moral influence and responsibility of historical games.

There are many other potential intersections between memory and historical game studies to explore, and which we hope will be explored in the future. First, historical game studies may address games as historical artefacts rather than as representations/simulations of history, therefore considering processes such as the musealisation and the preservation of the gaming heritage, as well as the relation between games and contexts in which they are designed, produced, sold, and received by the public. This focus is shared by material culture theory, as observed by Begy (2015), which similarly looks at the cultural dimension of artefacts, games included, to reflect on the socioeconomic frameworks they were created within and for. By speaking of musealisation and of the preservation of gaming heritage, scholars have already been discussing the preservation

4. Hammar approaches this when discussing the limitations on the player-character's abilities to influence historical events in *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry*: "The transatlantic slave trade and Caribbean slave system continue regardless of the player's actions in *Freedom Cry*" (Hammar, pp. 377-378). As Hammar notes, the player participates in the attempts at resistance, in a way that drives home the systemic force of the colonial powers and the more organised collective efforts that would be required to overturn it — also reflecting the history of Haitian revolution and independence. The force of the collective is thus signalled by what cannot be achieved within the game by the protagonist player-character. In another line (also noting games' tendency to individualise), Bonello Rutter Giappone and Vella (2022) comment on representations of work in neo-medieval RPGs, observing however that it has tended to follow the neoliberal-neomedieval logic, that is: offering "a crosshatch of contemporary ideological constructions superimposed upon a pseudohistorical imaginary".

of digital games, but less has been done in terms of historicising their content and examining how digital games reflect the worldviews and the beliefs of their creators as well as of the communities sharing them.

A more systematic application of the theoretical and methodological frameworks from memory studies is another further avenue we hope historical game studies will pursue. Among the many contributions we mentioned in the course of this article, a significant number only borrow concepts and ideas from memory studies, and for the most part they fall short of delving into a systematic application of frameworks and methods. A systematic intertwining and dialogue between the fields, instead, may lead many of the approaches (already to some degree shared, as we've shown above) to converge explicitly, therefore opening more avenues for interdisciplinary cooperation. Another topic that historical game studies may further explore with the aid of insights from memory studies is the depiction and simulation of collective and cultural trauma — another particularly discussed topic within the field of memory studies — in historical digital games. Of course, memory studies also benefits from the contributions of historical game studies and the fresh perspectives that emerge from dialogue.

The emphasis on empathy and subjectivity also raises hope that digital games would increasingly focus on realities that popular histories tend to minimise and push aside — from microhistories (see Caselli & Toniolo, 2020) and history "from below" (Thompson, 1966), to the history of collectivisation and assembly, e.g., the history of work and workers; solidarity and resistance; etc. (taking its cue from E. P. Thompson, 2013).⁴ Memory studies makes available another rich resource and aids in developing the methodology towards such marginalised histories. In addition, our suggestions indicate opportunities for game developers to further explore, extending an invitation to game developers to diversify approaches to historical game design in directions that challenge established historical, and their associated present-day, hegemonies.

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