

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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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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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AI	:	artificial intelligence
CODWWII	:	<i>Call of Duty: WWII</i>
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	:	<i>Wolfenstein: The New Order</i>

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*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

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- 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

Duke University Press, 2006) (in particular: 1-39); Daniel Chirot, Gi-Wook Shin, and Daniel Snider, 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 Sznajder, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age* (Philadelphia 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 Nieuwenhuysse, “Popular Uses of Violent Past 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* (publisher(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-

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

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- 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-Witthford 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

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 in 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.

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

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=ucf>, 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 Learning¹

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

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- 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

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 Nieuwenhuysse, “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:

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- 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

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

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.

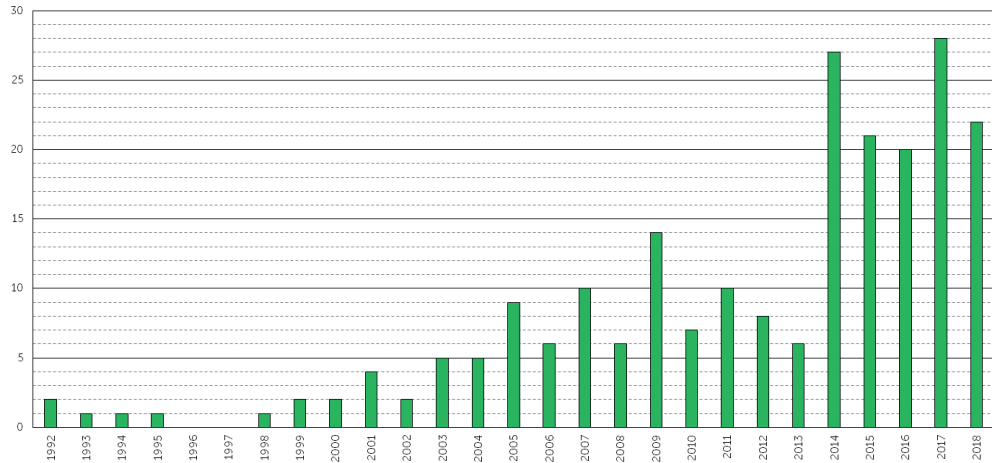


Figure 2.1: WWII-games: number of games/year (n = 220). (Steam, 6 September 2018)

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, 2020.

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

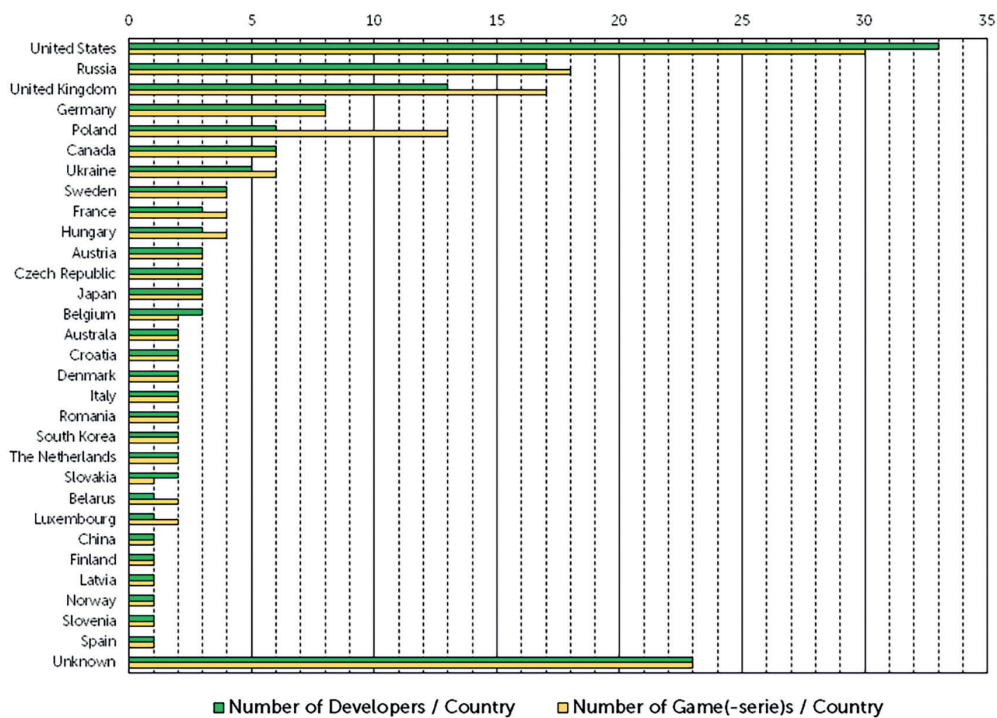


Figure 2.2(a): WWII-games: number of developers & games (/series) per country (Steam, 6 September 2018)

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.

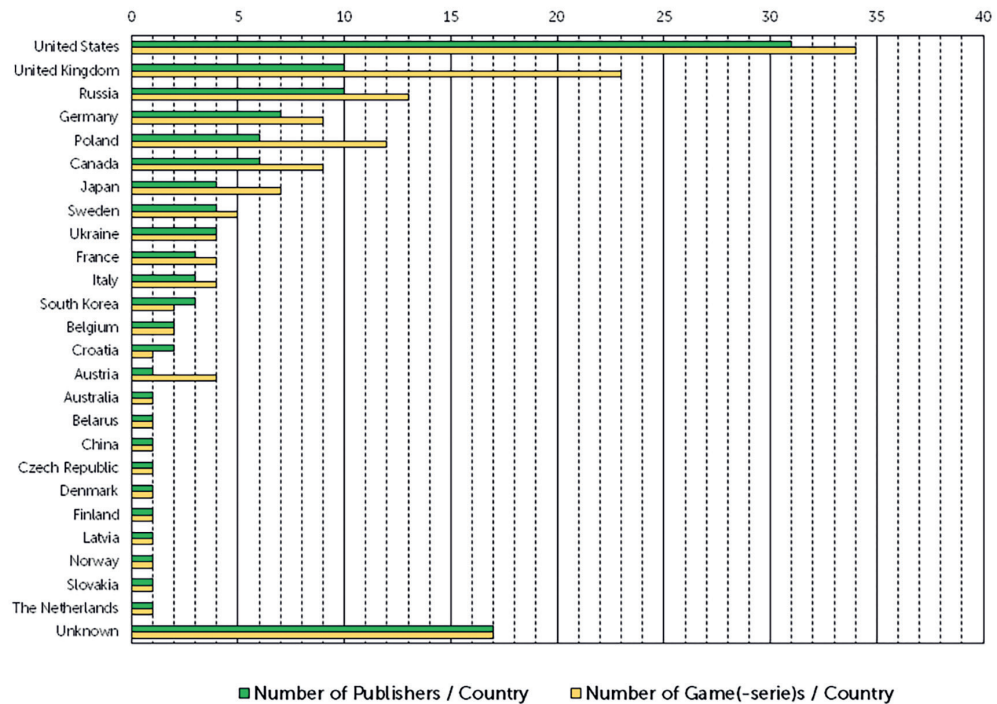


Figure 2.2(b): WWII-games: number of publishers & games (/series) per country (Steam, 6 September 2018)

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 I,” https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLAaj5mNXtCCdbaPo4jMvL_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_8414w, 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 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

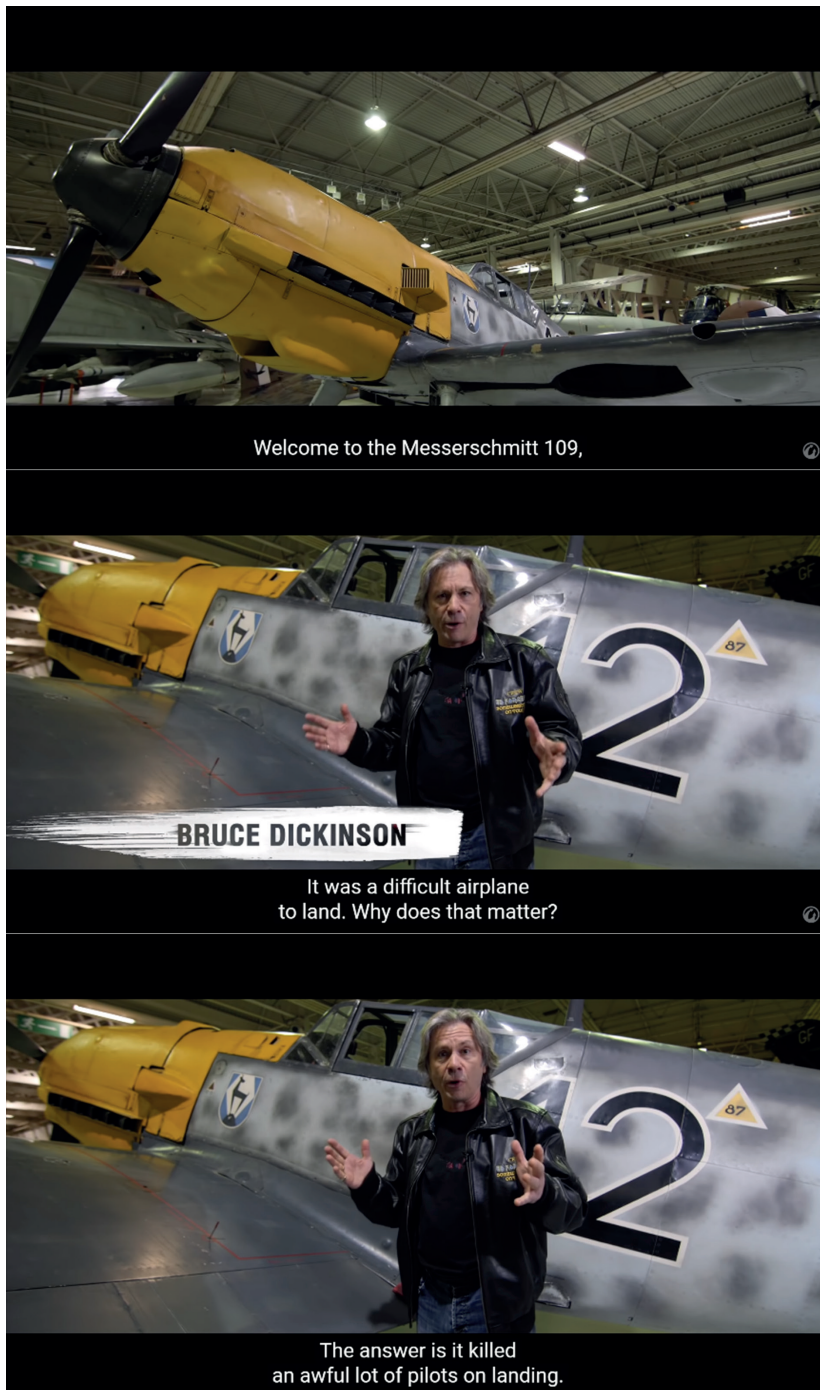


Figure 2.3: ‘Narratives of technological operation’ in the marketing paratexts of popular games about the Second World War (Game: *World of Warplanes*)

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.

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.

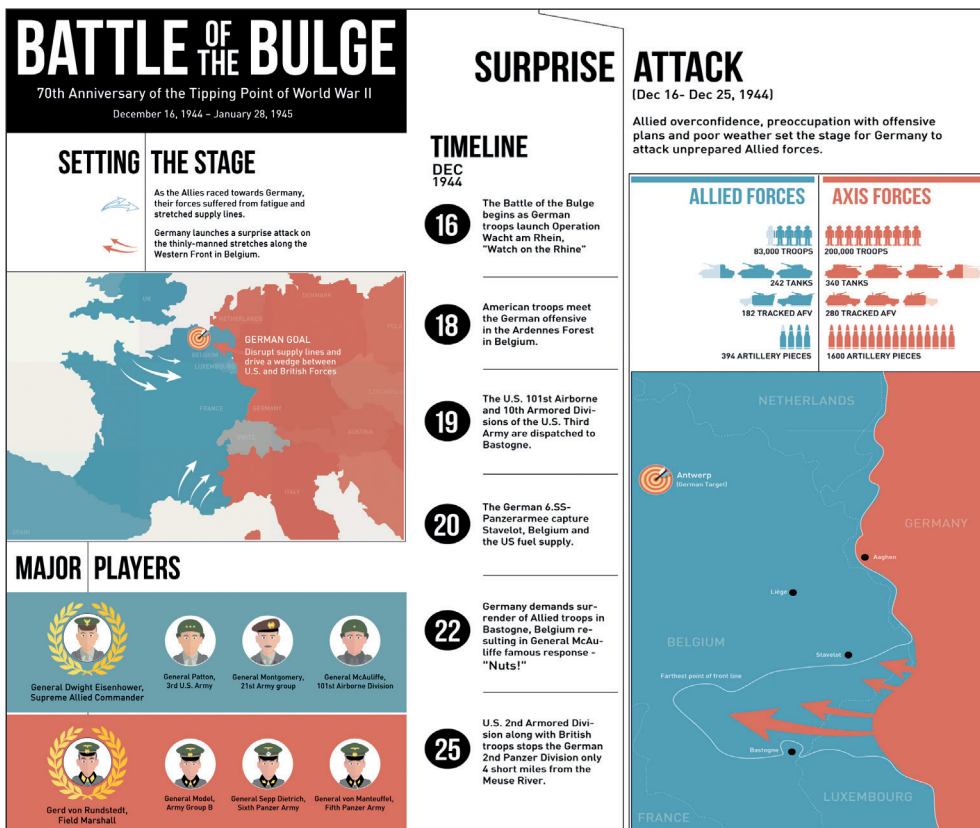


Figure 2.4: ‘Battle narratives’ in the marketing paratexts of popular games about the Second World War. (Part of an infographic shared on the website of the game: *Company of Heroes*)

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 tied 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-NBUYstY>, accessed September 26, 2020.

52 Heroes & Generals, “Heroes & Generals Devstream - Devstream #61 - Live from Copenhagen,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AIB8SWDI1-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 Linderöth.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=PLlQXYwoU12OfQd3pm7unW__PKpdM5Jjhd, accessed September 26, 2020.

55 Jonas Linderöth, “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

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 Bosphorus*).
- 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.dinoday.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 ‘Nazisplotation’-themes

Source: <https://www.dinoday.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 repackaging 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 Linderöth, “Exploring the Limits of Play: A Case Study of Representations of Nazism in Games,” in Torill E. Mortensen, Jonas Linderöth, 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* (Washington, 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.

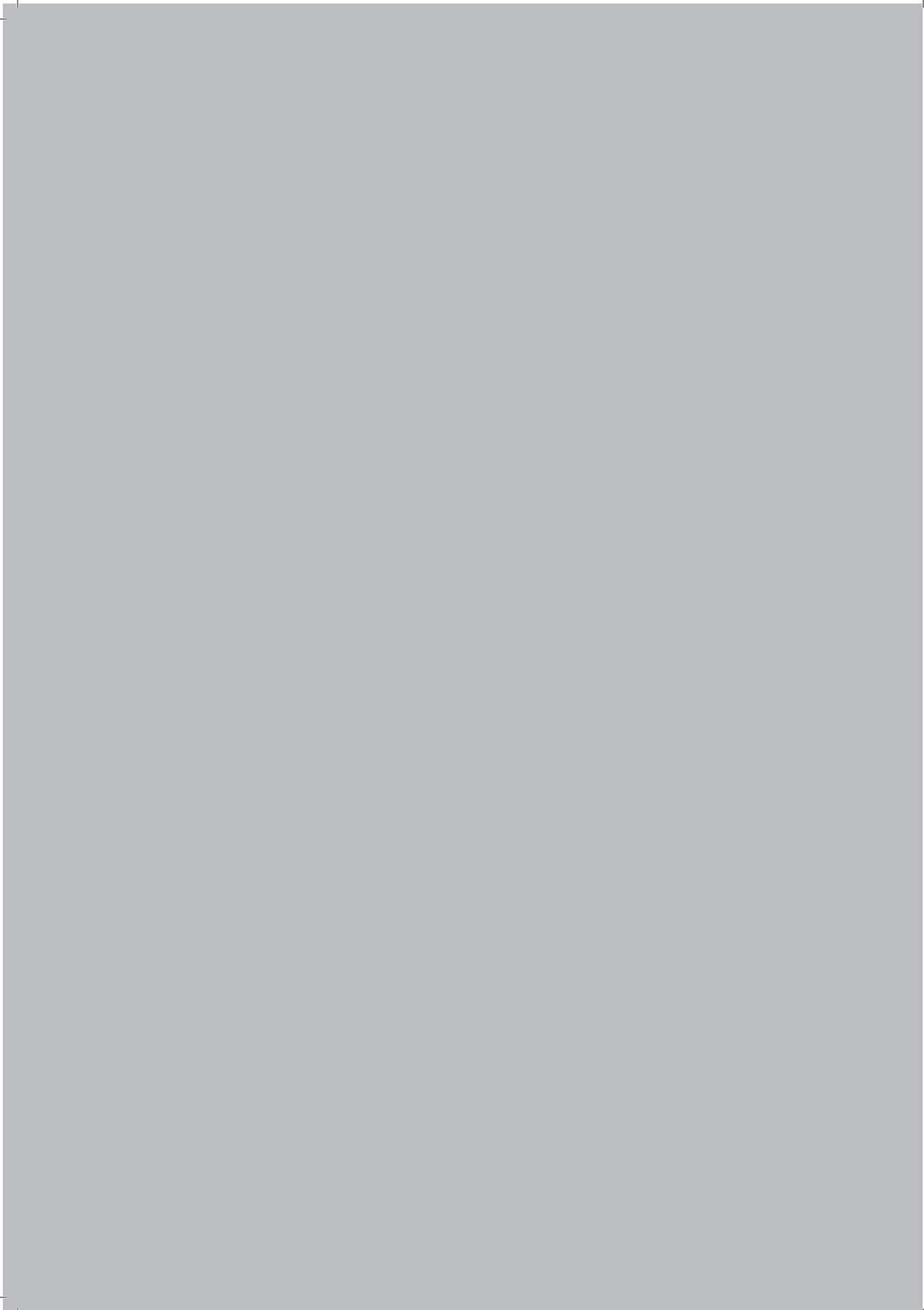
and therefore ignore non-combat oriented narratives.⁷⁹ Finally, most game creators also focus on what is the least contentious and most recognizable for players globally to be commercially successful, which leads them to avoid sensitive and lesser known topics. What are the implications of these previous 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.



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
<i>Heroes & Generals</i>	16.103.000	Denmark	United States: 6
<i>War Thunder</i>	14.066.000	Russia	Russia: 2
<i>Day of Defeat</i>	13.876.000	United States	United Kingdom: 2
<i>Company of Heroes</i>	13.001.000	Canada; United States, Japan	Sweden: 2
<i>Sniper Elite</i>	7.495.000	United Kingdom	Belarus: 1
<i>Red Orchestra</i>	4.135.000	United States	Canada: 1
<i>Wolfenstein</i>	3.850.000	United States, Sweden	Denmark: 1
<i>Call of Duty</i>	3.566.000	United States	Japan: 1
<i>World of Tanks</i>	3.320.000	Belarus	Spain: 1
<i>Commandos</i>	2.465.000	Spain, United Kingdom	
<i>Men of War</i>	2.108.000	Russia	
<i>Hearts of Iron</i>	1.901.000	Sweden	
<i>Dino D-Day</i>	1.474.000	United States	

Appendix 2

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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

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, zoveel 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 vermelde 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 beantwoordt 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:

Naam onderzoeker:

Handtekening en datum:

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?

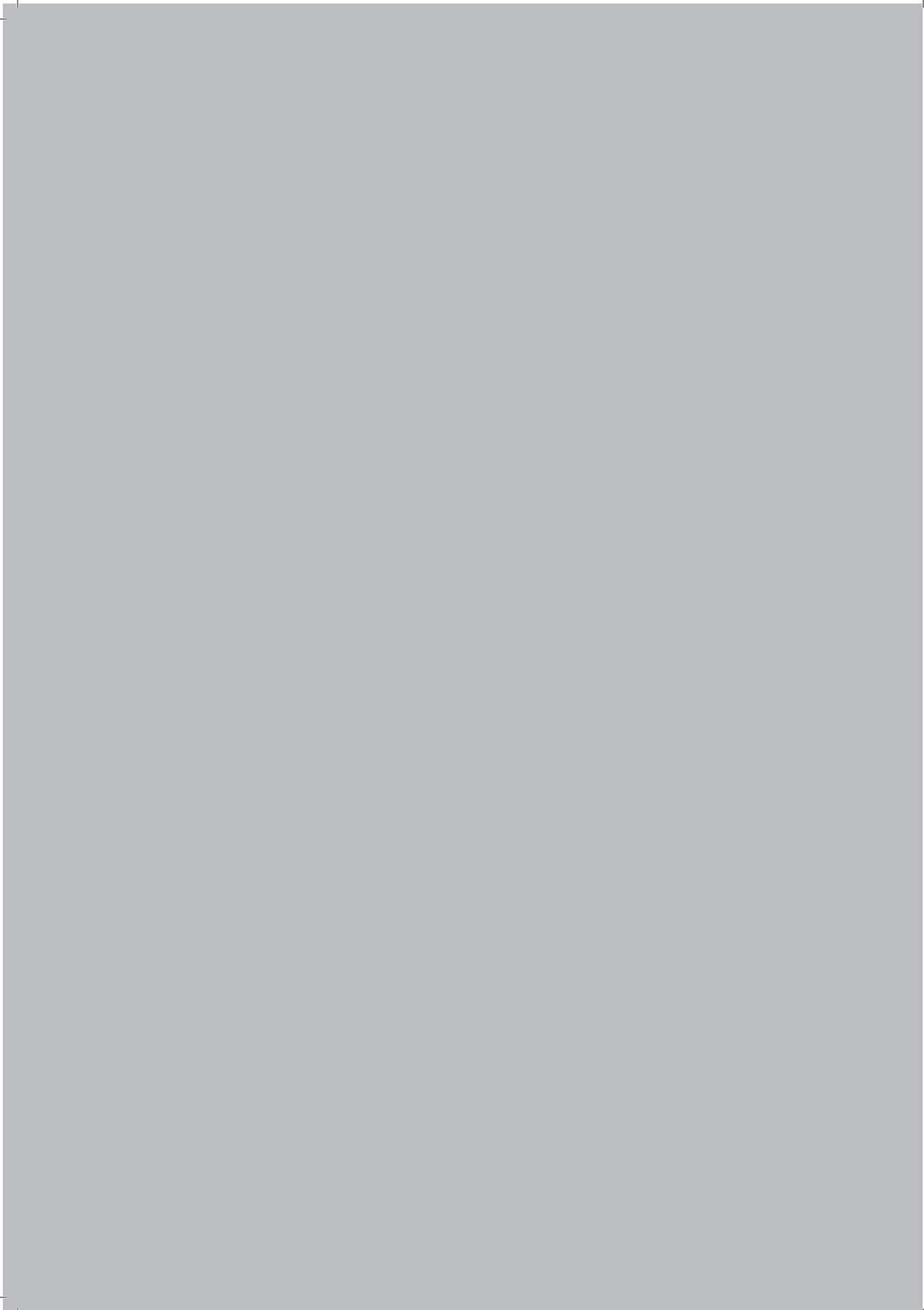
Call of Duty: WWII

- 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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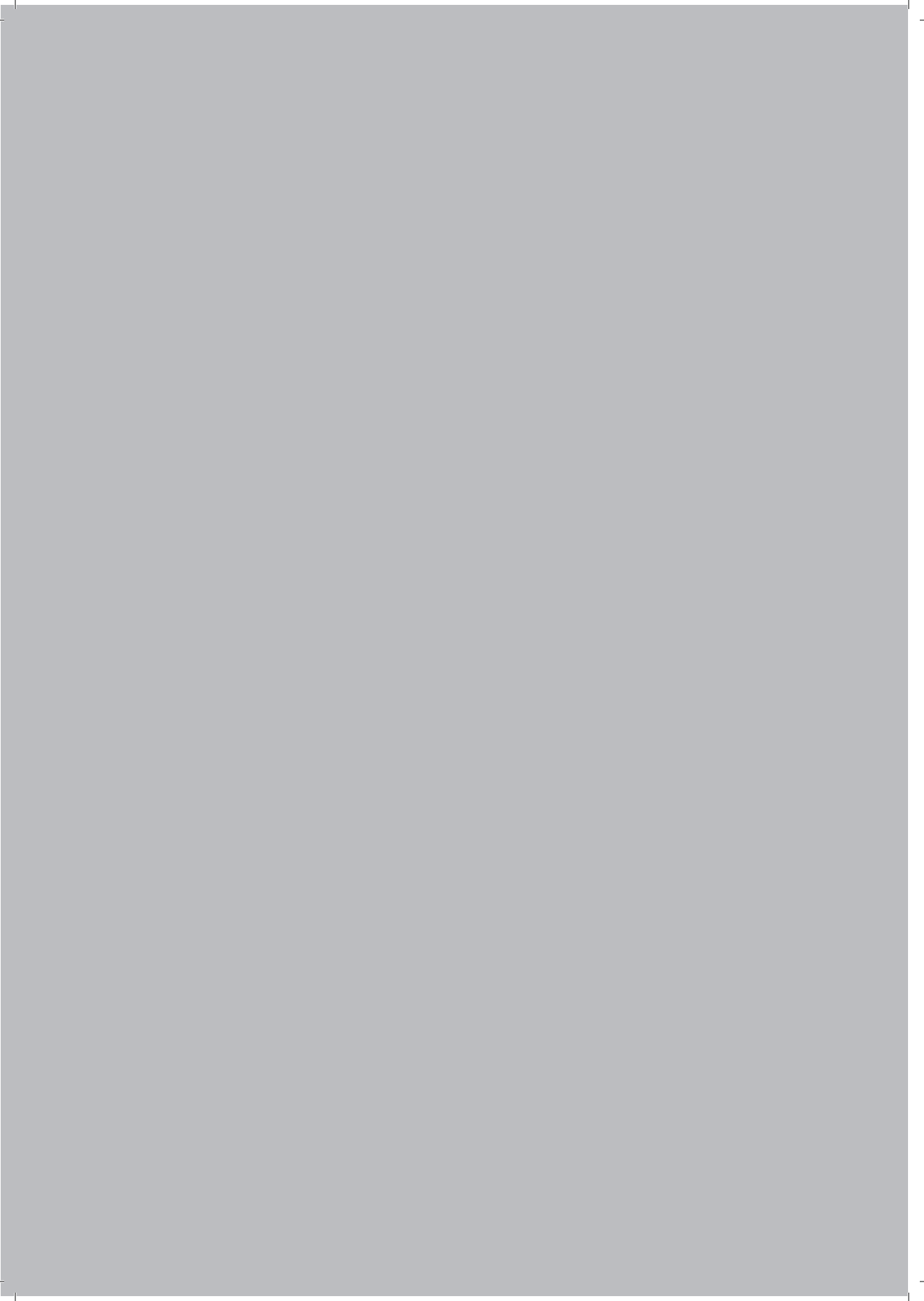
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Summary

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 War 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 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 21^{ste} 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 verwijst 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 groeiemarkten 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 gemakkelijk 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 ontleen. 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.
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- 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 Huizinga 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'*, Poederroijen (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"

