"Know Your History!"

The Cold War in Video Games and its function

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ABSTRACT

Digital games are products of our society, products of our culture; they are not created in aseptic underground laboratories without contact to the outside world. Whether consciously or not, developers are always inspired by their environment, their experiences and worldviews in the creation of their game worlds. Fantasy game worlds, just like "historical" ones, therefore always transport political statements. Ideas of domination, gender and economy thus find their way into global strategy games, role-playing games and economic simulations. These communicated worldviews, however, do not remain static. On the contrary, they evolve with our societies. This becomes particularly clear in the case of historical settings.

The Cold War is particularly interesting for this type of research for two reasons: First of all, the Cold War was a geopolitical, but at the same time also a political and a cultural conflict that potentially had an impact on people's everyday lives. And second, we have here the rather unique opportunity to compare how one and the same medium first processed a contemporary conflict (until 1989/1990) and later went through a similar process but with a now historical phenomenon (from the 1990s to today)

Keywords: Digital games, Cold War, History, backdrop authenticity, us/them dialectics

RESUMEN

Los juegos digitales son productos de nuestra sociedad, productos de nuestra cultura; no se crean en laboratorios subterráneos asépticos sin contacto con el mundo exterior. Ya sea conscientemente o no, los desarrolladores siempre se inspiran en su entorno, sus experiencias y visiones del mundo en la creación de sus mundos de juego. Los mundos de juegos de fantasía, al igual que los "históri-

cos", por lo tanto, siempre transportan declaraciones políticas. Las ideas de dominación, género y economía encuentran así su camino en juegos de estrategia global, juegos de rol y simulaciones económicas. Estas cosmovisiones comunicadas, sin embargo, no permanecen estáticas. Por el contrario, evolucionan con nuestras sociedades. Esto se vuelve particularmente claro en el caso de escenarios históricos.

La Guerra Fría es particularmente interesante para este tipo de investigación por dos razones: en primer lugar, la Guerra Fría fue un conflicto geopolítico, pero al mismo tiempo también político y cultural que potencialmente tuvo un impacto en la vida cotidiana de las personas. Y segundo, tenemos aquí la oportunidad bastante única de comparar cómo un mismo medio primero procesó un conflicto contemporáneo (hasta 1989/1990) y luego atravesó un proceso similar pero con un fenómeno ahora histórico (desde la década de 1990 hasta hoy)

Palabras clave: Videojuegos, Guerra Fría, autenticidad de fondo, dialéctica del ellos/nosotros

RESUM

Els jocs digitals són productes de la nostra societat, productes de la nostra cultura; no es creen a laboratoris subterranis asèptics sense contacte amb el món exterior. Ja sigui conscientment o no, els desenvolupadors sempre s'inspiren en el seu entorn, experiències i visions del món en la creació dels seus mons de joc. Els mons de jocs de fantasia, igual que els "històrics", per tant, sempre transporten declaracions polítiques. Les idees de dominació, gènere i economia troben així el seu camí en jocs d'estratègia global, jocs de rol i simulacions econòmiques. Aquestes cosmovisions comunicades, però, no romanen estàtiques. Per contra, evolucionen amb les nostres societats. Això esdevé particularment clar en el cas dels escenaris històrics.

La Guerra Freda és particularment interessant per a aquest tipus de recerca per dues raons: en primer lloc, la Guerra Freda va ser un conflicte geopolític, però alhora també polític i cultural que potencialment va tenir un impacte a la vida quotidiana de les persones. I segon, tenim aquí l'oportunitat força única de comparar com un mateix mitjà primer va processar un conflicte contemporani (fins a 1989/1990) i després va travessar un procés similar però amb un fenomen ara històric (des de la dècada de 1990 fins avui)

Paraules clau: Videojocs, Guerra Freda, autenticitat de fons, dialèctica ells/nosaltres

We hear the sound of cathode-ray television coming to life. An ominous sentence appears on the screen, the text granulated: "At the Height of the Cold War, KGB defector Yuri Bezmenov issues a chilling warning". Next shot: we see the television set on its own in the middle of a dark room showing a recording of an older man wearing glasses and speaking with a Russian accent: "Understand what's going on around. You are in a state of war". The man – the real-life KGB defector Bezmenov – tells an off-screen interviewer about the dangers of a Soviet secret programme he calls "Active Measures". Accompanied by archival footage from the U.S., some of which is somewhat haphazardly juxtaposed, Bezmenov recounts how the KGB could supposedly destroy Western

democracies over a period of many years in four steps - Demoralization, Destabilization, Crisis, and Normalization: "This is what will happen in the United States, if you allow all these Schmucks to put a Big Brother government in Washington in DC". The video teaser of the first-person shooter *Call of Duty: Black Ops - Cold War* (Treyarch / Raven Software US: 2020 / PS4 and others), described here, conveys a deliberate historicity on the surface. The use of contemporary technology and archival footage serves an authentication strategy, attested in the trailer's caption – "inspired by an actual event". The scene is followed by another montage of archival footage of radar installations and fighter pilots, followed by the punch line: "Know your History!"

What History? It was released on 19 September 2020[1], which was during the run up to the American presidential election. In this context, it is notable that the teaser's message resonates strongly with political (counter) discourses of the time. Putting its historicizing surface aside for a moment , the trailer conveys an alarmist narrative that could be found almost verbatim at the time of release within the American right and which culminated in the storming of the Capitol a few months later in January 2021. Interestingly enough the trailer's explicit notion that the US government could be ideologically infiltrated by the KGB is not a feature of the game itself. At the moment we can only speculate about why the developers chose to use Bezmenov's interview as a "historical" testimonial for the teaser. Since we have no evidence that the publisher intended this as an ideological statement, we have to assume that the motive behind it was to generate attention.

What this example clearly shows, however, is that historical settings in games are not objective reconstructions of a neutral past but are rather contemporary political and cultural constructs. The teaser, as I said, has little to do with the actual game, aside from the general historical setting. It mainly served to help sell the game. In this case, this was achieved by combining a cold-war narrative with contemporary (political) fears, thus polarizing the audience and generating interest.

The question I want to ask myself therefore is: "Why is there a demand for Cold War games?" and "What discursive statements are conveyed by games with a cold war setting?", and respectively "what are possible functions of the cold war setting?"

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[1] *Call of Duty Black Ops: Cold War* - Official Teaser Trailer, 19.08.2020, URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1kfCGjOaSw

13

Thinking/Remembering the Cold War

If we assume, as I do, that history is not an end in itself but also serves concrete functions within our identities and societies, digital games are promising sources with which to analyse these[2]: As artefacts of a quasi-globalized popular culture, digital games communicate, they serve an interdiscourse[3]. In them, shared values and taboos are negotiated in a public sphere. That is, I understand games for this purpose primarily as communicators within a highly complex social system. Put more simply, I am interested in the communicated worldviews, i.e. world interpretations, shared values, taboos and collective identities.

Digital games are products of our society, products of our culture; they are not created in aseptic underground laboratories without contact to the outside world. Whether consciously or not, developers are always inspired by their environment, their experiences and worldviews in the creation of their game worlds. Fantasy game worlds, just like "historical" ones, therefore always transport political statements. Ideas of domination, gender and economy thus find their way into global strategy games, role-playing games and economic simulations.

These communicated worldviews, however, do not remain static. On the contrary, they evolve with our societies. This becomes particularly clear in the case of historical settings. Through the collective memory of certain events, but above all by means of the moral evaluation that takes place in this process, we negotiate in the public arena what is "good" and "bad" for our society. To illustrate this idea: At the time of the invention of the German nation in the 19th century, for example, historical figures and events such as Arminius the Cheruscan and the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest were conjured up in paintings, monuments, historical novels, but also lectures at universities to serve as a unifying German memory. The central values conveyed here suggested that the willingness to fight and a willingness to make sacrifices, were supposedly basic German virtues[4]. This didn't only occur in Germany. Other countries would also utilise their own "historical events" to convey their own desired identity. Of course, our interest in history does not serve only to construct identities, but in my opinion it cannot be separated

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[2] Pfister (2020)

[3] The term was coined by Jürgen Link. A similar idea can be found in Jürgen Habermas' concept of the public sphere: In an ideal model, so-called leading and mass media would take over the role of mediating between institutionalized discourses of politicians and informal everyday conversations of voters

[4] Doerner (1995).

from it[5]. I would like to build on these thoughts in the following by analysing what common values were and are communicated in Cold War games.

There is yet not one definitive method to analyse historical content in digital games, but in my own research practice I have found it helpful to structure the game analysis along three research vectors: 1. narrative, 2. audio-visual aesthetics, and 3. game mechanics[6]. These three vectors serve primarily to ensure that the multiple levels of meaning in the game receive equal focus. Especially in light of Cold War games, it may for instance be tempting to focus on visual icons – hammer and sickle, red stars, or the story of a game. In my research to date, however, I have discovered that a game only fully realizes its potential as a discursive medium when a statement can be found on all three of the aforementioned levels. Since my specific research interest is the question of what socio-political function historical settings take on in digital games, I will examine the games in question based on a historical discourse analysis.

The Cold War is particularly interesting for this type of research for two reasons: First of all, the Cold War was a geopolitical, but at the same time also a political and a cultural conflict that potentially had an impact on people's everyday lives[7]. And second, we have here the rather unique opportunity to compare how one and the same medium first processed a contemporary conflict (until 1989/1990) and later went through a similar process but with a now historical phenomenon (from the 1990s to today). Through this transition from contemporary to historicizing imaginaries we can examine the process of historicization: By comparing first contemporary adaptations and later historicizing ones, I hope to gain insights into the possible different discursive statements attached to a moment in history. Therefore I will proceed by comparing representations of the Cold War in the 1980s with subsequent ones.

Cold War Game Studies

With the establishment of Cold War Studies as an independent field of research, research interests have become increasingly diversified in the last two decades. Bernd Greiner wrote in 2010: "Although diplomatic and military history remain fixed parame-

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[5] I have previously explored the question of why there is a virtually endless demand for historical content in my essay "Why History in Games matters. Historical Authenticity as a Language for Ideological Myths". Pfister (2020)

[6] Of course, I realize that these three levels cannot always be clearly separated from each other and always interconnect. This division has, above all, the funtion of forcing me to pay equal attention to all three levels. Division along other lines would also be conceivable.

[7] Stöver (2003), p. 9

15

ters, they have long since ceased to set the pace for research. Rather, Cold War politics is understood as 'total politics' that penetrated deep into the pores of the societies involved and left lasting traces everywhere - in social and cultural life, in the economy as well as in science, in education, upbringing, and the media, in relations between genders, classes, and ethnic groups. Overall, then, Cold War Studies aim at tp reappraise our understanding of historical spaces, political agency, and social sustainability"[8]. Thus until 1991, the Cold War was a political reality for most people in Europe and America. The conflict, which expanded geographically, sociopolitically, and culturally in all directions and on all levels, not only dominated international relations but could also be felt in everyday life[9]. As a "war of cultures"[10], it permeated the narratives and aesthetics of movies, comics, popular music, literatura[11], and also digital games. What is more, the development of computer technology was made possible or accelerated by the need for military and industrial development and long-term strategic planning by both sides in the conflict. A "symbiotic relationship" between the Cold War and digital games was not limited to technological progress however, but also took shape through a regular exchange of ideas, as William Knoblauch has demonstrated in an article based on the SDI project[12].

Over the past ten years, historical scholarship has increasingly opened up to digital games as sources. However, publications that focus on the Cold War in games have remained, until recently, the exception. When I wrote on this subject four years ago[13]. I found only sparse literature on the subject. The anthology *Playing the Past*, edited by Matthew Kapell and Andrew Elliott included three essays on the topic[14]. Apart from that, the historical conflict was also mentioned in works on wargames, such as the analysis of historical wars in games by Steffen Bender[15]. Fortunately, in recent years, several well-researched publications have appeared on the topic. Regina Seiwald, for example, has analysed the topic of propaganda in US games with the help of Althusser's *Ideological State Apparatuses Model*[16]. On *Zeitgeschichte online*, Maren Röger and Flo-

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[8] Greiner (2010)

[9] See Stöver (2003), p. 9: „Der Kalte Krieg war eine politisch-ideologische technologisch-wissenschaftliche und kulturell-soziale Auseinandersetzung, die ihre Auswirkung bis in den Alltag zeigte"

[10] Stöver (2007), 256-269

[11] Ibid.

[12] The Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), also called "Star Wars program", was a never implemented missile defense to protect against soviet ballistic nuclear missile. See Knoblauch (2013)

[13] Pfister (2017)

[14] Reisner (2013); Knoblauch (2013) and Schulzke (2013)

[15] Bender (2012)

[16] Seiwald (2021)

rian Greiner have published a very compelling dossier on the Cold War and games[17]. And in 2021, an extremely exciting anthology on games and state socialism was published, edited by Juliane Brauer, Maren Röger and Sabine Stach[18]. Like Jarolsav Švelch's monograph[19] before it gives us an insight into analogue and digital games beyond the Iron Curtain. Particularly valuable for my research question is finally the recent monograph by Clemens Reisner on Cold War Games[20]. Over 350 pages, he analyses Cold War games from 1980 to 1995 at once comprehensively and in depth.

In his monograph, Reisner has shown that the games – especially in the United States – offered a new way to think the conflict in the broader public. In a sense, the Cold War and digital games simultaneously and mutually popularized the computer simulation. In particular, when it came to the hypothetical question of nuclear war, computer simulations seemed the only way to go. Or as Florian Galleri formulated it: "But how do you simulate a weapon that was at the same time extraordinarily powerful and complex and almost never used in history?"[21] At the same time, Reisner showed that a vast majority of Cold War games dodged this question and did not include nuclear weapons at all. In total Reisner identified 153 games in total which thematised the Cold War. In his estimation this is a small number given the study covered a relatively long period of time – from the early 1980s to 1995 – and compared to the much larger number of games to be found with other historical settings, for example. The Cold War in games thus remained a marginal phenomenon in video game culture[22] .

What different discursive statements about the Cold War, especially with regard to the construction of collective identities, can be found in these contemporary games? There is, for example, a game that only quotes the Cold War on the surface: *Communist Mutants from Space* (Starpath US 1982 / Atari 2600), a simplistic fixed shooter similar to Galaxian (NAMCO J 1979 / Arcade), developed by Stephen H. Landrum for the Atari 2600 in 1982[23]. The only reference to the Cold War is an (attempted) comical background story that can be read in the manual: "About the enemy: The evil ruler of the planet Rooskee [sic!] has launched a diabolical attack. A cunning Mother Creature, filled with irradiated vodka, transforms helpless slaves captured on peaceful planets into bloodthirsty COMMUNIST MUTANTS. The Commie Mutants attack like crazy! Wipe out

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[17] Röger/Greiner (2017)
[18] Brauer/Röger/Stach (2021)
[19] Švelch (2018)
[20] Reisner (2020)
[21] Galleri (2021).
[22] Reisner (2020) 126
[23] Greiner/Röger (2017).

17

wave after wave of them, and they keep on coming. And the more you vaporize, the nastier they get. You've got trouble"[24].

That and visual quotes on the packaging: hammer and sickle, star and supposedly communist uniforms of the aliens are the only references to the Cold War. This is a game which would work just as well in a generic SF setting. In this case, the evocation of the Cold War serves most likely to drum up some attention from potential buyers. In this way it is similar to promoting a brand, and similar to the teaser mentioned at the beginning. Nevertheless, I would argue that even such a casual reference serves to solidify collective identities by naturalizing them, in a similar way to Roland Barthes *Mythologies*[25].

Apart from a rather casual confirmation of dominant enemy images and stereotypes, however, I would assume that little to no ideological transfer processes took place during the gameplay itself. However, as far as I know, it is also the only game that so clearly quotes the Cold War on the surface, but does include it in the game. Most of the games researched, however, not only quote the Cold War on the surface, but also partially integrate it into their game mechanics. That is, they use the Cold War as a triggering moment, or rather as a justification for the game mechanics[26].

This is especially true for the many military simulations, especially flight simulations. In 1980, *B-1- Nuclear Bomber* (Microcomputer Games US 1981 / Apple II and others) was the first text-based flight simulation to hit the market[27]. This was followed by countless others over the next two decades, with increasingly realistic graphics. The American game developer MicroProse distinguished itself in this genre with titles like: F-*15E Strike Eagle* (MicroProse US 1985 / C64 and others) and *F-19 Stealth Fighter* (MicroProse US 1988 / DOS and others)[28]. These games are primarily concerned with simulating realistic, or rather perceived as realistic contemporary military vehicles. Such games either

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[24] Atari 2600 Manual: *Communist Mutants From Space* (1982) (Starpath), URL: https://archive.org/details/Communist_Mutants_From_Space_1982_Starpath

[25] Political messages often "hide" on the surface, appear stereotypical and are neither questioned by the developers nor by the players. In this way, they coagulate into a myth in the reading of Roland Barthes. Between 1954 and 1956, Barthes analyzed the so-called „Mythologies". These are a collection of eclectic cultural semiotic reflections on detergents, Charlie Chaplin, the world of catching, etc. In each text Barthes uncovered ideological „myths" hidden in supposedly apolitical artifacts and narratives but not immediately recognizable as such.

[26] According to Reisner, most of the games fall into the category of vehicle simulations, meaning mainly flight simulators like Microprose's F-15 and F-19.

[27] Reisner (2020), p. 147f.

[28] Ibíd., p. 133-144.

simulate historical conflicts such as the Korean and Vietnam Wars or imagine covert operations in contemporary Europe. In *F-19 Stealth Fighter*m for example, players must bomb oil depots in Central Europe[29] and scout out new Warsaw Pact fighter planes.

So, in fact, these games could have worked potentially in other contemporary settings like the Falklands War or even completely fictional settings, but a good part of their appeal to players was most likely down to the reference to the Cold War. Players could thus take sides, but until the late 1990s almost exclusively on the side of NATO[30]. In tactical and strategic simulations, such as the Avalon Hill and SSI games in particular, like *Reforger88: Nato Defense of the Fulda Gap* (SSI US 1984 / Apple II and others), *Theatre Europe* (PSS UK 1985 / C64 and others) and *Conflict: Europe* (PSS UK 1989 / Amiga and others), players have to give orders to their troops (which were mostly re-presented in the form of abstract tactical signs on a strategic map) round by round. Later games like *Conflict: Europe* also allowed for rudimentary diplomatic negotiations and scientific research projects.

Almost all of the games mentioned presuppose that the Cold War has escalated and a "hot war" has broken out between the Warsaw Treaty countries and those of NATO. The prerequisite for winning is to defeat or even eliminate the opponent. Reasons for the outbreak of a 'hot war' were usually not given, at least not in the games themselves. At the same time, the game developers distanced themselves from the in carefully worded statements included in the manuals. For example, the *Conflict: Europe* manual states: "We do not believe a computer game should be used as a platform to make statements. We have tried our hardest to be impartial in our treatment, whatever our feelings on the subject. No doubt we have fallen victim to both sides 'dis-information' services during our research and we apologise for any errors this may have led to."[31] The developers place a lot of value on realistic military simulation: as you can read in the Strategic Simulations catalogue announcing the game *Reforger '88,* for example: "Once every year, NATO forces embark on a military exercise that simulates defense of a Soviet strike into West Germany. Specifically, it test NATO's ability to transport American reinforcements from the U.S. to the Rhein-Main airbase in Frankfurt. The success of such an operation demands that NATO troops in W. Germany withstand the Russian onslaught long enough for the reinforcements to arrive. The name of this exercise: Re-

19

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[29] From a Mission briefing screen in the game: „Washington has decided to get though and hurt the opposition financially by destroying an oil storage facility. This will temporarily reduce oil exports, and hopefully force them to the bargaining table."

[30] This changed with simulations like *MiG-29 Fulcrum*. See Reisner (2020), p. 150.

[31] Conflict: Europe Manual, 22. See also Reisner (2020), p. 203

forger. Now, REFORGER '88 makes the simulation available to every ardent warga-mer"[32]. SSI also published the *When Superpowers Collide* series of games, which were generally praised by critics for their realism. Interestingly, journalists often used the reviews of these games to reflect on contemporary politics. Boundaries were blurred between the seriousness of real events and, as traced by Clemens Reisner. This is also particularly evident in the hearings of the Federal Review Board for Media Harmful to Young Persons (BPjS), which regularly put these strategy games onto an official list which restricts the sale and advertisement of certain media in the 1980s because they glorified (nuclear) war[33].

In general, contemporary games about the Cold War show particularly clearly how im-practicable it is to draw a line between game and (political) reality. Despite the develo-per's professed conviction not to make games political, critical undertones can flow into games. In the game *Theatre: Europe*, the theme song is a tribute to John Lennon's "Give Peace a Chance" and the goal of the game is to win without using nuclear weapons. Ironically, this very game became the subject of public controversy prior to its release. Both the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and *The Sun* newspaper criticized the game's developer, PSS, for trivializing nuclear war[34].

One example of a conscious attempt to simulate the Cold War in a critical light was Chris Crawford's political simulation *Balance of Power* (Chris Crawford / Mindscape US 1985 / Apple II et al.). Here, players assume the role of either the American president or the Soviet general secretary of the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union) and have to guide the fortunes of one of the two superpowers for eight years, maximizing its prestige while preventing nuclear war. If the players' decision triggers a nuclear war, the game is over and the following message famously appears on the screen "You have ignited a nuclear war. And no, there is no animated display of a mushroom cloud with parts of bodies flying through the air. We do not reward failure." By his own account, Crawford's goal was to create a game that no longer used wars as a form of entertain-ment. It is interesting to note that he based his ideas primarily on the realpolitik doctri-nes of Henry Kissinger. Accordingly, the Cold War in the game becomes a zero-sum geostrategic game between the USSR and the USA. The goal is to preserve the balance.

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[32] Strategic Simulations Catalog (1984)(SSI), URL:
https://archive.org/details/Strategic_Simulations_Catalog_1984_SSI/page/n3/mode/2up
[33] Meßmer (2017) and Reisner (2020), p. 204f
[34] Meßmer (2017)

A specific ideology is not named or shown here[35]. nor in any of the other games mentioned.

However, this does not mean that these games are free of ideology, as Regina Seiwald has shown: "Cold War themed video games played from an American perspective heavily rely on anti-communist ideology, generated between the 1950s and the 1990s. On the one hand, these games thematically focus on [Ideological State Apparatuses] to communicate their ideology, such as negative features of communist, socialist, and Soviet forces, namely lies, deception, unrightfully claiming lands, lacking morality, and putting the intactness of the state and the system as the highest good to be protected. Conversely, they draw on positive features associated with capitalist and Western societies, such as the freedom of the individual, family, peace, and truth, amongst others. On the other hand, these games themselves function as [Ideological State Apparatuses] – systems that communicate a certain ideology – that thematically present instances of the [Repressive State Apparatus], such as the army, militia, or the police"[36].

Whether it is simply stereotypes that are served as in Communist Mutants from Space or whether an attempt is made to depict a geopolitical conflict as complexly as possible, a common denominator of these games is that the ideologies behind the conflict between the two social systems are almost never directly mentioned but only ever implied. In this respect, most games perpetuate a simple "us/them" model. This is also reflected in the fact that political actors outside this binary scheme, such as the Non-Aligned Movement or neutral European states, are usually not mentioned. Games that did not adhere to this template, such as the Japanese "run and gun" arcade game *Guevara* (SNK J 1987 / NES), in which you could play Che Guevara and Fidel Castro in the original version, therefore had to be adapted for the international market and rebranded *Guerrilla War*. In this case, the two Cuban revolutionaries became nameless mercenaries in an undefined South American dictatorship[37].

By its very nature, what has been said so far refers to a "Western" gaming market and, in particular, the American one. I have already shown that even in the Federal Republic of Germany, for example, other discursive rules applied, which often led to war games being placed on a list which restricted their sale and advertisement. But what was the situation like on the other side of the Iron Curtain? Recent publications have allowed us to gain an initial insight. In the Warsaw Pact countries, there was no games industry

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[35] Reisner (2020), p. 235-251 and Braunbek/Stiele (2017)
[36] Seiwald (2021)
[37] Reisner (2020) p. 296.

comparable to the West. In the GDR, for example, all board games were produced only by state-owned companies[38]. The situation will have been similar in the other Warsaw Pact countries. At the same time, however, there are indications that war simulations were unthinkable as an entertainment product in the "East". Here, the official doctrine had to be complied with, which accused the West alone of war-mongering behaviour. The research of Jaroslav Švelch shows, however, that in the CSSR, for example, enthusiasts and hobbyists did, in fact, develop games which dealt critically with the cold war and the repressive government[39]. Here, as well as in cracker[40] practices in East and West, it can be seen that digital games have been used from the beginning to some extent as a medium for conveying political opinions, as can be read in the research of Gleb Albert[41], among others.

Post-Cold-War Games

The end of the Cold War came as a surprise to most people, despite all portents. Many Cold War games whose development began before 1989 were overtaken by history within a few months. Some games appeared unchanged. In one case, Tom Clancy addressed the changed situation in a manual to a game that shares his name[42] In the immediate aftermath of the fall of communism, a few games appeared that dealt with the end of the Soviet Union or the fall of communism: *Crisis in the Kremlin* (Spectrum Holobyte US 1991 / MS-DOS and others)[43] and *KGB* (Cryo F 1992 / Amiga and others)[44] for example. With *Solidarność* (P.Z.Karen Co. Development Group P 1991 / MS-DOS), the American game company California Dreams released an English-language computer game from the genre of political simulations in 1991, intended to make the Polish trade union movement Solidarność known in the West[45].

After the end of the Cold War in 1991, which was proclaimed in feature articles around the world and which at the time also meant the end of history for many, not only for

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[38] Röger (2021), p. 105.

[39] Švelch (2018).

[40] Software cracking is the modification of software to remove or features from a software, especially the copy protection in the case of video games. The so called crackers sometimes used their modifiyed intro screens of games for personal messages.

[41] Albert (2021).

[42] Reisner (2020) p. 173

[43] Reisner (2020), p. 260-267.

[44] Reisner (2020), p. 318-326

[45] Reisner (2020), p. 271 and Amrain/Kratz (2017).

Francis Fukuyama[46], all in all fewer games were published that addressed the now historical conflict. The ready-made communist threat as antagonist for contemporary scenarios would have to be replaced. However, replacing the Soviet Union with the obvious choice of the People's Republic of China - such as in *Operation Flashpoint: Dragon Rising* (Codemasters UK 2009 / Windows and others) and *Operation Flashpoint: Red River* (Codemasters UK 2011 / Windows and others) – was a relatively rare occurrence. More commonly anonymous terrorists of the Middle East became the identity-forming 'other'. In exceptional cases, antagonism between the United States and Europe also took on the role that the Cold War had fulfilled[47].

The feared nuclear holocaust seemed to have been averted for the time being. Propagandistic distorted images of Russian-speaking antagonists were no longer opportune. Then, starting at the turn of the millennium, a slow renaissance of the Cold War topos took place, both on a narrative and an aesthetic level. There are first-person shooter games, strategy games or combat simulators that take place against the background of historical (real or fictional) Cold War conflicts from the 1950s to the 1980s. Historical conflicts that are as "realistic" as possible, such as the Vietnam and Afghanistan wars, are found primarily among vehicle simulations, but tend to play a subordinate role in tactical shooters, as Steffen Bender's historical study of 20th century wars in computer games has shown.

There is, for instance, *Vietcong* (Pterodon CZ 2003 / Windows and others) a tactical FPS, developed in the Czech republic in 2003. (Interesting, though still under-researched, is the large number of Cold War games developed in former Warsaw Pact countries.) In addition, fictionalized historical background stories often found their way in games, such as in the first *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (Treyarch US 2010 / Xbox 360 et al.), the satirical *No One lives Forever* (Monolith Productions US 2000 / Windows et al.) and more recently in *Call of Duty: Black Ops – Cold War* (Treyarch / Raven Software US: 2020 / PS4 and others). Furthermore, there are games whose action takes place in an alternative timeline, or games that use time travel mechanisms. These continue the Cold War in one form or another to the present day, such as *Singularity* (Raven Software US 2010 / Xbox 360.) or *Command & Conquer: Red Alert* (Monolith Productions US 2000 / Windows u. a.). Other games transfer a Cold War narrative almost unchanged to contemporary communist states such as China or North Korea. For example, the "rogue state" North Korea played the role of invader in the 2011 first-person shooter *Homefront*

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[46] Francis Fukuyama, The end of history?. In: The National Interest, Sommer 1989, URL: http://www.wesjones.com/eoh.htm.
[47] Pfister (2017b)and

(Kaos Studios US: 2011 / Windows et al.). Finally, there are games that reinterpret the Cold War either as a dichotomous good-evil conflict or as a new version of a mythical East-West conflict[48], such as *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward US: 2007 / Windows et al.)

Interestingly, it is the latter games that remain particularly faithful to the Cold War myth. In the narrative of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, for example, the ultra-nationalist leader Imran Zakhaev wants to restore Russia to the lost glory of Soviet times. After his death, Russian troops attack the U.S. in the follow-up game *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (Infinity Ward US: 2009 / Windows et al.), which results in combat in Washington DC, among other places. Here a primal fear of the USA towards Russian is addressed, which was served in the 1980s by action films such as *Red Dawn* (US 1984 / directed by John Milius). Incidentally, the developers of *Modern Warfare 2* made direct reference to this film by naming a Ranger unit "Wolverines". There is furthermore a cinematic cutscene in which you can see a monument to the late despot Zakhaev being erected in Moscow's Red Square, framed by the symbols of the USSR: hammer, sickle and red star. A narrator's voice can be heard accompanying this: "The more things change, the more they stay the same". Most of these games follow - with few exceptions - a similar basic structure: There is always a compelling showdown between two power blocks.

In the following I would like to focus on the game *Singularity*, a moderately successful shooter, but particularly interesting for us here because it uses Soviet "scenery" like few other games do: The game's unquestioned antagonism between "the West" (represented by a special US unit) and "the East", is a basic prerequisite for the plot and should serve to motivate the protagonist. There was apparently no need to introduce a story here. It is clear from the beginning who is the antagonist and who is the protagonist. This can be understood in the sense that the recourse to historical set pieces relieved the developers of the time-consuming work of creative writing.

Thus, in *Singularity*, at least in the origins of the narrative and in the aesthetic setting, we have a very strong - almost overcompensatory - reference to the Cold War, or rather to a popular Cold War discourse. However, if you take a closer look at how the Cold War discourse develops further on in the game, you begin to realise that basically there

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[48] „An east-west contrast [...] is not new in European history; it goes back to Greco-Roman antiquity, to Eastern Rome and Western Rome, to Occidental-Christian versus Oriental-Byzantine coinage, continued in modern times during the Enlightenment in Western Europe." In: Dülffer 2004, p. 5. Translation by the author.

24

is no deeper meaning attached to it. The historical background remains interchangeable at all times. The narrative - the fight of an American super-soldier against an evil genius - remains secondary. It is no different to what we are used to with the James Bond films. The hours of running and gunning with mutant soldiers in the narrow corridors could just as easily have taken place in a North Korean or at an Iranian research station. The same story would also work with a crazed Nazi professor and his horde of undead super-soldiers, as Raven Software had demonstrated itself with *Wolfenstein* (Raven Software US : 2009 / Windows et al.) a year before *Singularity* was released.

"Backdrop authenticity"

The Cold War is thus not so much a prerequisite for the plot as a mere background, a superficial colourful decoration and - as shown - interchangeable. The historical reference here becomes *Kulissenauthentizität* – backdrop authenticity[49]. These games are not about processing the Cold War, explaining it, or even taking a critical stance. It is about selling a product. The developers usually admit this candidly[50]. But if the Cold War is not a prerequisite of the narrative, then the question as to why the developers chose this setting in the first place seems valid.

Five years ago, I argued that the Cold War is interesting for game designers because it functions like a brand, in a similar way here to World War II[51]. In the meantime, however, I'm no longer so sure. The Cold War is generally underrepresented in popular culture. Although new television series - such as *The Americans* or *Deutschland 83* - are being created all the time, it seems less cited compared to other historical settings. But that also means it's not an interesting enough to become a sucessful brand. The mention of the Cold War alone is not enough to make the sales figures skyrocket.

First reflections

My cursory overview already shows in all clarity that it is not possible to speak of a homogeneous field of Cold War Games. The Cold War is sometimes only a superficial flourish. Sometimes it serves as the motivation for conflict, sometimes it is used as a historical or fictional setting. Let us therefore concentrate on the question of what unites most games: they serve first and foremost a dichotomous world view: a world with only two opponents. The emphasis is necessary because it reduces a highly complex global

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[49] Reisner (2013). Fort he academic debate on authenticity see Pfister (2020).
[50] Schüler/Schmitz/Lehman (2010), p. 174-183.
[51] Pfister (2017a)

conflict into what actually becomes a binary system through the game: West or East. Neutral states are not mentioned here, nor are other alliances. Such a simple worldview can, of course, be perceived as a relief in an increasingly complex globalized world. Apart from the satirical strategy game *Nuclear War* (New World Computing UK 1989 / Amiga and others) there is one example – that I recall: a *Civilization II* scenario that was sold with the first scenario pack, where you can play non-aligned states, or even the European Community[52]. Another notable exception here would also be the Tropico series (e.g. Tropico 6 [Limbic Entertainment D 2019 / Windows and others]), in which players lead a fictional Caribbean state through the turmoil of the 20th century and have to decide, among other things, how to shape their relationship with the USSR and the USA. In most of the games, however, the Cold War is reduced to a simple anta- gonism between two superpowers. In a way, the Cold War becomes here a myth, as described by Roland Barthes, insofar as we do not question it, it seems natural.

This leads me to my second observation: in digital games, a conflict with ideological origins is almost completely de-ideologized. As shown by Regina Seiwald, the autocratic form of government in the Warsaw Pact states is alluded to in some games, whether satirically exaggerated as in *Command & Conquer: Red Alert* and *No One Lives Forever*, or portrayed through the presence of an overpowering state police force. These games, therefore clearly do have an ideological statement. In most of the games discussed in this essay, however, ideology is never mentioned as such: neither communism nor capi- talism, neither neo-liberalism nor socialism. Instead, the games satisfy a simple us/them identification. This applies to military strategy games but also to first person shooters and spy games. One of the few examples I can think of in which the commu- nist ideology becomes noticeably evident in the game is in the fictional *Metro* series, set in a post-apocalyptic future in the Moscow subway. One of the larger political fac- tions here is the communist group Red Line, which is made up of people nostalgic for the Soviet Union. Interestingly, the faction is in constant battle with a fascist group ca- lled The Fourth Reich. So here, in an SF setting, reference is made to the "Great Patrio- tic War" (i.e. WW2) and not to the Cold War.

The de-ideologization of the conflict is summed up very nicely in the recent *Call of Duty: Black Ops - Cold War*. Here you take on the role of an American Covert Operations agent. The game skilfully serves all the familiar tropes of the Cold War in popular cultu- re. From jungle-battles against Vietcongs, to agents in leather coats in East Berlin, inte- rrogations of double agents and brainwashing (here referring to MK-Ultra). We meet

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[52] Sid Meier's *Civilization II Scenarios: Conflicts in Civilization* (MicroProse 1996)

Ronald Reagan and Michael Gorbachev in the game, but when it comes to the question of why there is fighting, characters on both sides answer, "To protect our way of life." What distinguishes these two ways of life, however, we never learn. Nor are the two sides noticeably different from each other. Both "Adler", on the side of the USA, and "Perseus", on the side of the USSR, are willing to disregard ethical concerns in order to achieve their goals.

The developers may have not included ideological explanations because the technology of the time did not allow for more complexity. However, the removal of ideological backdrops can be observed in other media, which would suggest that there are other reasons for it. Incidently, it was similar with games thematising the Second World War, another fundamentally ideological conflict, as I discovered repeatedly in my research. Unfortunately, I can't really offer a satisfactory explanation for this at this point. In part, it may be explained by a widespread fear of "political content" and the associated controversies this can cause for large companies, that may have an impact on stock prices. For me, however, this explanation is not satisfactory. I suspect rather that there could be a systemic reason behind it.

What remains of the Cold War as well as of the Second World War, if one removes the ideological superstructure, is a dichotomous antagonism, a unifying "we" is confronted with a threatening "them". Here, however, a direct comparison also shows that the Second World War is much better suited for a unifying "We", since in the conflict there is a quasi-global consensus as to who was on the good side and who was not. With the Cold War, the situation is different. Although most narratives reproduce the story of a victory of the West and for freedom over the East and communism, the situation is much less clear-cut, as evident in the problematic combat operations in Korea and Vietnam. The Second World War works much better as a brand, which is also reflected in the incomparably larger number of WW2 games.

Conclusions

I agree with Clemens Reisner that digital games in the 1980s, with their new language, were eminently suited to establish new ways to think and communicate the Cold War. The computer simulation established itself as the language for the Cold War in both popular culture and geopolitics. Computer games explained to the players the world political situation and at the same time their personal situation within the conflict[53].

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[53] Reisner (2020), p. 333

Mainly, they remedialized communication and military technology[54]. Some contemporaries saw the representation of nuclear war as problematic. There were even protests against some games. While the games were not free of ideology, as shown by Regina Seiwald, many did not show any ideology, interestingly enough. Instead, they left it at a simple us/them thinking, in the tradition of an imagined West-East conflict. In this respect, it should come as no surprise that *Call of Duty: Black Ops - Cold War* recently rediscovered the Cold War for the AAA-game[55] market, especially since it can now connect with a current political discourse, at least since the recent Crimean crisis.

My hypothesis is that historical settings become used in popular culture whenever they can fulfil a need for collective identity. Then they meet public demand and sell well. This explains why, for example, the Japanese Sengoku period and the American Civil War work particularly well as settings, like the 戦国無双-series (in English *Samurai Warriors*, developed by Omega Force) and Sid Meier's *Gettysburg!* (Firaxis Games 1997), for example. They enable players to virtually re-enact battles, esteemed to be important for national identity. In our topic, the Cold War primarily constructs a diffuse collective identity of the "West", which is never explicitly assigned to an ideology - i.e., capitalism - but is instead charged with diffuse ideological content: especially freedom and justice.

Of course, these are only initial observations and, ideally, there needs to be further research on cold war games. Many questions remain unanswered. A particularly exciting question for me, is how the Cold War is portrayed in games developed in former states of the Warsaw Pact, and if these differ from Western imaginaries? While during the Cold War, games about the conflict were developed almost exclusively in the USA, since the end of the Cold War several games have been developed in countries of the former Warsaw Pact like *Vietcong*, developed in the Czech Republic and *You Are Empty!* developed in the Ukraine. Thus, it is conceivable that especially in countries that construct their national identity primarily in distinction to Russia, the Cold War has a special identity-forming effect. Especially satirical imaginings of the cold war like Tim Curry's portrayal of a high Soviet general in *Command & Conquer: Red Alert* also suggest that there is at least partly a nostalgic function here. Here, a simpler (if fictional) bipolar world is evoked in which, at least in popular culture, only two sides existed, locked in an uneasy but peaceful stalemate.

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[54] Ibíd. p. 337

[55] AAA-games or Triple-A-games is a term used by the industry and journalists for games with very big budgets up to hundreds of millions of dollars

But to go back to the example of the teaser given at the beginning: Historical settings such as the Cold War can also function as discursive arguments that attack collective identities, in this case the legitimacy of the U.S. government. As with most historicizing games, most Cold War games are less concerned with authentically recreating a past than with creating a historicizing atmosphere by invoking certain superficial details and stereotypical narratives that meet with audience demand for the various reasons mentioned above. If the Cold War works as a historicizing setting, it is primarily because the expectations of a paying audience are met. In turn, these expectations arise, I would argue, because they have a system-stabilizing or system-changing function: the perpetuation of a diffuse "Western" identity, for example.

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