

(Re)Playing History and Rethinking Gender in Neo-Victorian Video Games

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(RE)JOGAR A HISTÓRIA E REPENSAR O GÊNERO EM VIDEOJOGOS
NEOVITORIANOS

INÊS CANDEIAS BARROS

RESUMO

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: videojogos; neovitorianismo; identidade; gênero; representatividade.

Ao longo das últimas décadas, diversos criadores de videojogos têm demonstrado uma preocupação em criar mundos ficcionais, personagens e enredos mais envolventes, e com os quais os jogadores podem mais facilmente se identificar. Isto é, possivelmente, consequência de desenvolvimentos tecnológicos, bem como de preocupações prementes acerca de inclusão e diversidade na indústria de videojogos, e nos próprios videojogos, preocupações essas que se estenderam para além do mundo académico e passaram a ser também discutidas na esfera pública. Considerando estas preocupações, videojogos cuja ação decorre em determinados períodos históricos são confrontados com duas opções, representar a história fielmente sem recurso a liberdade criativa, ou refletir criticamente e através de uma perspetiva contemporânea nesse período histórico. Na presente dissertação, analisa-se como três videojogos, *The Order: 1886* (2015), *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* (2015), and *Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey* (2019), lidam com estas preocupações, posicionando a sua ação na cidade de Londres durante o período Vitoriano, e criando um elenco de personagens mais diverso. A análise centra-se em diferentes personagens femininas e transgénero destes três videojogos, para explorar o modo como estes videojogos neovitorianos procuram subverter estereótipos e papéis de género, assim como o género enquanto sistema binário, masculino/feminino.

(RE)PLAYING HISTORY AND RETHINKING GENDER IN NEO-VICTORIAN
VIDEO GAMES

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ABSTRACT

KEYWORDS: video games; neo-Victorianism; identity; gender; representativity.

Over the last decades, many video game developers have demonstrated a concern to create more compelling and complex fictional worlds, characters, and plots, with which the player can connect with. Arguably, this is both the consequence of technological developments, as well as of pressing concerns about inclusivity and diversity in the video game industry and in video games themselves, which have extended beyond academia and into the public sphere. When approaching these concerns, video games with specific historical setting have two main options, to accurately represent history without any creative freedom, or to critically reflect on it through a contemporaneous perspective. In this dissertation, I look at how three video games, *The Order: 1886* (2015), *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* (2015), and *Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey* (2019), address these concerns through their setting in the city of London of the Victorian era, and by assembling a more diverse cast of characters. I focus my analysis on different female and trans characters from these three video games, to explore how these neo-Victorian video games attempt to subvert gender stereotypes, roles, and the male/female gender binary.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DLC	Downloadable Content
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
ISAGA	International Simulation and Gaming Association
ISFE	Interactive Software Federation of Europe
NASAGA	North American Simulation and Gaming Association
NPC	Non-Playable Character
PC	Personal Computer
POV	Point of View
PS3	PlayStation 3
PS4	PlayStation 4
RPG	Role-Playing Game
RTS	Real-time strategy
TASP	The Association for the Study of Play
TBS	Turn-based strategy

INTRODUCTION

Lakshmi Menon notes how recent video games seem to demonstrate a growing concern with the development of the fictional worlds contained in them. According to the author, game developers strive to make games with “complex narratives that create alternative realities and histories”, thus finding “new methods of storytelling through a synthesis of textual and cinematic media, bound only by the rules that bind gameplay” (108-9). Furthermore, Jesper Juul notes how “recent video games provide more elaborate worlds than previous games and, often, more coherent worlds” (“Half-Real” 162). The author adds that “in combination with the improvements in computer graphics and storage, this results in an increased emphasis on game fiction” (“Half-Real” 162). To this effect, Zach Whalen and Laurie N. Taylor also note how “video games have become more complex and expressive” and have found “their way into more and more aspects of our lives” (2).

In mainstream and independent productions, developers seem to demonstrate a conscious effort to create more compelling and complex fictional worlds, characters, and plots, with the intention to offer players a more immersive gaming experience. Nicolas Sigoillot states that this attention to the small details that contribute to the complexity of a video game can be noted when analyzing the non-playable characters – or NPCs –, for example. The author focuses specifically on the crowds present in several of the locations of *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate*. According to Sigoillot, “the developers of the game made great efforts in building the fictional world so that the population seems lively”, as to assure “the immersion of the player” (16). Furthermore, Jonathan Dumont, *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* world director, explains that it was the developer’s intention to create “a living ecosystem”, as that would make the game “more credible” (qtd. in Sigoillot 16).

It is important to note that not all video games are developed with these intentions, and not all show this concern with a fictional world and its complexity, some are solely focused on the mechanical aspects and the playability of the game itself. This is particularly true regarding sandbox games¹, like *Minecraft* (2011); simulation games, that

¹ According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the term “sandbox” can be used to refer to “a video game or part of a video game in which the player is not constrained to achieving specific goals and has a large degree of freedom to explore, interact with, or modify the game[’s] environment” (“Sandbox”).

is, games that intend to replicate real-world activities, such as *The Sims* (2000)²; and arcade games³, such as *Tetris* (1988) or *Pac-Man* (1980), just to name a few. Rui de Lemos argues that “the videogame industry is evolving in, at least, two branching paths, one more closely connected with narrative and one more interested in continuing to develop the mechanical, skill-based systems that award pattern recognition” (19). Notwithstanding, the author adds that: “The divide between these two is also growing narrower, with games more invested in providing both experiences.” (19).

Following the ideas originally put forward by Henry Jenkins, Menon argues that this shift in gaming development is perhaps a consequence of “an increasing participation of the consumer of a popular cultural text with the text itself [...]. Video games, therefore, become one of the most significant examples of this participatory culture” (108). This seems to indicate that the relationship between video games and players has also evolved over the years to become more interactive.

It is, therefore, possible to conclude that on the one hand, developers have strived to further create more engagement between the game and its players, by developing fictional worlds, characters, and plots, with which the players can connect. On the other hand, players also take part in this interactive process. As Williams et al., state, “game titles are driven by consumer demand” (829). This can mean, for example, that “games feature more males and so attract more young males to play” (Williams et al. 829). However, consumer demand can also mean that players have an opportunity to voice their social concerns, something that they⁴ would like to see addressed by the developers and incorporated into the video games. When we think of this, the lack of diverse representation in video game characters is what immediately comes to mind, particularly in terms of gender – not as biologically determined, but as Judith Butler suggests, “culturally constructed” (9) –, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and age, just to name a few, but these concerns have expanded to include “the lack of diversity as to whom is participating in the design and production of games themselves” (Kafai et al., “The Need

² *The Sims* can also be considered a sandbox game.

³ Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines “arcade game” as “a usually coin-operated game designed for play at an amusement arcade” (“Arcade Game”).

⁴ In this dissertation, I will attempt to use more inclusive language. I will attempt to accomplish that through the use of neutral and more inclusive pronouns such as they, and them whenever I mention players, as well as authors I mention. When the gender identity of a video game character is clearly defined, I will use the pronoun that best describes them. However, when that is not the case, I will turn to more neutral or inclusive ways to reference them.

for Intersectional” 4). In fact, “this lack of diversity in the gaming industry reflects the lack of diversity in the technology industry at large” and became more widely discussed and investigated “around the same time that GamerGate happened in 2014”⁵ (Kafai et al., “The Need for Intersectional” 4).

I believe it is possible to argue that GamerGate really opened the discussion of these concerns. As Kafai et al. note, in 2015, one year after the emergence of the GamerGate controversy, the discussions around it “continued and increasingly began to more explicitly address the lack of diversity in gaming.” (“The Need for Intersectional” 3). Moreover, the authors conclude that GamerGate turned this issue into one no longer discussed only within academia, but also in the public sphere, where it is recognized “the need to address the lack of diversity in games within the industry and wider culture” (4).

Released for the PlayStation 4 – henceforth referred to as PS4 – on February 20th, 2015, *The Order: 1886* is a “third-person action-adventure shooter” video game (“*The Order: 1886* Wikia”)⁶. Third-person refers to the player’s point of view or POV and, in the case of this game, is situated on a somewhat raised view behind the playable character. Action-adventure describes the genre of the video game which combines some elements of the action and adventure genres. *The Order: 1886* follows the fictional Knights of the Round Table or the Order, as they “protect mankind from supernatural threats in an alternate universe Neo-Victorian London” (“*The Order: 1886* Wikia”).

Later the same year, *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* was released worldwide. The video game was released for PS4 and Xbox One on October 23rd, 2015, and a month later, on November 19th, came out the Personal Computer – henceforth referred to as PC – version. *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* is the ninth main game of the *Assassin’s Creed* franchise. Much like the previous games in the franchise, *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* is set in both the present day and in a historical period, with the historical setting taking up most of the game’s action. In this case, the game is set mainly in London during the

⁵ GamerGate refers to the controversy that started in 2014 “within the gaming community as a seemingly personal feud between a game designer and her ex-boyfriend”, which soon escalated into “a larger discussion about the harassment of women in the gaming industry” (Kafai et al., “The Need for Intersectional” 2). Anita Sarkeesian, a feminist media critic, gaming activist, and perhaps the most well-known target of GamerGate was harassed, received death threats, and even saw herself turned into the main character of a video game, where players were asked to punch repeatedly an image of Sarkeesian’s face. For further analysis of the GamerGate controversy see Kafai, Yasmin B., et al., “The Need for Intersectional”.

⁶ See footnote 22 for a brief explanation of the origin and relevance of Wikia pages of video games.

Victorian era and follows the twins Jacob and Evie Frye, the two protagonists and playable characters as they try to free the city from criminal organizations and Templar rule. Much like *The Order: 1886*, *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* is also a third-person action-adventure video game with an open world, which allows the player to explore the location somewhat freely – in this case, Victorian London –, since they're not necessarily forced to follow a strict and linear gameplay.

Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey was released on April 5th, 2019 only for PC. Like the two aforementioned video games, *Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey* is a third-person POV adventure game with a point-and-click interface, that allows the player to move the pointer through the screen and click on specific locations/items/characters to explore the game. *Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey* is set in 1888 London during the Jack The Ripper murders, and follows the mythological and historical characters among which Sir Lancelot Du Lac, Morgana Le Fay, and Mary Jane Kelly, the three playable characters, as they attempt to stop The Ripper's reign of terror.

As I have argued before, developers are increasingly determined to create games with more complex fictional worlds, characters, and plots that offer players more interactive and immersive gaming experiences. Furthermore, players are also becoming an important part of the development process, as they become more vocal about what they want to see addressed in video games, and how they want it. I chose to analyze *The Order: 1886*, *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, and *Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey* mainly because of their shared historical – Victorian London – setting. Deciding to place the action of a video game in a particular historical context, in this case, the city of London during the Victorian era gives two immediate options to the developers. The first option would be to choose to represent the said historical period in the most accurate way possible, by creating characters that comply with the common stereotypes of that period, and by developing a fictional world that can be easily associated with known historical facts. The second one would be to look at “history through the lens of today”, as Jeffrey Yohalem, lead scriptwriter for *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, puts it (qtd. in Fishbune 28).

In these recent video games, among which are those chosen as the corpus for this dissertation, it is possible to see how game developers are choosing to follow this second option. By looking back on the city of London during the Victorian era from a more contemporary perspective, video games such as these ones are able, for example, to

deconstruct “the period’s strict sexual codes and restrictive [...] [gender] roles” (MacDonald and Goggin 3).

Tara MacDonald and Joyce Goggin express the importance of looking back to move forward, and they do so by introducing the idea, put forward by Adrienne Rich, that feminists should look back on the past with a fresh pair of eyes (1). The authors argue that “for contemporary feminist writers, artists, musicians, performers, and academics, the Victorian period remains an important site of historical re-vision” (2). MacDonald and Goggin argue that the continued interest in the Victorian era “as a locus of continued contest and revision hinges on received notions concerning the period’s strict sexual codes and restrictive female roles”, as well as, on “the tension between such received notions and emerging Victorian institutions like the National Society for Women’s Suffrage and the figure of the New Woman” (2-3). Thus, it is possible to consider the Victorian era as the perfect setting to explore questions of gender.

In a variety of neo-Victorian media, from television series to films, books, and music, the focus is turned to the past, to reflect on how Victorian gender discourses “continue to be, given that we still consistently begin from a binary gendered position in order to critique, and hopefully deconstruct, precisely that male/female binary” (MacDonald and Goggin 12). Given the diversity in neo-Victorian media, it is quite tempting to ask if video games, namely the three games on which I will be focusing my analysis, may also be considered as such. What I propose is that yes, they may.

The Order: 1886 and *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate*, as well as *Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey* attempt to do what I have discussed before, that is, to look at the Victorian era through a more contemporary perspective. These three video games, as I argue, are not limited to perpetuating fixed notions and stereotypes, but they attempt to explore and deconstruct them instead, even if in a somewhat limited way, as I will address further. All three video games place their action in the city of London during the Victorian era, but assemble diverse casts, both in terms of gender identity, sexual orientation, or in terms of the roles they play within the action of the game, which is not always the ones we would expect from knowing the stereotypes attributed to this period. Considering, once again, MacDonald and Goggin’s arguments, by placing the action in the Victorian period – and

assembling such a diverse cast of characters –, the games attempt to deconstruct, even if with limitations, Victorian gender discourses, that is, the male/female binary roles⁷.

Furthermore, I believe that video games that portray a particular historical period, are in a unique position to influence players to engage with the past in a more interactive way than they can, simply by reading a history book, for example. This is especially true when considering the ever-growing engagement between video games and players, as I discussed before. Karsenti points out how appealing it can be for students to learn from popular video games (Sigoillot 2). Of course, not all academics agree with this idea, as some, like Marc Marti, argue that “the representation of history in games contributes to a fictionalisation of history” (qtd. in Sigoillot 2).

As more video games choose to represent history through a contemporary perspective and reflect on it critically, this allows them to, in a way, address important contemporary concerns, challenge preexisting meanings about the said historical period, and it can also open the door to new possibilities of interpretation. However, this does not mean that there is a complete disregard for historical accuracy in the development process of video games. On the contrary, it is quite frequent to see historians specialized in said historical period working closely with video game developers. One such example is Judith Flanders, a historian whose work focuses on the Victorian period, and who worked in both *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* and *Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey*. It is paramount that the player can somehow identify the setting of the game, and for that, it should be maintained at least some level of plausibility, whether it be through the introduction of notorious individuals of the time, or simply through accurate representation of historic monuments, land or cityscapes. Talking about the character Lara Croft, Kennedy states that “providing [...] Lara with a (fairly) plausible history gives her some ontological coherence and helps to enhance the immersion of the player in the Tomb Raider world, and abets the identification with Lara” (qtd. in Engelbrecht). This quote does not refer to the requirement of historical plausibility, but I believe it highlights how important it is to maintain a minimum level of plausibility that guarantees the player can identify and get immersed in the world of the video game, and that they can somehow relate with it.

⁷ These binary gender roles are still very much perpetuated in video games, and some video games are still designed to reinforce gender stereotypes; See Munday for a detailed analysis of the role of video games in the socialization of children, and of the gendered representation of female characters in video games; See also Bryce and Rutter.

In this dissertation, I look at how Victorian London has been represented in video games, how through that representation it is possible to reflect on the limitations of binary gender discourses, and how those discourses can be and are at times deconstructed. As I have argued previously, in video games set in the Victorian era, the developers can either perpetuate binary gender discourses or contest and deconstruct them, through the subversion of gendered stereotypes and the inclusion of more diverse casts of characters. I focus my analysis, on female and trans characters, since I believe these allow for a greater deconstruction of the binary gender roles, although I do use other characters and how they are portrayed in terms of comparison. Furthermore, I will also analyze, even if briefly, the relationship between video games and the players who play them, and to do so I will explore recent video game players' demographics. My analysis will be focused on the three video games that I have been discussing throughout this introductory section, *The Order: 1886*, *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, and *Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey*⁸.

There is already a significant amount of research concerning video games and gender, as well as video games and history, some of which I will reference in this dissertation. Furthermore, there is also a lot of research regarding the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, as it is one of the most popular and successful video game franchises. Notwithstanding, by analyzing less researched video games alongside more popular ones, I believe that I can complement the research that already exists. To this effect, I have divided my analysis into four distinct chapters.

Chapter 1 deals with the theoretical framework. In this chapter, I look into the origins of the discipline of game studies and how it has evolved over the years. From there I attempt to establish how relevant video games are nowadays, and why they ought to be studied. Lastly, in this first, chapter I turn my analysis to the best-known debate within game studies, "Ludology versus Narratology".

⁸ Regarding the *Assassin's Creed* franchise in general, and *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* in particular, there are other mediums, which are somewhat connected with the main game, that could also be considered in this analysis, namely additional downloadable content – henceforth referred to as DLC – and novels, for example. In November 2015, one month after the release of the main game *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, it was published the novel *Assassin's Creed: Underworld*, written by Andrew Holmes under the pen name Oliver Bowden, takes place in 1862 - six years before the beginning of the game – and provides a backstory to some of the characters. While I will briefly explore the DLC, I will not be extending my analysis to the novel, as I don't believe it to be relevant to what I intend to achieve with this dissertation. For an analysis of the connection between the *Assassin's Creed* video games and the novels see Magaldi and Mendes. See also, Mukherjee.

In Chapter 2, I review existing research on the relationship between video games and players and briefly analyze some recent demographic data concerning video game players. In this chapter, I reflect upon the influence that video games have on the individuals who play them. Firstly, I direct my analysis to how video games can influence how players remember certain historical periods, by focusing on games set in the Victorian period, specifically the three I have mentioned previously. Secondly, I explore how video games can influence the way players think about their own identities, depending on the characters available to them, and how those characters are portrayed. The analysis included in this second chapter combines research from various fields of academia to get a broad, although not exhaustive, understanding of the relationship between video games and players.

In Chapter 3, I analyze how Victorian London has been represented in various video games by focusing on *The Order: 1886*, *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, and *Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey*. In this chapter, I identify and reflect upon neo-Victorian and/or steampunk aspects that might be found in these video games, to understand how, in these, Victorian London is transformed into “an important site of historical re-vision” (MacDonald and Goggin 2).

In Chapter 4, the last chapter, I shift my analysis to the portrayal of gender in video games, by focusing particularly on female and trans characters. Firstly, I briefly explore how female and trans characters have been portrayed in video games. Secondly, I focus my analysis on the same three video games, by selecting certain characters from each video game, considering, mainly, the representation of their gender identity, and their role in the fictional world of the games.

It is my hope that this dissertation can contribute to further the knowledge of video game studies within the framework of Neo-Victorian Studies as a way to (re)play History and rethink gender.

CHAPTER 1. GAME STUDIES: THE ORIGINS OF A FIELD

Why game studies now? Because the information age has, under our noses, become the gaming age. It appears likely that gaming and its associated notion of play may become a master metaphor for a range of human social relations, with the potential for new freedoms and new creativity as well as new oppressions and inequality. (Boellstorff 33)

At the time it was published in 2006, the article by Tom Boellstorff already noted how the age we are living in could easily be described as the “gaming age” (33). I would argue that this statement has become truer over the years. As I will explore further in this chapter, over the last four decades, the popularity of video games has largely increased, with billions of players all around the world, and generating billions of dollars of profit every year (Esposito; Mäyrä 4-5).

Much like in many other fields of studies, it seems to be a rather difficult task to find clear definitions in the field of game studies. What are in fact game studies? How can be defined the concept of “games”? What is the difference between “games” and “video games”? The list of complex questions is quite long after all, as it seems that within any field of studies or academic discipline, the hardest concepts to define are those that determine the essence of said field or discipline and what it undertakes to study. Needless to say that this difficulty does increase the challenge to craft any type of academic work, but it does not make it altogether impossible. Thus, in the effort to elaborate my own research, I will turn to relevant previous academic research that I believe will help me clarify any pertinent concepts, always considering the limitations of any definitions I might use, explanations I might elaborate on, or even conclusions I might reach.

In *An Introduction to Game Studies: Games in Culture*, Frans Mäyrä presents a theorization of game studies that conceptualizes games as culture, rather than focusing on how games are made, on a game’s structures and/or functions, or even on the legal or business aspects of games (2). Mäyrä argues that the analysis of the concept of games as culture needs to be an interdisciplinary one since the concept of culture has been theorized by many different researchers from various backgrounds (2). In the author’s analysis, there are three important spheres of inquiry when it comes to the analysis of games as culture. These three spheres are not only influenced by historical processes but they are also influenced by each other through complementary and interactive processes (Mäyrä

2). All three, the author argues, cannot be separated from one another: the study of games, the study of players, and the study of the contexts of the previous two (2).

Mäyrä takes inspiration to theorize this three-sphere analysis of games as culture from Jesper Juul, who also uses a three-sphere division in an earlier study. Juul also focuses on the game, on the player, and on the world (qtd. Mäyrä in 2). In Mäyrä's analysis, this is identified as the "context", however, the author argues that Juul considers the context as a broader concept, which can be used not only with respect to the contexts of games and players, their relationship to one another and to the historical processes – that also have considerable influence -, but also to "multiple frames of reference, and thus also multiple possible realities" (2).

I find Mäyrä's vision of game studies to be particularly relevant to my own analysis. The author describes it as "as multidisciplinary and dialectical", adding that "if and when we understand anything, it is by making connections that open up new directions for thinking about games" (3). It is, in Mäyrä's words, by "bringing into contact existing but previously separate ideas, concepts, and frames of thought, we can proceed to create a synthesis of them, and see our grasp of things evolve" (3). I believe that a multi and interdisciplinary vision is essential when it comes to young(er) disciplines such as game studies. It is not only necessary for different disciplines and fields of studies to use their particular methodologies and concepts to contribute to further the knowledge, but it is also fundamental that all those different disciplines and fields of studies work together in a dialectical way. I will develop this idea further in my analysis, by showing how different disciplines and fields of studies can indeed work together, and how the knowledge of various fields of study can inform and complement each other. For now, however, I will concentrate on clarifying some concepts relevant to my analysis.

1.1. Clarification of Key Concepts

When plummeting into any particular field of study it is of the utmost importance to clarify key concepts. However, it is important to be aware of the difficulty, if not impossibility, of that task. Any definition we may somehow reach inevitably comes with several limitations. Nonetheless, I will now, to the best of my abilities, attempt to clarify some concepts that I believe to be significant in the context of my analysis.

According to Bo Kampmann Walther, there is a need “to clarify the distinctions between playing and gaming”, two often used concepts within game studies. While both terms seem to be, at first, almost synonyms of one another, the author argues there are indeed important differences between them. The author states that “[p]lay is an open-ended territory in which make-believe and world-building are crucial factors. Games are confined areas that challenge the interpretation and optimizing of rules and tactics - not to mention time and space.” (Walther). In this brief definition, the author focuses on the ontological differences between play and game, that is, the structural differences between the two notions. However, the author argues that there are also important epistemological differences between them, that is, differences regarding the dynamics of playing and gaming⁹.

Gonzalo Frasca also theorizes about the differences between game and play. The author refers to how “Roger Caillois's game categorization *alea*, *agon*, *ilinx*, and *mimicry* is one of the best known” (“Simulation Versus Narrative” 229). However, the author does not find this categorization to be as Caillois' other one, *paidia* and *ludus*, that is play and game (“Simulation Versus Narrative” 229). While *paidia* makes reference “to the form of play present in early children (construction kits, games of make-believe, kinetic play)”, *ludus* refers to the “games with social rules (chess, soccer, poker)” (“Simulation Versus Narrative” 229-30). Frasca mentions how Caillois failed to provide a clear definition of both terms, so it is common to, for example, suppose “that *paidia* has no rules”, and that is inaccurate (“Simulation Versus Narrative” 230). Like the author refers as an example, “a child who pretends to be a soldier is following the rule of behaving like a soldier and not as a doctor” (“Simulation Versus Narrative” 230). Accordingly, Frasca suggests “the difference between *paidia* and *ludus* is that the latter incorporates rules that define a winner and a loser, whereas the former does not” (“Simulation Versus Narrative” 230). Furthermore, the author also reflects on how these two terms structurally differ from one another, as “*ludus* follows the same three-act rule behind Aristotelian stories”, remaining “ideologically too attached to the idea of a centralized author” (“Simulation Versus Narrative” 230). On the contrary, “*paidia* games are more ‘open-ended’ than their *ludus* counterparts” (“Simulation Versus Narrative” 230).

⁹ I will only briefly explore these terms, for I believe going in-depth into how they have evolved goes beyond the scope of my dissertation. See Mäyrä for a historical analysis of playing. Also, see Walther for a more comprehensive analysis of the distinctions between playing and gaming.

Forthwith, I will turn to some of the most mentioned concepts in this dissertation, “game”, and “digital game”¹⁰.

According to Mäyrä, games can present “players experiences that range from the aesthetic pleasures of impressive graphics, music, storylines and (sometimes) even well-scripted dialogue” (22). There are many games that “also provide players with active experiences that are more akin to the tests of skill, strategy, strength or endurance that are typical of some sports” (Mäyrä 22). Other games focus instead “on the building and creating activities that people in nondigital contexts have enjoyed while being engaged in arts and crafts, or in hobbies such as building miniature models” (Mäyrä 22). In addition, Nelson Zagalo mentions how video games are a systemic structure created to address both the learning needs of cultural and social order, and the cognitive needs for reward framed as problem-solving (63). The author further describes a game as “estímulo cognitivo”, or cognitive stimuli, and as “artefacto cultural”, or cultural artifact (63). As cognitive stimuli, a video game rewards the player for their effort in performing the tasks proposed in the game. As a cultural artifact, the video game allows the player to observe, interact with, and learn to respond to different situations, thus contributing to the development of the player’s social responses (Zagalo 63).

If we, in turn, focus on the non-digital games, we observe a wide variety encompassing different types of “puzzles, hopscotch style of street-play, dice, card and board games” (Mäyrä 22). The variety of games goes further than all these examples I have just mentioned, so I believe it is not that difficult to understand just how difficult it would be to try to find a definition that was broad enough to include all the particular aspects of all these kinds of games while being narrow enough that it would still be interesting to be used in academic analysis. Considering all this, I will not try to find any definition of the concept of game¹¹, as doing so would also demand that I explore how a definition – or definitions – have evolved, and I believe that that goes beyond the scope of this dissertation. Moreover, the same can be stated regarding digital games.

¹⁰ I have chosen not to clarify the term “video game” in this section as I will do so in a section specifically dedicated to video games.

¹¹ See Juul, “Half-Real” for a comprehensive reading of game definitions. See also de Lemos, for an analysis of the terms game and narrative, and how those can be applied to the 2016 video game *Firewatch* (5-16).

Mäyrä notes how digital games are “related to both the emergence of digital technologies and the more general developments in games, toys and play as forms of leisure, culture and business” (32). The author argues that when considering a definition of digital games, it is important to consider the perspective from which the research is being conducted, as said definition can be framed to include some aspects and exclude others: “The boundaries defining the subject of study for game studies are permeable, forcing us to make a more thorough scrutiny of the basic starting points” (32). The truth is that, often, digital games and video games are terms that are used interchangeably. It is not uncommon to see both terms used with the same intentions. The definitions and the history of digital and video games are usually regarded as being the same. I will address the definition of video game in section 1.3. of this chapter.

The last key concept I believe is important to clarify, is that of “gameplay”. Juul describes gameplay as “the interaction between the rules, the game tree¹², the players pursuing a goal, and the players' personal repertoires and preferences” (“Half-Real” 199). Ultimately, the game is developed with the intention of providing entertainment to the player as they pursue the main goal the game developers designed for said game. In most games, the player has some autonomy to approach the game in a different way than the developers first expected, which does not guarantee the same “quality gameplay” (“Half-Real” 200). Nonetheless, despite the developers not being able to predict exactly how a player will approach a game, or if “many emergent and non-intentional events can happen in a game, they still would not happen without the game” itself (“Half-Real” 200).

1.2. Why Games Ought to be Studied

Game studies is a fairly recent field of studies, at least in how it is established in academia, nowadays. Mäyrä believes it to be important to theorize about gaming technology and digital games, among which video games, and their relevance in the everyday life of many people in today’s world. For that reason, the author wonders “why should there not be game studies represented in a modern university?” (6). According to the author, introducing game studies to an academic context can only help to inform about

¹² Game tree is a graph that “provides information about the players, **payoffs**, **strategies**, and the order of moves” (“Game Tree”).

the changes in “social life [...] [,] creative practices”, and culture of late modern societies (6). As the author states, “games are the most successful example of information and communication technologies becoming domesticated, which means that they evidence being integrated into the everyday life and practices of groups of people” (6). Nevertheless, as with most newer disciplines or fields of studies, there seems to be a certain unwillingness to indeed define it as such. Some scholars, for example, “would rather prefer to talk about a multidisciplinary research field that is focusing on games” (Mäyrä 4).

Despite all this, game studies has “become [well] established both as a field of scientific inquiry and as a branch of knowledge that is formally taught at universities.” (Mäyrä 4). Over the last decades, game studies has defined its “own subject of study – games and playing in their multifarious manifestations – and also its own theories, methods and terminology, which have entered into the usual process of academic application, evaluation and reformulation” (4). Nonetheless, it is essential to remember the importance of interdisciplinarity, which helped to structure game studies as a field and continues to contribute to much of the research conducted within it.

Over the last decades, the field of game studies has become increasingly popular, and that is due largely to the increasing popularity of games themselves, particularly video games. Statistics concerning recent years seem to confirm just that. Statista, a website that provides statistics for market and consumer data reports, in selected gaming markets in Europe during the year 2021¹³, the United Kingdom had the largest gaming audience in Europe with approximately 46.7 million players (“Number of Gamers”). In second and third place respectively were Germany with 39.1 million players, and France with 36.5 million players. Another online survey¹⁴ reported that “83.6 percent of global internet users played video games on any device” (Clement, “Global Gaming Penetration”).

¹³ On a supplementary note, *Statista*’s website states that these data refer to “Physically Sold Video Games and Digital Video Games.” The term “Physically Sold Video Games” is used in reference to “revenues associated with in-person purchases of video games in retail stores [...] or in online-shops as CDs, DVDs, or other solid storage media”. The term “Digital Video Games” refers to “revenues associated with digital game sales [...]” Furthermore, “additional downloadable content (DLC) and subscription services” were also considered, as well as, subscription-based games, e.g., *World of Warcraft*, [...] [and] free-to-play games with in-game purchases for additional premium content or functionalities, e.g., *Fortnite* (“Number of Gamers”).

¹⁴ This report focused on the share of internet users worldwide who play video games on any device as of the 3rd quarter of 2021. The focus group was internet users, aged 16 to 64, who responded to an online survey (Clement, “Global Gaming Penetration”).

Above the worldwide average percentage and leading with the highest percentage was the Philippines with 96.4 percent (Clement, “Global Gaming Penetration”). This survey places the United States of America and the UK below the worldwide average with 80.9 percent and 74.9 percent respectively (Clement, “Global Gaming Penetration”). Furthermore, Portugal is also featured as one of the countries below the worldwide average percentage with 81.2 percent of internet users worldwide who play video games on some device (Clement, “Global Gaming Penetration”).

Frans Mäyrä suggests that for the most part “with the rise of social media and information technologies, millions of people have found games as one of the most fascinating uses for these new interactive devices.” (4). The author adds that “digital games are a significant cultural force, which has a prominent role in the lives particularly of those people who are living in industrialized countries” (4). Much like the statistical data I previously presented, the gaming market has attracted millions of people from all around the world, and it shows a tendency to grow over time. Furthermore, the success of the gaming industry also needs to be noted.

As Mäyrä accounts, “games development and publishing nevertheless has grown into a global creative powerhouse, with a global market value regularly cited as exceeding 30 billion dollars annually” (4-5). While these data reflect the years in which Mäyrä wrote and published – that is, until the year 2008 –, more recent data suggest that these numbers have in fact increased. According to the Interactive Software Federation of Europe, or ISFE, the European video game industry is currently worth about 23.3 billion euros (“The Industry”). Furthermore, the website Statista projects that in our current year – 2022 –, the video game market could reach around 208.60 billion American dollars and that it will increase to around 304.70 billion American dollars by 2027¹⁵ (“Video Games”).

Frasca notes the influence that younger generations have on the field of game studies: “Probably the most promising change comes from a new generation of researchers who grew up with computer games and now are bringing to this new field both their passion and expertise on this form of entertainment” (“Simulation Versus Narrative” 221). I remember playing many different video games growing up, both on video game consoles and on my PC. As an adult, I maintain my video game-playing

¹⁵ These data include “fee-based video games distributed over the internet”, that is “online games, download games, mobile games, and gaming networks”. Not included are any physical video game sales and demo/trial versions of video games (“Video Games”).

habits, perhaps even more so than when I was a child. Much like what Frasca notes, this childhood interest of mine became one of my hobbies as an adult, and consequently, one that I am interested in researching on an academic level. Furthermore, I believe that this personal example can also help to illustrate how video games have become a constant in the lives of people, especially younger generations who have grown up playing video games. Mäyrä proposes that this growing influence of video games in people's lives, along with the field of game studies being a fairly under-researched field is what really contributed to the emergence of "a new wave of game studies" (5).

While it does not seem hard to find reasons why games ought to be studied, I believe it is important to acknowledge that those reasons can – and do – change depending on various factors including the motivations of the researcher, the academic background the researcher has, the field of studies in which the research is being conducted, and the nature of the research itself, just to name a few. James Newman, for example, considers many reasons why games – particularly video games – should be studied, whether they be "social, cultural, economic, political and technological" (qtd. in Esposito). The author highlights three main ones: "[T]he size of the videogames industry; the popularity of videogames; videogames as an example of human-computer interaction" (qtd. in Esposito). Newman's reasons converge with those proposed by Mäyrä, particularly regarding the popularity of video games, and the importance they have in people's lives.

1.3. The Origins of Game Studies and the Rise of Video Game Studies

Mäyrä puts forward a more generalized definition of game studies which describes the field as "a *multidisciplinary field of study and learning with games and related phenomena as its subject matter*" (6). Much like with any other concept, it is rather difficult to reach a clear definition of "game studies". As the author points out, the task to define the field gets particularly difficult "when one starts to organize this diversity into a collection of theories and methodologies or forms it into a single body of knowledge to be communicated in teaching and publication" (6). Since game studies is such a diverse, multi and interdisciplinary field of studies, which borrows from, and is influenced by so many other fields of studies, it is quite difficult to make sure that all the theories and methodologies, for example, are included in one single definition. As Mäyrä

explains, if anyone attempting to produce a definition does follow that path, they will find that “a ‘science of everything’ can just as easily [...] become a ‘study of nothing’”. (6).

Mäyrä describes the identity of game studies as “a historical process”, one which has evolved (6). While it is true that the existence of game studies as an established field of studies is quite recent – particularly this “new wave of game studies” that I have previously mentioned –, and still a bit of a complex situation, with some scholars still reluctant to define it as a field of studies, the truth is that the study of games has been around for quite some time, particularly if we look at research conducted within other fields of study and disciplines such as history and ethnography¹⁶ (Mäyrä 6). Noteworthy classical works include *Games of The North American Indians* (1907) by the ethnographer Stewart Culin and *History of Chess* (1913) by Harold James Ruthven Murray.

In earlier research focused on games, the attention given to simulation, that is the “imitation of operations of a large system by other simplified system” is quite noticeable (Mäyrä 7). After all, there is also “a rich tradition of using various kinds of simulations for learning purposes”. This interest in the usage of games for learning purposes can be traced back to eighteenth-century Germany, particularly to the work of Helwig who, in 1780, adapted chess into a war game, and who expressed the wish to design a game for pages to learn “a few principles and rules of the military art” (Avedon and Sutton-Smith qtd. in Mäyrä 7).

Around two centuries later, in the 1950s, American war gamers created the East Coast War Games Council – later changed to National Gaming Council, and eventually to North American Simulation and Gaming Association – or NASAGA. This organization included a majority “of educators interested in using particularly simulation games to enhance learning” (Mäyrä 7). Around the same time, similar organizations started to appear in other countries, which lead to the creation, in 1970, of the International Simulation and Gaming Association – or ISAGA –, an international network of national associations of simulation and gaming research (Mäyrä 7). In 1974, in Minneapolis,

¹⁶ It is impossible to successfully recount all the important moments that shaped game studies into what it is today. In my analysis I tried to summarize the early beginnings of game studies as best as I could, to hopefully show how this field of studies started to be developed even before it was defined as a field of studies, and how it got to what can be described as a new, or contemporary wave of game studies.

another group of scholars founded an association dedicated to the study of play, which changed its name to The Association for the Study of Play – or TASP – in 1987.

Many of the organizations and associations were also the creators of several important publications in the field of game studies. For example, TASP published several journals mostly focused on play research, among which *Play and Culture*, *Journal of Play Theory and Research*, and *Play and Culture Studies*. However, it is not possible to list important journals in the field without naming the oldest academic journal in the field of game studies – first published in 1970 –, *Simulation & Gaming* edited by Toshiko Kikkawa and Marlies Schijven.

In the 1940s, theorists such as Vannevar Bush already hypothesized in their theories about “a tool or device that would operate in an associative manner like the human mind, rather than in a strict linear or category-based fashion” (Mäyrä 8). Two decades later, Theodore Nelson introduced the concept of “hypertext” as a way of “interconnecting written or pictorial material that ‘could not be conveniently presented or represented in paper’” (qtd. in Mäyrä 8). However, it was the introduction of computers to the study of games that opened a world of possibilities for researchers, and in turn put in motion the emergence of what would later be described as a new wave of game studies (Mäyrä 8). As computers became increasingly available for both public and private use, the interactions between human-computer interactions began to also change, thus, it was only natural for scholars to gain increasing interest in these new interactions and new technologies which were making them possible: “For the literary scholars, digital media appeared, opening new interesting directions particularly in the experiments of hypertext fiction, and interactive fiction in general.” (Mäyrä 8).

The year 1997 saw the publication of two influential works in the field of game studies. Firstly, Espen Aarseth published *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, in which the author explores hypertexts, adventure games, and multi-user dungeon – or MUDs, a multiplayer virtual world, that relies heavily “on purely textual strategies, and [...] provides a unique laboratory for the study of textual self-expression and self-creation” (Aarseth 13). This way, the author attempts to provide “a fresh perspective to a form of textuality that requires ‘non-trivial effort’ from their readers to traverse the text” (Mäyrä 8). Secondly, Janet Murray published *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, an “influential work discussing the future possibilities for interactive drama and narrative” (Mäyrä 8). These two works became influential, mostly

because they came to represent the two sides of the well-known debate within the discipline of game studies, which I will address later, Ludology versus Narratology.

Juul argues that “the history of video games is both very brief and very long.” (“Half-Real” 3). The author considers the first video game to have been *Spacewar!*, a game released in 1961, only about sixty years ago (“Half-Real” 3). In turn, Charlie Fish maintains that the first video game is a couple of decades older, *Nimatron*, which was presented in April of 1940 at the New York World’s fair (6-7). If we consider, as the author suggests, that television has existed for approximately ninety years, film for more than a hundred years, and the printing press for about five hundred years, then we begin to realize that video games are indeed quite recent (“Half-Real” 3). When considering the history of games, we realize just how recent video games also are in that context, as they are predated by millennia, by games such as senet, the Egyptian board game unearthed “in the 2686 BC tomb of Hesy-re” (Juul, “Half-Real” 4). However, for such a recent medium, video games do have a long and extensive history¹⁷.

The history of video games is deeply connected with that of computers. Juul notes how “computers work as enablers of games, letting us play old games in new ways, and allowing for new types of games that would previously not have been possible.” (“Half-Real” 5). Fish adds to this idea by stating that “video games are shaped by the technology of the day and human creativity has always found ingenious ways of pushing the limitations of the hardware” (6). Thus, it is easy to understand how the rapid evolution of computers over the last eighty years, has also propelled the rapid evolution of video games. In addition, Teresa Pereira notes how only recently, since 2010, the video gaming industry went through some changes, particularly regarding content distribution (153). From this moment onwards, it was no longer required for a video game to have a big video game company to be successful in the gaming market (Pereira 153). At the same time, video games became more readily available to players, as they started to be massively sold in digital stores and other platforms, like the PlayStation Store or Steam (Pereira 153). But, as I believe to have demonstrated, all these shifts and changes make up for a rather short video games’ history, which “is complemented by an even shorter history of research”, since, as Juul argues, it was “only around the turn of the millennium

¹⁷ I do not believe it is possible to go over every detail of video game’s history in this dissertation, without risking losing the focus on its theme and goals. For a thorough analysis of video game history see Fish.

that video game studies began to come together as a field with its own conferences, journals, and organizations” (“Half-Real” 11).

According to the author, over these more than two decades, research on video games could be described as “something of a gold rush and a race toward being the first to point out special aspects of games, to format the field, to define words, and to point to similarities and dissimilarities between games and other cultural forms” (“Half-Real” 11). Much like in the field of game studies, with regard to video games, there are also some important discussions and debates concerning the study of this type of medium. The most important of these discussions are, as Juul suggests, “games versus players, rules versus fiction, games versus stories, games versus the broader culture, and game ontology versus game aesthetics” (“Half-Real” 11).

Juul states that one such discussion “concerns whether we study the games themselves or the players who play them” (“Half-Real” 11). Considering this, we could, on the one hand, study “games as objects unrelated to players”, while on the other hand, we could study games, and combine that with the experiences of those people who play them (“Half-Real” 11). Furthermore, the author argues that it is even possible “to discuss games or players, we can also choose between studying a specific game for its role in the general media ecology or focusing on the game itself and the playing of the game” (“Half-Real” 17).

One discussion, or debate, foundational in the field of game studies, and that has, therefore, influenced how video games are studied, is that of Ludology versus Narratology. Before moving into my analysis of the said debate and having just briefly addressed the history of video games, I believe it is important to clarify what indeed are video games.

Much like with any other definition of any key concept, to attempt to define “video game” it is necessary to understand the limitations that task entails. Any definition we might reach is deeply influenced by who theorized it, and/or by the area of studies it is being used on, for example. However, definitions are also heavily influenced by time and place, that is when and where they are produced, as Ramón Méndez explains (91). Thus, to define a concept, in general, and the concept of video games in particular, is to be aware of its constant evolution (Méndez 91).

According to Juul,

video games are two different things at the same time: video games are real in that they consist of real rules with which players actually interact, and in that winning or losing a game is a real event. However, when winning a game by slaying a dragon, the dragon is not a real dragon but a fictional one. To play a video game is therefore to interact with real rules while imagining a fictional world, and a video game is a set of rules as well as a fictional world. (“Half-Real” 1)

In this definition, Juul uses “fiction to mean any kind of imagined world” (“Half-Real 122). According to Juul, in video games, the fictional world is projected in different ways, either by “using graphics, sound, text, advertising, the game manual, and the game rules” (“Half-Real 121). The author distinguishes fiction from storytelling by arguing that, unlike fiction, “a story is a fixed sequence of events that is presented (enacted or narrated) to a user” This way, and as I will explore further in this section, according to the author, a video game assumes player’s influence in the game they are playing, whereas “story” assigns a passive role to the player.

Juul theorizes that “the interaction between game rules and game fiction is one of the most important features of video games” (“Half-Real” 1). This interaction is, as stated by Juul, a complementary, yet not a symmetrical one (“Half-Real” 121). As Juul points out, it is possible to “discuss rules mostly without mentioning fiction” (“Half-Real” 121). However, “it is not possible to deal with fiction in games without discussing rules” (Juul, “Half-Real” 121). Juul adds that in a video game, both “rules and fiction compete for the player's attention.” (“Half-Real” 121). Moreover, this interaction also influences different aspects of video games, whether it be “in the design of the games themselves; in the way we perceive and use games; and in the way we discuss games” (Juul, “Half-Real” 2).

Much like I mentioned before, regarding research on video game, the interaction between rules and fiction allows us to choose to either focus on the player or the game. It is possible to focus on “the rules as they are found mechanically in the game program or in the manual of a board game, or we can examine the rules as something that players negotiate and learn, and at which they gradually improve their skill”, for example (Juul, “Half-Real” 2). In addition, and regarding the fictional world portrayed in the game, it is possible to consider it either “as a fixed set of signs that the game presents” or as “something that the game cues the player into imagining and that players then imagine in their own ways” (Juul, “Half-Real” 2). On the side of the player, the interaction between

game rules and game fiction gives them “a choice between imagining the world of the game and seeing the representation as a mere placeholder for information about the rules of the game” (Juul, “Half-Real” 2).

Unlike “traditional nonelectronic games”, which “are mostly abstract”, video games feature fictional worlds, something that really sets them apart from their predecessors (Juul, “Half-Real” 1). Juul states that there are considerable differences between “an abstract game and a modern video game with an elaborate fictional world”, and while “it is tempting to describe games as being either abstract or representational”, this is a distinction that is not easy to validate (“Half-Real” 130). According to David Parlett, this is mostly due to the fact that are the players that determine just how representational a game is (qtd. in Juul, “Half-Real” 130). That is, “no hard and fast distinction can be drawn between abstract and representational as a classification of games” since a game’s representativity “depends on the level at which it is being played and the extent of its player’s imagination” (Parlett qtd. in Juul, “Half-Real” 130).

Newman notes just how common it is to think about video games as an interactive medium. Notwithstanding, the author believes it is not important in the context of their own analysis to explore the problematic concept of “interactivity”¹⁸, or even to reflect on just how complex it is to define video games as a medium, as the author does not believe those to be at the core of any misconception about the interactive nature of video games. Instead, Newman believes that any misconception is the result of a “misunderstanding of videogames and the experience of play”. Newman argues that video games are not interactive, and while they do have interactive elements, it is a mistake to take those as the only defining characteristic of the nature of video games, since the author considers that doing just that, ignores other elements essential to the player’s experience of a said video game, such as cut-scenes, scores or map screens, just to name a few.

I find Newman’s idea particularly interesting, especially since it states that video games cannot be understood in a highly segmented way. The interactive elements of video games do not determine the entire experience of gameplay. Rather, these elements are simply one of the many parts that compose the larger, and more complex system that are video games.

¹⁸ For further reading on that, the author directs the readers to the work of Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*.

I will now turn my analysis to one of the foundational debates in game studies since as Juul states, “[v]ideo game studies did not appear in a vacuum” (“Half-Real” 15).

1.4. Ludology Versus Narratology

Frasca notes that the late 1990s and early 2000s brought a shift in video game studies (“Simulation Versus Narrative” 221). While earlier research was mainly focused on how games could bring out violent behaviors, from the late 1990s and early 2000s onwards, research on video games was somehow redirected to the relevance of video games themselves (Frasca, “Simulation Versus Narrative” 221). Furthermore, this period also saw the increase of international conferences on game studies, and the publication of the first peer-reviewed online journal – which still exists nowadays – *Game Studies* (Frasca, “Simulation Versus Narrative” 221). As I have discussed thus far in this dissertation, all these shifts in game studies and the rise of video games, as well as the rise of video game studies, did not emerge completely out of context. It was, however, the result of the evolution of a field of studies shaped by different influences. Therefore, it is impossible to explore all these shifts, and how the field evolved over the years, without discussing the debate which defined the earlier years of video game studies (Juul, “Half-Real” 15).

With origins in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, on “the study of storytelling media such as drama, novels, and films”, the concept of narratology is nowadays “commonly used in a much broader sense” (“Juul, “Half-Real” 15). According to Martin Kreiswirth, only recently have researchers turned “from examining the narrative” of various types of media, to begin to look “at narrative itself, asking rigorous questions not about this or that narrative or story, but about exactly what a story is, where it occurs, how it works, what it does, and for whom” (378). After this narrative turn¹⁹, it became “common to see narrative as the primary way in which we make sense of and structure the world” (Juul, “Half-Real” 15).

Juul describes narratology simply as the study of “games as stories” (Juul, “Half-Real” 15). According to Frasca, the concept of narratology was “invented to unify the works that scholars from different disciplines were doing about narrative” (qtd. in Mäyrä

¹⁹ See Kreiswirth for a better understanding of what is the narrative turn.

8). As this definition suggests, narratology is not only bound to the field of game studies, but rather to many different disciplines and fields of studies. Considering the field of game studies, particularly the debate ludology versus narratology, a narratologist is “a scholar that either claims that games are closely connected to narrative and/or that they should be analyzed –at least in part– through narratology” (Frasca, “Ludologists Love Stories”). There is, however, as Frasca argues, a problem in considering the concept of narratology since it appears to have two distinct meanings, both inside and outside game studies (Frasca, “Ludologists Love Stories”).

Frasca proposes a more general definition of narratology, that can be used both in the field of game studies, as well as in other areas of the Humanities, “a scholar who studies narratology, a set of theories of narrative that are independent of the medium of representation” (“Ludologists Love Stories”). Most scholars traditionally considered to be narratologists, such as Todorov, Genette, Greimas, Metz, and Prince, who carried their research in various types of mediums never did any research on computer games or even video games. However, that seems to be somewhat changing with the work of more recent narratologists, such as Marie-Laure Ryan (Frasca, “Ludologists Love Stories”). To avoid any confusion that the term “narratologist” could bring, as it carries different meanings both inside and outside game studies, Frasca proposes that a new concept can be used.

Michael Mateas suggested “the term ‘narrativist’ in order to refer to a scholar who uses ‘narrative and literary theory as the foundation upon which to build a theory of interactive media’” (qtd. in Frasca, “Ludologists Love Stories”). Frasca employs both terms and explains why. While the term “narrativist” allows the author to refer to scholars that focus their research on interactive media, the term narratologist can be used to refer to those who research narrative in a broader number of mediums (“Ludologists Love Stories”).

Juul argues that, often, the underlying idea of “the description of games as storytelling systems” is “that video games (or “interactive narratives”) would be better if they were more like stories” (“Half-Real” 16). According to Juul, to focus entirely on narrative and disregard the rules of a game, would make it uninteresting, as the rules are what allows for the fictional world to include challenges that the player needs to surpass, and what guarantees that the fictional world resembles the real world in which the player lives (“Half-Real” 161). Furthermore, there seems to be “no compelling argument demonstrating that a well formed “narrative” would be a more interesting player

experience” (“Half-Real” 16). Although it is natural to consider that since narratives are a constant part of our lives, something which helps us make sense of the world around us, and that, regarding the video games we play, helps us “tell stories” about it, this argument cannot be entirely accepted (“Games Telling Stories”). To do so would, for example, overlook the influence we, as players, have while playing a game, as I have discussed previously.

For ludologists, such as Frasca, focusing on the narrative of video games, or choosing to follow what the author calls the “storytelling model”, “limits our understanding of the medium and our ability to create even more compelling games” (“Simulation Versus Narrative” 221). According to Frasca, video games, “are not just based on representation but on an alternative semiotical structure known as simulation” (“Simulation Versus Narrative” 221-2). Notwithstanding, the author considers the existence of similarities between simulations and narratives, mainly with regard to characters, settings, and events (“Simulation Versus Narrative” 222). However, despite all these common aspects, simulations and narratives are still quite different regarding their mechanics, and the “rhetorical possibilities” they offer (Frasca, “Simulation Versus Narrative” 222).

For Frasca, there is essentially no difference between game studies and ludology, since as the author argues, both terms can be used to describe a new field of studies and can, therefore, be used interchangeably (“Ludologists Love Stories”). Juul also points to this idea when stating that “[l]udology is broadly taken to mean ‘the study of games’” (Juul, “Half-Real” 16). The origin and history of the term “ludology” do not seem to be too clear (Juul, “Half-Real” 16). Notwithstanding, the earliest record of it being used is in 1982, although at the time it was used with a different meaning (Frasca, “Ludologists Love Stories”; Juul, “Half-Real” 16). Nevertheless, it is well accepted that it was only in 1999 that the term became popularized through the publication of the article “Ludology meets Narratology”, authored by Gonzalo Frasca, where it is used “to describe a yet non-existent discipline that would focus on the study of games in general and videogames in particular.” (qtd. in Frasca, “Ludologists Love Stories”). When Frasca suggested the term, in 1999, the author did so considering that there was a “lack of a coherent, formal discipline that dealt with games”, and that was contributing to an increased number of researchers looking “for theoretical tools in literary and film theory and narratology” (Frasca, “Simulation Versus Narrative” 222).

The term “ludologist” began to be used “to describe someone who is against the common assumption that video games should be viewed as extensions of narrative” (Frasca, “Simulation Versus Narrative” 222). Frasca believes this definition to be too simple. The author argues that while ludology refuses the idea that video games are “held together by a narrative structure, it does not entirely dismiss that there are “elements that games do share with stories, such as characters, settings, and events”, and that those also need to be acknowledged, and studied (Frasca, “Simulation Versus Narrative” 222). Frasca notes how, initially, the term ludologist was used at a conference as a reference to his own self, Markku Eskelinen, and Jesper Juul (“Ludologists Love Stories”). Moreover, the term has also been associated with Espen Aarseth – as all three authors previously mentioned follow, in one way or another, the work of the author – as well as with several members of the team of *Game Studies* (Frasca, “Ludologists Love Stories”).

It is my hope that although briefly, I have explored this debate in a relevant way. Although the Ludology versus Narratology debate was indeed formative for the field of game studies, it has since been settled. I will now turn to how the field of game studies has become one of interdisciplinary dynamics and academic exchange.

CHAPTER 2. ON PLAYERS AND VIDEO GAMES: HOW VIDEO GAMES INFLUENCE PLAYERS' LIVES

Moreover, it is necessary to research and analyze video games themselves as well as their effect on the target audience and the world. Video games are one of the largest media outlets today. They appear to have a strong influence on the players and their perception of the world. (Kondrat 173)

Although the Ludology versus Narratology debate has long since been settled, it is still important to note how it shaped the field of game studies into how it is today. According to Frasca, there should never have been an issue concerning the nature of games, but rather, the debate should have been focused on whether any of the sides could expand the existing knowledge about video games, and if the dialogue between researchers with different convictions could lead to an understanding that would do nothing but contribute to the advancement of game studies (qtd. in Schweighauser 116). Philipp Schweighauser points to how even some of the most distinguished figures of the debate, such as Frasca, seem to “have realized that disciplinary strategies of distinction have their limitations” (116). This does not in any way mean that a ludologist like Frasca would suddenly favor narratology over ludology, however, as Schweighauser suggests, the tone of the author’s article seemed to be somewhat “conciliatory” (116).

As a new field of studies, and like any young field of studies, game studies also struggled to create a space for itself within academia, while attempting to maintain a solid and “active dialogue with the other disciplines” (Mäyrä 5). Mäyrä argues that until there are more “institutions dedicated solely to the study of games, the majority of game studies will continue to be practised by individuals [...] situated in some [...] of the numerous fields where game studies is currently exercised” (5). Consequently, game studies will attract people from various corners of academia, who see in games and play a possibility to research a panoply of subjects. Spencer Ruelos and Amanda Cullen point to how “[g]ames and play are capable of raising interesting social, political, and ethical questions, as game studies has shown, on topics such as racism, authoritarianism, and the agency of non-human entities”. These are, of course, issues that are also addressed by a variety of other disciplines and fields of studies, and are thus an example of how interdisciplinary dialogue can work as a way to make knowledge progress.

In their article, Bogost attempts to shift the focus from how games work, to “how they inform, change, or otherwise participate in human activity” (qtd. in Schweighauser 117). The author adds:

Such a comparative video game criticism would focus principally on the expressive capacity of games and true to its grounding in the humanities, would seek to understand how video games reveal what it means to be human. (qtd. in Schweighauser 117)

Bogost’s theory was greatly informed by the work of Wolfgang Iser. For example, Bogost’s argument that “the ontological position of a videogame (or simulation, or procedural system) resides in the gap between rule-based representation and player subjectivity” (qtd. in Schweighauser 118), is based on “Iser’s phenomenological description of the reading experience” (Schweighauser 118).

In the book *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, an important text in game studies, as I have previously mentioned, theorist Espen Aarseth rejected Iser’s work, mostly because the author considered it could not help to explain “the specific forms and functions of nonlinear, multicursal computer games” (qtd. in Schweighauser 118). Furthermore, it was Aarseth’s conviction that Iser’s concept of “Leerstellen” – or “blanks” – was not enough to “account for the kinds of openings cybertexts offer their users” (qtd. in Schweighauser 118)²⁰. Aarseth argues that “[t]he concept of cybertext focuses on the mechanical organization of the text, by positing the intricacies of the medium as an integral part of the literary exchange” (1). The author adds that this concept “also centers attention on the consumer, or user, of the text, as a more integrated figure than even reader-response theorists would claim” (1). While the performance of the reader of a text “takes place all in his head”, the performance of a cybertext reader can also be “an extranoematic”, that is, happen outside of the reader’s mind (Aarseth 1).

Despite recognizing validity to the arguments of both authors – Iser and Aarseth –, Schweighauser considers that Iser’s biggest contribution to game studies²¹ relies on the “theory of fictionality”, “the most sustained” available at the moment the author wrote

²⁰ For a detailed analysis of cybertexts, see Aarseth.

²¹ See Schweighauser for a more detailed analysis of Iser’s contributions to game studies (117-23).

the article, and the theory that allows for the most “promising avenue of exploration for ludologists” (118).

As Schweighauser points out, albeit developed for “the study of literary texts, Iser’s theory can tell us much about the cultural work of fiction in a variety of media” (118). Furthermore, Schweighauser states that in this theory, Iser “does not provide yet another reading of computer games as stories but invites the game studies community to reconsider some of its central concepts, in particular 'play,' 'simulation,' 'fiction,' and 'immersion” (118). More importantly, as it is heavily rooted within literary anthropology, it dares to wonder about the relation between humans and fiction, and, going back to Bogost reflections, “how they [video games] inform, change, or otherwise participate in human activity” (qtd. in Schweighauser 117). Furthermore, Schweighauser argues that “by focusing on literary experience [...] Iser allows us to ask questions concerning one of the four essential properties of digital artifacts”, that is, “their participatory nature” (118).

In a later phase of the author’s work – labeled “literary anthropology” –, Iser turns once again to earlier reflections concerning the reading process, to possibly reach a conclusion as to why humans need fiction (Schweighauser 118). It is Schweighauser’s argument that despite Iser’s focus on literature and literary fictions, the author’s reflections can easily be adapted to the analysis of fictional worlds in other types of media, namely video games (118). While Iser wonders about human’s need for fiction, Bogost wonders about how video games can influence the human condition and even how they can shed some light on “what it means to be human” (qtd. in Schweighauser 118).

According to Juul, “playing a game is an activity of improving skills in order to overcome [...] challenges, and playing a game is therefore fundamentally a learning experience” (“Half-Real” 5). Notwithstanding, just because a game can be understood as a learning experience that does not necessarily “imply literally endorsing the actions in the game or wanting to perform them in real life” (Juul, “Half-Real” 21). It is always important to go back to the idea that the player, and how they choose to interact with the game produces different outcomes and interpretations that even the game developers did not originally consider when designing video games and their fictional worlds to respond

in a certain way. That is, the video game can have an influence on the player, just as much as the player and how they play can influence the game²².

Sigoillot argues that video games “enable the player to explore their fictional settings” like no other medium can (1). The author notes that “thanks to its unique input/output logic associated to a predetermined gameworld, [video games] should never offer the same experience to anyone because what the player sees is triggered by his/her own actions” (2) In other words, Sigoillot suggests that although a video game is set on a predetermined gameworld, the player has some power to control said gameworld, by guiding the actions of the avatar they play as. As I have discussed previously, this also contributes to the overall experience of the player, to how they perceive a particular video game, and – regarding video games set in a historical period – how the player reflects on said historical period (Sigoillot 2).

2.1. The Influence of Video Games on the People Who Play Them

Regarding literary texts, Iser suggests that when we read those texts, “we identify with literary characters and project ourselves into fictional worlds” (qtd. in Schweighauser 119). Although these fictional worlds do “not take us out of our everyday reality”, they still allow “us to experience, in our minds, both different, alternative ways of living and the relationships obtaining between those other ways of living and our own” (119-20). Thus, “[t]o enter a fictional world, then, is not to escape from our own world but to experience living in two worlds at the same time”, that fictional world and our real world (Schweighauser 120). This way, these “literary texts invite us to abandon ourselves to playing, in our minds, different roles in that world”, and by doing so, as Schweighauser notes, we begin to “accept the fictional world as *if* it were real.” (120).

When we begin to identify with those characters that inhabit the fictional worlds of literary texts, we are allowed to “imagine ourselves as different from who we are in

²² This dynamic relationship in general, and the role the player takes in the construction of the fictional world in particular, are especially interesting to analyze if considering just how much players can participate in and engage with the fictional world of the video game, even when they are not actively playing. It is not uncommon for players to create Wikias or Wiki websites dedicated to more popular games, or to those with more content (Sigoillot 19). These sites resemble Wikipedia pages and are created in a standardized way through the website <https://www.fandom.com/>. (Sigoillot 19). These sites are the product of the collective effort of players, who dedicate hours of their time to research and compose “articles about in-game characters, places, concepts written and documented by the players themselves.” (Sigoillot 19).

our everyday lives”, and to “explore alternative ways of living our lives, which in turn is an activity that invites us to reflect on the lives we really live” (Schweighauser 120). Nevertheless, it begs the question, how can this apply to video games?

It may be that both literature and video games “have the power to effect the kinds of social transformations” (Schweighauser 120). In fact, Bogost argues that games – particularly those the author refers to as persuasive games – can “disrupt and change fundamental attitudes and beliefs about the world, leading to potentially significant long-term social change” (qtd. in Schweighauser 120). Considering Iser’s ideas on fiction, Schweighauser argues that this disruptive power can be identified in all games, not only in the persuasive games Bogost talked about (120). Jane McGonigal also reflects on this idea of the power of video games to influence and bring about social change. McGonigal argues that “games can change the world and [...] game developers have a responsibility to steer games in the direction of improving real world problems”, whether it be on matters of “human rights, poverty, environmental issues, global conflict, news, business, public policy, politics, public health”, or even “economics” (qtd. in Prescott and Bogg 16-17). McGonigal argues that games do not make their players escape their real, everyday lives, but instead can make “their lives more rewarding” (qtd. in Prescott and Bogg 17).

According to Caillois, games seem to possess “a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life” (qtd. in Schweighauser 121). As it were, by playing games, the players not only enter and experience their fictional worlds but are also allowed to “participate in its construction” (Schweighauser 121). However, Schweighauser recognizes that there are some limitations to that (121). On the one hand, as I have discussed previously, video games are mostly designed to respond in a certain way, which by itself limits the number of choices the player has. On the other hand, some of the player’s freedom to participate in the construction of the fictional world is also limited on a visual level, as the visuals designed for the game prevent the player to have complete freedom to imagine the fictional world (Schweighauser 122). In addition, Schweighauser notes how the way players “experience alternative ways of being”, and have a substantial influence on their “ways of being outside the gaming situation” (124).

Newman argues that first-person POV video games are usually “faster paced and more immersive”, as they really allow the player the chance to experience the fictional world of the game as if they were the character themselves. On the other hand, although

not so immersive, third-person POV games “allow the player to see his character in action”, thus helping the player to “build up a stronger sense of identification with the character he is playing”.

According to Newman,

the interplay of sequences requiring greater or lesser degrees of control, coupled with the variety of "controlling" and "non-controlling" or "primary" and "secondary" roles has significant implications for the ways in which videogame characters are understood, composed and related to.

The author adds that during gameplay sequences, when the player is in full control of a character, to think of a character as such is almost improper, because at that moment, “the ‘character’ is better considered as a suite of characteristics or equipment utilised and embodied by the controlling player”. However, and despite acknowledging the bond between the player and the character they control during gameplay, and through which the player experiences the world, Newman considers that it is inaccurate to say that the player only experiences the video game through that single character. Instead, the author argues that “[r]ather than ‘becoming’ a particular character in the gameworld, seeing the world through their eyes, the player encounters the game by relating to everything within the gameworld simultaneously”. This, the author argues, is particularly relevant in games where the character simply cannot be dissociated from the world of the game, such as any video game in the *Super Mario* game series.

A character is not only a character within a game’s fictional world, especially not if the character is the main playable character. According to Newman, that character “is a complex of all the action contained within the gameworld”. Newman uses the character Lara Croft to argue that taking on the role of Lara “is as much about being presented with puzzles as it is having the techniques and resources to solve them. It’s as much about being in dark, dank caverns and being attacked by wolves as it is having the equipment to combat them”. The author argues that to state that a player identifies with any certain character²³ of a video game is to oversimplify that process, as the player does not only identify with a character but with the entire fictional world of the game. Moreover, as I

²³ Although the author’s analysis is mostly focused on games with “a defined player-controlled ‘character’ [...] (whether that be man, woman, car, spaceship, fungus),” Newman suggests the same can be true regarding games with more abstract variants of characters, such as *Tetris*.

will now discuss, it may even be that the player does not identify with the fictional world at all, as it is quite difficult to know with certainty what the player really takes from the game, as some authors argue.

Ruelos and Cullen, for example, maintain that video games continue to be a medium frequently demonized by the dominant sociocultural discourses. It is not uncommon to notice how quickly video games are blamed for violence perpetrated by young people, in acts of mass violence like school shootings, for example. However, as Ruelos and Cullen note, the same sociocultural discourses seem to also perceive video games as “trivial, unreal, and childish play things with no real social implications”, an opposing view to the one presented before. Following these ideas, it would seem that on the one hand, games supposedly exert an extremely influential power on the players who play them, regulating their moral code and determining their actions; on the other hand, video games are just an inconsequential type of entertainment.

Winnerling also points to this idea by stating that it is not that clear what the players really take from video games and the historical representation contained within said video games (159). To illustrate this idea, the author mentions how some studies²⁴ report that there seems to be no correlation between in-game violence and a player’s behavior (159). Notwithstanding, the author argues that those studies cannot be taken for a fact when it comes to in-game history, at least not before further research is carried out (159). But, once again, it is just quite difficult to know with absolute certainty what players take from video games and the historical representation contained in them. It is possible for players to play a video game without paying much attention, so much so that while playing through those real-world processes – which reflect history – their actions within the video game become a simple way to reach a goal, not necessarily conveying any meaning. It may be that the player plays, and replays, through these historical real-world processes with no meaningful intention, much less to faithfully replicate history, but only as a way to reach a certain goal within the video game.

Having said that, studies such as those by Dr. Susanne Kuehling attempt to show how games can really immerse the players – in this case, students – to learn about and interact with other cultures through those real-world processes Winnerling mentions. Kuehling, for example, developed a role-playing game – or RPG – designed to immerse

²⁴ Winnerling highlights the studies by Festl, Scharnow, and Quandt 2013; and Grizzard et al. 2014 (159).

students in the learning process, by placing them in the role of highlanders, entitled “The Tribe”, and reflected on how games can be used in higher-level education to help students comprehend course material (37). Kuehling states that: “Undergraduate anthropology classes, especially ethnographic area courses, are perfect locations for simulation games because they invite students to connect with a foreign place and its peoples” (37). Through these games, students are asked to relate to the “exotic other” in a more personal, empathetic way:

By ‘switching sides’, my students become more open to course content, achieve better critical reading skills. The large majority of participants clearly enjoy the class – the role play creates interest, even in a lecture or student presentation. I have observed this all five times I have used simulation approaches. (Kuehling 37)

Kuehling’s research focuses specifically on the impact these games can have when used in the context of undergraduate anthropology classes, where they can help to deconstruct stereotypes about the distant and exotic other and encourage the students to think about those people simply as human beings from different cultural backgrounds (39). However, I argue that games, specifically video games, can also have a substantial impact in a broader context, and could influence how their players think about the world around them, and possibly even about themselves. Ruelos and Cullen, for example, point to how, more than just “technological artifacts, they [video games] are cultural systems that are capable of creating new norms of behavior or influencing what we see in mainstream culture”.

According to Boellstorff, most people “who participate in games and other interactive media like metaverses play more than one game or metaverse” (33). Furthermore, there is a clear “emergence of cultures of gaming on a range of spatial scales”, whether it be on a local, regional, national, or even global level (33). It is interesting to see how experiences can be shared on a global scale by those who play these games, and how that helps to create a sort of culture of its own. Boellstorff shows how complex these gaming cultures can get, as they begin to involve people from all around the world, from different cultures, and backgrounds, and those gaming cultures eventually lead to the emergence of “multiple subcultures such as youth, male versus female, cooperative versus competitive gaming, and so on” (33). Furthermore, Boellstorff argues that gaming can not only influence “the whole panoply of interactive media, from

television to movies to cell phones to the Internet in all its incarnations”, but also “physical-world activities in unexpected ways, including the lives of those who do not play games or participate in interactive media” (33). It is, therefore, of the utmost importance to understand the “‘gaming cultures’ – that is, how cultures worldwide are being shaped by gaming and interactive media”, and how, I would add, the people who belong to those cultures can, and are, being influenced by gaming and interactive media (Boellstorff 33).

In the final section of this chapter, I will analyze how video games can influence the people who play them, and just how important diverse representation is in the context of the gaming industry. For now, however, I will look at how video games can influence the way players to perceive the world around them, and how they remember certain historical periods.

2.2. Brief Reflections on How History Can Be Represented in Video Games

Tobias Winnerling considers it important to establish the difference between “factual history” and “affective historicity”, although the author’s intention is not to thoroughly explore either concept, but to provide “working definitions”, that is to say, “flexible tools rather than statements to be cast in stone” (152).

Factual history is not necessarily a synonym for the past, instead, it is at most “an approximation of the ‘real’ past events which are lost to us forever” (Winnerling 152). However, history’s interpretative nature does not equate to arbitrary interpretation. Alternatively, any interpretation of history needs to follow “a clearly established demonstrative procedure that distinguishes the undertaking of history as a clearly ‘factual’ one” (Winnerling 152).

Affective historicity is “the attempt to create representations that convey the feeling of (representations of) the past” (Winnerling 152). Similarly, affective historicity cannot be considered a synonym for the past. According to Winnerling, what really distinguishes these two approaches “is that affective historicity is more flexible in its manner of interpreting because it follows mainly aesthetic and imaginative procedures to arrive at its results” (152), which can be understood as an arbitrary interpretation in the context of factual history. As Winnerling puts it: “[Factual] [h]istory works towards the

rational, utilizing reasons, while affective historicity tends towards the emotional, utilizing feelings” (152). However, it is important to understand that both these approaches are not mutually exclusive and can, therefore, “draw easily upon each other in building their respective narrations” (152).

Winnerling states that frequently, when attempting to represent a certain historical period, game designers and developers need to insert in – and adapt to – the video game, pop cultural references that can easily be recognized by the player (155). It is not enough to include those references, but it is necessary to make sure that they, not only fit the game – in terms of its story, aesthetic, or setting, for example -, but also that they can be easily picked up by the players (155). Initially, this seems to point to a “deeper connection between the game and factual history” mainly because it seems that the game is set out to replicate a certain historical period by including the “real-world processes at work” in that particular time period (Winnerling 155). However, this does not necessarily have to “mean that the game conveys a message by being ‘factually correct’”, as Winnerling points out (159). Instead, what it does is provide the players with the “feeling of an authentic experience”, one supported by a convincing representation of history (Winnerling 159). As Winnerling puts it:

Understood in this way, a successful historicizing video game is a game that, through careful presentation of selected historical elements, achieves a state of not-being-questioned by its players. The affective historicity of the game establishes a link to the real world that is crucial if the game is to be taken seriously [...]. Not for the sake of history, of course, but for its own sake! (159).

This way, what at first seemed to resemble more factual history, quickly transforms into affective historicity, as the video game sets to create (and transmit to the player) a more flexible representation of the past. Thus, allowing the players a more flexible consideration of a historical period, which could ultimately influence how players regard said period.

Sigoillot notes how over the decades, video games went through considerable improvements, particularly in regard to the graphics, and how that allowed to improve the “fidelity and authenticity” through which games represent “real-life places such as Victorian London” (2). This, according to Sigoillot, has been achieved mostly through

the collaborative work of both video game developers, and historians, as well as other consultants (2).

There have been few studies that address the ways in which a medium such as video games can be employed in school settings, to motivate students to engage with history and geography, for example (Sigoillot 2). I have already mentioned that of Kuehling, although not focused on a video game, but rather on an RPG. Another example is that of Romain Vincent, who conducted research for their Ph.D. project, on “how historical video games can be used pedagogically in classes for all levels” (qtd. in Sigoillot 2). However, not all studies focus on the legitimacy of the pedagogical use of video games. Marc Marti, for example, notes “how the representation of history in games contributes to a fictionalisation of history which then contributes to a national narrative” (qtd. in Sigoillot 2). Although Marti’s argument is indeed a relevant perspective, I believe it tends to disregard the subjectivity that is already inherent in history, and how individuals can, and often do, create their own subjective accounts of history, heavily influenced by their own sets of beliefs and life experiences.

According to Nohr,

video games have (at least) to be understood as a part of a discursive operation in which a society provides itself with a concept of history. In a radical abbreviation, such a position could be reduced pointedly to this: the historiography-discourse comes down to a reconfiguration and restructuring of the past in the light of the present. (qtd. in Winnerling 161).

I believe that it is particularly interesting Nohr’s reflections on the idea of video games as a medium, which when included within a certain sociocultural context, attempts to represent the past, despite acknowledging the limitations of doing so, and through the light of the present. This, I think, goes along with what I was arguing before. Nohr notes how video games create a space for the established accounts of history to be reconsidered through the lens of more contemporary perspectives. I will go back to the ideas introduced in this section, in the next chapter when I analyze how Victorian London has been represented in video games.

2.3. Addressing Representation in Video Games and How It Influences the Players

Technology seems to be more frequently associated with the masculine, as Julie Prescott and Jan Bogg point out (2). Consequently, this association also manifests in the form of “gender distinctions applied to the access to technologies [...], and how technologies are used” (Prescott and Bogg 2). However, these gender differences are not limited to who has access to and uses technologies, but also to who is involved in their development. According to the National Science Foundation, in 2006, in the USA, “females represented just 16% of employed computer and information scientists educated to doctorate degree” (qtd. in Prescott and Bogg 2). According to the United Kingdom Resource Center, in the UK during the year 2008, “the number of employed female ICT professionals”²⁵ was “just 14.4% of employed ICT professionals” (qtd. in Prescott and Bogg 2). During the same period, this trend was also present in statistics concerning higher education, in technological fields. The number of females receiving a bachelor’s degree in computer science, in the USA, “decreased by 10% from 28% in 2000 to 18% in 2008” (National Science Foundation qtd. in Prescott and Bogg 2). In the UK, in 2011, “females represented just 13% of all undergraduate degree acceptances in computer science” (UCAS qtd. in Prescott and Bogg 2).

In the USA, during the years 2006 to 2021, the distribution of players by gender²⁶ seem to indicate a slight growth in percentages over the years (Clement, “U.S. Video Gaming”). While the data for the first year of the report – 2006 – indicated a distribution of 62 percent of male players and 38 percent of female players, in the data for the last year – 2021 – there is a distribution of 55 percent of male players and 45 percent of female players (Clement, “U.S. Video Gaming”). According to the same statistical report, the year in which was accounted a larger percentage of female players, was 2014, with a percentage of 52 male players, and of 48 female players (Clement, “U.S. Video Gaming”). The statistics for the UK, for the year 2020, indicate that approximately 40 percent of players were female, and around 60 percent were male (“Digital Market”).

²⁵ Referring to Information and Communications Technology.

²⁶ This statistical report reflects the data collected through an online survey responded by 4000 individuals, 18 years and older, and who identify as male and female.

Despite the increase of female-presenting players over the years, what all these statistical data show is that technology is indeed male-dominated, Prescott and Bogg's initial argument. Not only is this true regarding who has access to and most frequently uses technology, but also regarding who is involved in the development of technology.

As technology gained a bigger, more prominent role in society, the issues of accessibility, inclusivity, diversity, and representation began to be more widely discussed. Although it was not until recently, the discussion around the issue of male dominance in the technology industry grew in importance, as it greatly determines – and limits – “what technologies are made and for whom” (Valenduc et al. qtd. in Prescott and Bogg 2).

In their analysis, Prescott and Bogg look at how

there is a gender divide within computer games in terms of gender representation within the games themselves, to gendered differences in how games are played, motivations for play, space and time to play as well as how games are produced by a predominantly male dominated industry producing games for men. (3)

Although the authors place most of the focus of their analysis on gender, they also admit that there are also other groups of gamers that are highly underrepresented, like those belonging to ethnic and/or “racial” minorities, as well as older and LGBTQIA+ players (3).

Works such as the article by Ruelos and Cullen seem to be committed to reflecting upon the relationship between video games and players, particularly how video games can influence and transform a player's life and perception of the self, and their identity. In the article co-authored by Ruelos and Cullen, Ruelos reveals their motivations to want to study video games and how these can influence the people who play them: “As a queer gamer myself, I was particularly interested in how games, digital culture, and identity were central to how these gamers sought authenticity, connection, and belonging”. I find this particularly interesting, especially given the increasing demand for more diversity in video games. As I have briefly mentioned before and will mention again in chapter 4, over the years, players have become more aware of the lack of diversity, and of the stereotyped representations of various groups, and more recently began to demand more and better representation, not only within the fictional worlds of the games themselves but also within the gaming industry.

Prescott and Bogg go over some studies that have focused on ethnic and racial representation in several games. The studies referenced by the authors note that the games in analysis seem to follow a tendency to have a white main character (3). For example, in their analysis of 130 games, Brand et al. concluded that most characters were either white or it was difficult to establish their racial identity (qtd. in Prescott and Bogg 3). In another study, Dill et al. concluded that 68% of the main characters were white, 15% Latinx, and 8% black (qtd. in Prescott and Bogg 3). In a different study, White et al. conclude that 81% of characters were white, 11% Black, 5% Asian, and 3% Hispanic (qtd. in Prescott and Bogg 3). As another example, this one regarding gender and ethnicity, Jansz and Martis concluded that most lead female characters were white (qtd. in Prescott and Bogg 3). Everett and Watkins ascertained “that nearly 70% of game protagonists are white male[s]” (qtd. in Prescott and Bogg 3). In a different report published in May 2022, Brittney Lin reports that about 61.2% of video game characters are white, and 38.8% are from other ethnicities (“Diversity in Gaming Report”). Furthermore, Lin notes how 9.5% of games include a white playable character and have no other ethnic representation, and how only 5.3% do not include a white playable character. If we consider all these studies or reports, we can easily identify a common trend in their findings: predominantly, video games feature white characters. However, more than identifying the percentage of ethnic representation in video games, it is also important to understand the ways through which these groups are represented.

Black individuals are commonly represented associated with stereotypes surrounding “criminality, athleticism or terrorism”, with black males usually appearing in sports games, and black females “represented as victims of violence” (Prescott and Bogg 3). Leonard, for example, notes how in *The Grand Theft Auto* series, “the black playable characters and black non-player characters are ghettoized and hyperviolent” (qtd. in Prescott and Bogg 3). Moreover, other ethnic and cultural groups are also stereotyped in video games. Asian characters, for example, are portrayed in several games – *Dynasty Warriors* (1997) and *Tenchu: Wrath of Heaven* (2003) – “as martial artists, speaking poor English” (Prescott and Bogg 4). Other stereotypes include the Arab terrorist – *Conflict: Desert Storm* (2002) and *America’s Army* game series – and the Latinx criminals – *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (2002) (Prescott and Bogg 4). This stereotyped representation of characters from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds contributes, according to Prescott and Bogg, to the players’ own ideas about those same

groups (4). To include a diverse representation in video games is indeed important, however, “[i]t is not just about increasing the representation of minority groups within games,” it is, perhaps more important “having un-stereotypical representation of these groups within games, to reduce cultural stereotypes in this increasing media platform” (Prescott and Bogg 4-5). But these issues are not limited to the representation of cultural and ethnic groups, it is an issue that impacts many other groups²⁷.

The LGBTQIA+ community is one such group. Kerr argues that the lack of LGBTQIA+ content in video games was a direct consequence of the gaming industry presuming that players were homophobic (Prescott and Bogg 6). Notwithstanding, some researchers still argued that more sexualities were beginning to be represented in video games (Prescott and Bogg 6). For example, Shaw identified non-heterosexual content in games like *Bully* (2006), *Fable* (2004), and *The Temple of Elemental Evil* (2003) (qtd. in Prescott and Bogg 6-7). The author also found that “[m]any games from Asian countries, predominantly Korea and Japan, contain and homoerotic content” (qtd. in Prescott and Bogg 8). Much like is noted with ethnic and cultural groups, many of the representations of LGBTQIA+ groups are also quite stereotypical. Once again, it is not only about the increasing of diverse representation, but more so about how that representation is achieved.

In 2015, Nielsen – an audience, data, and analytics measurement company – compiled a statistical report on diversity in video games, and in their players²⁸. The reason why I specifically mention this report is because it was published roughly one year after the GamerGate controversy and because it acknowledges that controversy when it analyzes the differences in gender representation in video games, and how players of all genders feel about that. According to this report, players – mostly those from LGBT and Asian-American communities –, consider that “video game characters underrepresent certain groups” (“How Diverse Are”). Regarding sexual orientations, 65 percent of LGBT players “don’t feel all sexual orientations have ample representation among video game characters”, while 16 percent believe they have (“How Diverse Are”). On the other hand, among those players who identify as heterosexual, 31 percent believe “all sexual

²⁷ See Prescott and Bogg, for a more detailed analysis of how different groups – particularly those of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and of various sexualities – have been represented in video games, and how video games continue to perpetuate certain stereotypes regarding said groups.

²⁸ The statistical data in this report were compiled through the survey of players from various cultures and ethnic backgrounds, living in the USA.

orientations are represented”, while 28 percent believe they are not (“How Diverse Are”). The report concludes:

Based on gamers’ attitudes toward character representation, players appear to be looking for game publishers to pay more attention to their individuality. Given these consumers are also engaged gamers, considering all demographics when creating video game characters, as well as in marketing efforts, may help the gaming industry reach their audience in more meaningful and personal ways. (“How Diverse Are”)

The sociologist John Huizinga suggests that “play is vital and an essential part of human life” (qtd. in Prescott and Bogg 74). Particularly in childhood, play “is viewed as a means for children to understand the social world” (Mead qtd. in Prescott and Bogg 74), and RPGs, for example, “enable children to understand different roles, gain a sense of empathy and the viewpoints of others (Kato qtd. in Prescott and Bogg 74). Furthermore, Bandura argues that “[s]ocial learning theory posits that children imitate what they observe” (qtd. in Prescott and Bogg 17). Elizabeth Munday notes how “[f]rom birth to adulthood, children take on the norms and values of society, and fall into their gender roles, following socially approved behaviours, norms, and values” (11). The author explores how gender, and gender roles are learned through the process of socialization²⁹. Stanley and Wise define socialization “as the process by which children are transformed into social beings” (qtd. in Munday 11). This way, Munday reinforces Bandura’s argument, when stating that children learn their gender “throughout their lives via action and inaction, through imitation and internalisation based on the norms and behaviours of those around them, who are seemingly the same.” (11). If we consider games as a part of the socialization process, we can see how they “go one step further as they allow players to not only observe but also enact in virtual behaviours” (Prescott and Bogg 17).

Konijn and Nije Bijank suggest that “games have the potential to support the development of adolescent identity construction” (qtd. in Prescott and Bogg 55). According to the authors, in adolescence video games can function as role-play tools that aid learning and development, as games may appeal to and have an impact on “wishful identification, immersion and presence, mastery and challenge and perceived realism”

²⁹ See Munday for a detailed analysis of the role of videogames in the socialization of children, and of the gendered representation of female characters in video games (11-12).

(qtd. in Prescott and Bogg 55). Of course, the same issues – regarding gendering and the perpetuation of stereotypes in video games – arise. To give an example, if we consider the traditional distinct spheres in which males and females would be socialized in, and the traditional gender roles associated with the female gender, it may be that by imitating her mother, a young girl might feel pulled to play games that simulate activities like housework, or childcare, like those games in the *Imagine* series³⁰, especially when such games are specifically created with the intention to appeal to a female audience (Munday 11).

For video games with such a young target audience, to reinforce the gap between the traditionally distinct male/female spheres, and since they take such an important role in the learning and developmental processes of both children, and adolescents, to have such stereotyped and limiting representations is everything but ideal, especially when “[t]here is the possibility for games to break [...] stereotypes rather than reinforce them” (Prescott and Bogg 108). For instance, Wajcman reflects on how “[o]nline technologies in particular enable men and women to blur their gender roles and experiment with virtual bodies, personalities and identities” (qtd. in Prescott and Bogg 108). According to Gee, the relation between the player and the character – or avatar³¹ – they choose to represent them in the fictional gameworld, is particularly powerful and interesting to explore as

it transcends identification with characters in novels or movies, for instance, because it is both active (the player actively does things) and reflective, in the sense that once the player has made some choices about the virtual character, the virtual character is now developed in a way that sets certain parameters about what the player can do. (qtd. in Prescott and Bogg 111)

³⁰ *Imagine* is a game series designed for an audience of 6 to 14-year-old girls. Some of the games in this series are *Imagine: Master Chef* (2007), *Imagine: Fashion Designer* (2007), and *Imagine: Babies 3D* (2012).

³¹ An avatar is an image that a computer user chooses to represent them. According to Robert P. Fletcher, avatars are part of a long tradition of the simulation of human beings through copies that “have been created with strings and cogwheels as well as through computer graphics” in more recent times (239). Other names have been given to avatars, including “puppet, doll, automaton, [and] android” (Fletcher 239).

Needless to say, some games allow for more detailed customization of the playable characters and/or avatars, while others do not; some games openly subvert traditional gender roles, while others reinforce them.

CHAPTER 3. (RE)PLAYING HISTORY IN NEO-VICTORIAN VIDEO GAMES

The popularity of neo-Victorian reimaginings of the Victorian era—as exemplified by a plethora of screen adaptations but also by the popularity and proliferation of neo-Victorian fiction, design and art—can thus be seen as a form of cultural nostalgia that, for a considerable number of people, reflects the desire to revisit the Victorian period because it still seems to be perceived as emblematic of racial, gender and class certainties. (Primorac 57)

As I have briefly discussed in the previous chapter, Winnerling notes the important distinction between “factual history” and “affective historicity”. While on the one hand factual history attempts to be the best possible “approximation of the ‘real’ past events which are lost to us forever”, on the other hand, affective historicity is much more flexible and subjective with regard to the interpretations of the past, in the sense that it attempts “to create representations that convey the feeling of (representations of) the past”, as “it follows mainly aesthetic and imaginative procedures to arrive at its results” (Winnerling 152). Notwithstanding, as Winnerling suggests, both these approaches can draw upon one another, as they are not mutually exclusive (152).

During the development process of a video game set in a certain historical period, in an effort to represent said historical period, the development team tends to include processes that would typically be associated with it (Winnerling 155). Not only this, but to guarantee that the player is able to identify and relate to that historical period, it would be also essential to include easily identifiable pop cultural references, and make sure that they fit within the game. Upon a first examination, this seems to establish a “deeper connection between the game and factual history” (Winnerling 155). However, upon closer inspection, this might not be exactly the case, as a believable and compelling representation of history functions as a way to give the players the “feeling of an authentic experience”, one that is successfully taken seriously (Winnerling 159). Thus, video games seem to take on an approach that more closely resembles affective historicity, because, although video games tend to reproduce historically observed real-world processes, their overall representation of a particular historical period is arguably a more

flexible one, as its greatest concern is not to faithfully replicate history, but instead it is to ensure the player's entertainment.

Nohr notes how through video games it is possible to bring about “a reconfiguration and restructuring of the past in the light of the present” (qtd. in Winnerling 161). This, I believe, aligns with the ideas put forward by MacDonald and Goggin, which I have previously mentioned. The authors, build upon Rich's arguments – that it is important to look back on the past with a fresh pair of eyes – when they state that “the Victorian period remains an important site of historical re-vision” (1-2). Jess Nevins also points to “the ‘attraction of the surface elements of the Victorians’ to modern writers who use the period's ambience and garb to ‘portray contemporary issues’ as well as critique the social inequalities of the past” (qtd. in Taddeo 44).

Antonija Primorac notes how all neo-Victorian “adaptations and appropriations of the Victorian era” seem to share “a desire to retrieve and re-present the past by translating it into a vocabulary understandable and relatable to contemporary audiences” (1). Furthermore, Julie Anne Taddeo also points to the potential of the Victorian era as a site for historical revision. The author's analysis is mainly focused on steampunk, particularly on steampunk's subversive power. Citing ideas by Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, Taddeo argues that “[a]s a genre, steampunk reflects not only the continuing historical relevance and accessibility of the Victorian period but also its ‘dangerous edginess’ and ‘possibilities for subversion’” (44). According to Taddeo, more than “dashing”, or “fascinating, the “corset-clad steampunk heroine”, is what really “facilitates the interrogation of gender issues that connect the past and present”, even if different contemporary adaptations of steampunk – whether it be as a lifestyle of fantasy – may seem at times to “obscure or trivialize, the subversive potential of the genre as a whole” (44). Notwithstanding, as Linda Hutcheon declares “the act of adaptation always involves both (re)interpretation and then (re)creation” (qtd. in Taddeo 45).

I believe Yohalem's comment about the intentions of the team of developers behind *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* helps to illustrate all these arguments. According to the game's lead scriptwriter states, the decision to create a video game set in Victorian London and include a more diverse cast of characters was a “very conscious” one (qtd. in Fishbune 28). *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* was released in 2015, the same year as *The Order: 1886*, one year after the GamerGate controversy, and right when the debate around the diversity of representation in video games significantly increased (Kafai et al., “The

Need for Intersectional” 3). Thus, it is understandable why the game’s development team really had to consider how to approach this next installment in the franchise, and how to represent the historical period in it. As Yohalem argues, right then and there, the developers were faced with a “choice between seeing history through the lens of today or trying to get at what it really was like” (Yohalem qtd. in Fishbune 28). Ultimately, the decision to include a diverse cast of characters – most of whom would not be included otherwise – fell on the women of the development team, who said that “they did not enjoy reading historical fiction because it treats women terribly” (Fishbune 28). Accordingly, it was their choice “to make an ideal version of Victorian London, one that didn’t hit any of those pain points” (Yohalem qtd. in Fishbune 28).

Particularly over the last decade, neo-Victorian has become more commonly used outside of academia, as a “widely accepted term used to describe these adaptations and appropriations of Victorian literature and culture across media” (Primorac 2). In *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism*, Cora Kaplan maintains that “the interest in the material remnants of the Victorian era started in Britain in the 1960s and gradually expanded so that all other aspects of the period came to be appropriated and used in art, literature and design” (qtd. in Primorac 2). In this study, which Primorac identifies as one of the first studies about neo-Victorianism, Kaplan also suggests that this interest in the Victorian could be observed in the British political discourse, particularly since the 1980s, “first through the appropriation of the ‘Victorian Values—thrift, family, enterprise’ by Thatcher’s Conservative government”, and later through “Blair’s retooling of ‘Christian Socialism’ in his branding of New Labour” (qtd. in Primorac 2). Over the decades, neo-Victorianism has evolved and is now used to refer

not only to the numerous screen adaptations of Victorian literature and Victorian-inspired TV series and films, fiction and graphic novels, but also to the ways in which fashion, art and interior design have hearkened back to the Victorian era, which has also led to a mainstreaming of the Steampunk and Goth subcultures’ aesthetic. (Primorac 2)

In academia, the term “neo-Victorian” was adopted, as Sergei Eisenstein suggests, “in favour of the earlier ‘post-Victorian’ [...] and ‘retro’/’faux-Victorian’, which imply an overt nostalgia for the period” (qtd. in Heilmann and Llewellyn 5). As the interest in neo-Victorianism began to expand, so did the demand for a definition for the term that was generating so much research (Heilmann and Llewellyn 5).

Judith Johnston and Catherine Waters argue that the prefix “neo” – in neo-Victorianism – “when used in conjunction with a political movement, implies a desire to return to the political beliefs of that movement’s past [...] and a desire for the reinstatement of earlier, and often conservative, values as opposed to more radical change” (qtd. in Heilmann and Llewellyn 5). Notwithstanding, when “used in conjunction with a genre, the implication is rather a new, modified, or more modern style, as in Neo-Gothic for instance” (Johnston and Waters qtd. in Heilmann and Llewellyn 5).

Additionally, Heilmann and Llewellyn argue that “‘neo-Victorian’ is more than historical fiction set in the nineteenth century”, and that for something to be considered as such, it “must in some respect be self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians” (4). Having this in mind, I believe that it is also important to consider that representing and recreating any historical setting does not come without its challenges, mostly because as Primorac notes:

Representing and recreating the past on screen is an enterprise always fraught with the issues of authenticity, agency and ethics, which in turn reflect the questions of who gets to tell the story, how true to the historical events the adaptations really are or whose side of the story gets depicted.
(12)

Despite this, it is undeniable the role that media such as films or television play “in the re-interpretation of the past and the creative re-imagining of the [Victorian] period’s events *and* fiction” (Primorac 12). These easily become representations of the past within “contemporary popular culture”, and “often take on the function of an imagined memory”, part of “a Victorian past that never was—but which, nevertheless, mobilises the emotions and reactions of its audiences, challenging some of their ideas about the past while reinforcing others” (Primorac 12).

3.1. Representations of Victorian London in Video Games

Winnerling notes that “video games featuring historical content”, or as the author calls it “historicizing” video games, are often released as part of a series (151). The article “7 of the Best Video Game Series for Reliving History” by Ben Wilson illustrates Winnerling’s argument with seven examples of the *Civilization* series, the *Call of Duty*

franchise, the *Age of Empires* series, the *Battlefield* series, the *Hearts of Iron* series, the *Total War* series, and of course, the *Assassin's Creed* franchise. According to Winnerling, there are many reasons why historicizing video games are often serialized, among which are economical, audience-imposed, or even technical limitations (151). Furthermore, the author adds that “the mere existence of a series carries important implications for the games’ contents—for a common ‘look’ they share, a story running through them, or recurring settings, items, or icons” (151). It is the author’s main argument that when referring to serialized historicizing video games set up to “represent aspects of the real world of history, they open themselves to a different sort of scrutiny than we otherwise bring to bear on games and game series” (151).

Many video games are set in the Victorian era – or in fictional worlds heavily inspired by it –, some of which combine that historical setting with steampunk elements and aesthetics. Pereira follows the classification system proposed by Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith and Tosca, which separates video games into four different groups – action, adventure, strategy, and process-oriented –, and for each one of the four groups the author provides examples of neo-Victorian and/or steampunk video games. I will not get deep into the video game classification system, as I believe doing so goes beyond the scope of this dissertation, however, I still mention it, as I believe it helps to illustrate just how diverse neo-Victorian and/or steampunk video games can be³².

The first group is that of action video games, which encompass games that include some type of physical fight or drama (Pereira 146). As an example, Pereira mentions *The Chaos Engine*, a 1993 video game inspired by the 1990 novel by William Gibson and Bruce Sterling, *The Difference Engine*. Another well-known example is that of *Bloodborne* (2015).

The second group includes adventure games, that is, those games that require the attention and patience of the player, as adventure games commonly feature some type of mystery to be solved, or mission to be fulfilled (Pereira 146). Examples of adventure games include *Black Mirror* (2003/2017) and *Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey*. As Pereira notes, it is rare for adventure games to involve action or fighting sequences, or the danger of death of the main playable character (146). However, it is not uncommon for video

³² For a more comprehensive – although not exhaustive – list of video games with Victorian settings and/or steampunk elements and aesthetics, see Stalberg.

games to combine more than one genre and include characteristics of those genres. That way, games such as *The Order: 1886* and *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, which are classified as action-adventure video games, combine both fighting sequences with missions to be completed.

The third group includes strategy video games and it is divided into two subgenres, real-time strategy games – or RTS –, and turn-based strategy – or TBS. While the former requires that the player makes real-time decisions, as there are no pauses, the latter demands that each player stops at the end of their turn, to allow the other players to have their own turn (Pereira 147). *Victoria: An Empire Under the Sun* (2003) is an example of an RTS game and *Sid Meier's Civilization V* (2010) of a TBS game.

The fourth, and final group, encompasses process-oriented video games. According to Pereira, in process-oriented games, the player can interact with the game in one of two ways (147). On the one hand, the player can take on the role of a character through who they explore the fictional gameworld, just like what happens with *Elvon* (2020). On the other hand, the player can interact with the gameworld through the manipulation of game variables, like what happens in the video game *Frostpunk* (2018) (Pereira 147).

Over the decades, video games have gone through significant improvements, all of which have allowed for a more visually realistic representation of historical places and times, which Victorian London is no exception (Sigoillot 2). The perfect example of that is the diversity of video games with Victorian settings, settings inspired by the Victorian era, and games that combine historical settings with steampunk elements and aesthetics. This increased authenticity of the representation of history in video games is not only the result of technological advancements but also of the inclusion of historians and other consultants into the video games' development teams. Furthermore, Sigoillot suggests that video games are, more than any other, a medium that really allows players “to explore their fictional settings”, in the sense that, although they are designed for and presented to all players in the exact same way, the experience each player has, greatly depends on their own actions within the game (1-2).

In their analysis, Sigoillot focuses on how Victorian London has been portrayed or adapted in video games. One of the video games analyzed by the author is *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, the other is *The Order: 1886*. The author argues that, for example, the

popularity of the *Assassin's Creed* franchise can be explained by the “impressive rendition of the geographical and historical context” in which the games in the series take place (1). *Assassin's Creed Syndicate's* setting takes the players back in time, to an 1868 Victorian London. Sigoillot points out that the “Victorian setting has always been popular in video games because the period is both modern and intriguing, close to our times but still shrouded in a strong mythos” (1). Furthermore, as Jeff Vandermeer maintains, the “popularity of the Victorian setting has also been raised by the steampunk artistic movement which emerged in the 1980s which blends elements of both science fiction and magic to an aesthetic of the industrial revolution” (qtd. in Sigoillot 1).

3.2. Representing Victorian London in Video Games: *An Analysis of The Order: 1886, Assassin's Creed Syndicate and Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey*

Emil Lundedal Hammar also explores how memory plays an important role in video games that attempt to establish some type of historic fictional world. The author's analysis is particularly focused on the video game *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry*, a DLC for the main game *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*, but it can be helpful when considering any of the other games in the franchise. When stating that “narrative focuses on the reliving of ancestral memories”, Hammar touches on some of the ideas Menon had brought up a couple of years earlier (375). That is, the arguments presented by these two authors, considered that the video game's development team can, on the one hand, construct a narrative built upon an accepted account of the period portrayed in the game, which helps to maintain a certain level of believability. On the other hand, there is also a possibility to engage with the past from a contemporary perspective, in order to challenge it and create new possibilities of interpretation. As Hammar explains:

Assassin's Creed series uses history and the notion of historical believability, and yet, through its diegetic justification of ‘reliving ancestral memories’, the series provides creative license to construct a sort of speculative fiction and include various historical locations, architecture, persons, and events for the player to play with or consume. (376).

Helena Esser also discusses the balance between historical accuracy and creative license. Much like Hammar, Esser considers how the development teams for the video

games *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* and *The Order: 1886* went to great lengths to assure the historical authenticity of the 1880s Victorian London portrayed in the video games. However, although both portrays rely “on our shared memory of the Victorian city to evoke, even mirror, the markers and conditions of a physical London”, they do so while attempting to – by borrowing the term used by the author – re-calibrate it (2). Putting it in another way, it is unquestionable that both games attempt to authentically portray Victorian London – whether it be through realistic architectonic representations of distinguishable landmarks, or through the reproduction of verifiable historical processes/activities –, however, by introducing assassins parkouring their way through the city, or half breed creatures, for example, these games establish themselves as a fictional representation, where history can be also challenged.

Sterling maintains that “[n]o city emblematises Victorian urban legacies as potently as London, which throughout the Victorian era remained the largest city in the world and became a collective symbol of the first megalopolis” (qtd. in Esser 3). Esser adds that many of the structures that we immediately associate with the city of London, such as the “Kensington Museum complex and colleges, Westminster Palace, Trafalgar Square, the British Museum, Victoria, Paddington, and Charing Cross stations, Tower Bridge, Bazalgette’s embankment and sewer system, and the Underground”, in fact appeared during the nineteenth century (3). These structures have not only “become markers of a shared cultural memory of nineteenth century London”, but they also “frequently serve as landmarks in neo-Victorian texts” (Esser 3).

According to Esser, *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* and *The Order: 1886* “mobilise popular imaginaries of Victorian London to enact steampunk game spaces as interactive heterotopias” (13). Perschon suggests that “by adding technofantastical impulses and retro-futurist speculation”, steampunk “collapses linear timelines, re-maps the Victorian urban imaginary of collective memory” (qtd. in Esser 1). This way, it is possible to argue that steampunk “re-plays and re-imagines a socially produced and historically grown urban environment that both bears social and imagined legacies of the Victorian past yet must also answer to present-day demands and future projections” (1-2).

Esser argues that in *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* and *The Order: 1886*, Victorian London acts as a “heterotopic counter-site”, that is “a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (Foucault qtd. in Esser 2).

Referencing Foucault, the author maintains that, like a “heterotopia of illusion, steampunk cities both re-present and reflect on ‘real’ space”, as they “create a space of illusion that exposes every real space [. . .] as still more illusory” (qtd. in Esser 2). While these steampunk cities build upon our “shared iconographies and mental maps” of the real cities, they do so while deconstructing those and “playing with our expectations” (Foucault qtd. in Esser 2).

Additionally, like Foucault’s “heterotopias of compensation”, when compared to the real cities, these steampunk cities appear as an idealized version of them, particularly “because they mimic the properties of real spaces while advertising their deviation from them as selling factor” (qtd. in Esser 2). Lastly, these steampunk cities can also be associated with “heterotopias of deviation”, places that receive the “individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm” (Foucault qtd. in Esser 2). It is possible to observe this, to some extent, in all three games – *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate*, *The Order: 1886*, and *Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey* – as different representations of Victorian London, albeit distinct from each other, are the place in which assassins, criminals, immortals, half breeds, and mythological figures gather. Thus, as Esser notes, “steampunk London becomes a space of adventure and exploration where such ‘deviants’ as assassins and rebels become protagonist heroes” (2).

Moreover, it is possible to identify a balance between the historical representation of Victorian London, and the deconstruction of gender norms and social roles that, therefore, activates “the tension between the familiarity of memory (representation) and the excitement of anachronism (inversion) to challenge our imaginary of past and present city alike with alternative outcomes” (Esser 2). Even if they do it in different ways.

Released in 2007, the original *Assassin’s Creed* video game was the first game in what would become known as the *Assassin’s Creed* franchise. In fact, this was also the first game in the franchise to include the following disclaimer: “Inspired by historical events and characters, this work of fiction was designed, developed, and produced by a multicultural team of various religious faiths and beliefs.” In 2015, with the release of the ninth main game of the franchise, *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate*, the original disclaimer, which had been featured in every main game until then suffered some changes to better fit this new game. It now reads: “Inspired by historical events and characters, this work of fiction was designed, developed, and produced by a multicultural team of various beliefs, sexual orientations, and gender identities.”

In the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, there is a big focus on religion³³ – in the power play between two secret societies, the Knights Templar and the Order of the Assassins – , something which determines the action of the games themselves. Throughout all the video games, the player took on the role of a member of the Order of the Assassins and was asked to visit certain moments in history to try and stop the Templars from finding sacred artifacts known as “Pieces of Eden”. In doing so, the player would prevent the Templars from ruling the world. In *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, this focus on religion shifted slightly. Furthermore, other concerns were taken into consideration during the development process of this game, more than was the case with previous games, and the adjustments made to the original disclaimer demonstrate just that, as I will explore further in my analysis.

Divided into nine gaming sequences, several cut-scenes, and some side-quests, *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, follows the twins Jacob and Evie Frye on their quest to free Victorian London from Templar control, or rather, the oppressed working class from the grasp of Crawford Starrick and his criminal gang, “the Blighters”. While doing this, the Frye twins must also identify and discover a “Shroud of Eden”³⁴. In the role of either Jacob or Evie, the player embarks on a journey that has much in common with past *Assassin's Creed* games, as the player can still climb buildings, run around the city of London, or explore it from the rooftops, for example. Something else in common with past games is that *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* also “plays with the idea of history and memory, and history as memory, as the lives of the ancestors are relieved through the genetic memories of their descendants” (Menon 109).

According to Menon, the fact that the player is always aware that they are playing through the memories of the character, and not in present-time events as they are happening, is what allows the game's development team more freely reinterpret history, since memories themselves are a reinterpretation of events, which can be “suppressed, modified or altogether erased, thereby making it impossible to recount memories in a linear, continuous manner” (109). However, and as I have mentioned before, all the games

³³ See de Wildt for an extended analysis of religion, utopia/dystopia projects, and conspiracy in *Assassin's Creed*.

³⁴ Shrouds of Eden are like Pieces of Eden, except they are “shaped like cloths capable of restoration and healing” (*Assassin's Creed Wiki*).

in the *Assassin's Creed* franchise require a level of plausibility, something that maintains a sort of “illusion of reality” (Menon 112).

This, of course, applies to more video games, not only to *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*. As I have addressed briefly before, just because video games choose to represent a sort of alternate interpretation of historical settings, this does not mean that historical accuracy is completely disregarded. The player still needs to be able to identify and get immersed in the world – and historical moment – of the video game. Although in games such as *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* and *Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey*, for example, the development team worked closely with historians, like Judith Flanders, a historian whose work focuses on the Victorian period and who worked on both of these video games. In *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, that level of plausibility is maintained through the player's interaction with real-world events, the cityscape (see Appendix A), and NPCs, among which can be identified historical figures such as Charles Dickens, Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Jack The Ripper, Alexander Graham Bell, Florence Nightingale or even Queen Victoria (see Appendix B).

The Order: 1886 was released just a few months before *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, in 2015. In *The Order: 1886*, the player is cast as Grayson or Sir Galahad, a member of the Knights of the Round Table or the Order. As Grayson, and with the help of the other members of the Order, the player fights against creatures like werewolves and vampires, as well as against enemy organizations. Unlike what happens in *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, in *The Order: 1886*, the player roams freely and explores Victorian London through the rooftops, as the roaming of the city itself is much more limited.

In *The Order: 1886*, the player is required to go through the sixteen chapters of the game – some of which are only cutscenes – in a linear way (“*The Order: 1886* Wikia”). That is, the player cannot explore the Victorian London of *The Order: 1886*, like they would in the open world of *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, instead it is the game's missions – which the player must complete in a predetermined order – that direct the player as Grayson, to certain parts of the city. According to Sigoillot, this illustrates just how different the “game-design philosophies” of both games are (3). Furthermore, Sigoillot also points to how the narrative is distinct in these two games, as in “*Assassin's Creed Syndicate* the player is free to put the plot on hold and undertake other quests through London at any moment”, while “*The Order 1886* is a plot-driven game where the players are directed in a predetermined order and cannot escape the unfolding of events

which are presented to them” (3). All these differences, I believe, impact how the player experiences the game. *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate*, for example, offers the player a greater number of possibilities on how to approach the gameplay, and in doing so, to create unique experiences. The same does not necessarily happen in *The Order: 1886*.

In “Crafting a Next-Gen Material Pipeline for *The Order: 1886*”, David Neubelt and Matt Pettineo, developers for *The Order: 1886*, state that early in the development of the game, “the word “filmic” was often used to describe the cinematic feel that we [they] wanted to achieve with the game’s visuals” (1). Neubelt and Pettineo add that “[t]hings like cinematic lighting, grungy streets, and highly detailed characters were identified as key elements in creating a convincing portrayal of 19th-century London” (1). Thus, like what happens with *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate*, there seems to exist this conscious effort to immerse the player in the game through the portrayal of a Victorian London that is both convincing and easy to identify. As one would expect, this immersion translates differently in both games, as they are indeed different. While in the former, the player is much more an observer, who watches the game as they would a film – let us not forget that the developers’ intention was to create a game with a cinematic feel to it –, the latter allows the player to explore the city more freely, and thus get acquainted with it. As Sigoillot argues:

The game [*Assassin’s Creed Syndicate*] set aside “grand history,” using only parts of it. Instead, it relied more on city’s details, making the game use history but also show pieces of history to its players through the feeling that one explores the city in the position of an anthropologist, inciting players to be curious about their environment. [...] Conversely, *The Order 1886* fails in this regard: it only uses Victorian London as a backdrop whose sole purpose is to generate an atmosphere of anxiety. (17)

Furthermore, Sigoillot argues that as a consequence of the differences between these two games, it might even be that “*Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* will appeal to historians and can trigger interest in, as well as educate on, Victorian London, creating fruitful debates on the fidelity of its transposition from game to reality”, while “*The Order 1886* will only appeal to people who appreciate not Victorian society, but steampunk aesthetics inspired by Victorian times” (17). As Ellis and Weerasuriya, for example, describe, *The Order 1886*’s “neo-Victorian London is remixed with trappings of the *Blade Runner* city”, which incorporates “[l]ayered skylines, blue-tinted colour palettes,

neon advertisements, and rain and smog complement a vertically expanded Victorian London populated by heavy Gothic-brutalist skyscrapers, ‘mooring towers and lighthouses’, and urban canyons” (qtd. in Esser 10) (see Appendix C).

Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey was released in 2019, and like the other two games is set in Victorian London, in the year 1888, right when Jack The Ripper began his reign of terror. Out of the three video games, *Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey* is the one that includes the most playable characters, three to be exact, the Arthurian legends, Sir Lancelot Du Lac and Morgana Le Fay, and the historic figure – and the last of Ripper’s victims – Mary Jane Kelly. In this game, the player can move through and explore specific locations to hunt, and hopefully stop the killer.

Unlike *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* and *The Order 1886*, *Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey* is neither an open world like the former nor a linear cinematic video game like the latter. Instead, it is described as a “branching narrative adventure where [...] in-game decisions impact each character’s resolution” (“Steam. *Dance of Death*”), with various cut-scenes, and that include a point-and-click interface, which allows the player to move their pointer through the screen and click on specific locations/items/characters to explore the game.

As I discussed before, this does impact the way the player experiences the game. On the one hand, because the locations are more or less static, like photographs of locations through which the characters move (see Appendix D), there is not much room for the player to really experience Victorian London by walking the streets and entering - or even climbing – historic buildings like they would in a game such as *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate*. On the other hand, because it is a branching narrative adventure, the choices the player makes throughout the game impact how the game responds, and how the player experiences the game each time they play it. Although the ending is ultimately the same, “the reactions and how you got there had to be different depending on the relationships that you fostered” (Saunders qtd. in Teixeira).

According to Jessica Saunders –director and founder of Salix Games, and creative director for *Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey* –, in this debut game the developers of the indie company intended to try and subvert the usual ways through which the Jack the Ripper story is portrayed in the modern media (qtd. in Teixeira). As Saunders puts it, it is simply not possible to make a story about The Ripper “being a protagonist hero, because

ultimately you have to excuse what he did. You have to say it was ‘for the greater good’, or blame some supernatural entity”, and that is both “nonsense, and takes the onus off the murderer” (qtd. in Teixeira). Saunders argues that the press fabricated a certain aura of sensuality around the murders to help sell the story, but that never really existed (qtd. in Teixeira). As Saunders maintains, “these women were much older than you expected, they were down-and-out, homeless... we know everything about four of the five main victims but we never hear about them, we only hear about this spectre who we know nothing about” (qtd. in Teixeira). Instead, it was their intention to focus on the women for “who they [...] were, what they did, how they were found”, how “they were people”, how “[t]hey got into fights, they were up to no good, but they were funny and loved and had lives” (qtd. in Teixeira). Hence, why it was so important to tell the story through Mary Kelly’s eyes.

Similarly to *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate*, in *Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey* historians also worked – as consultants – alongside the team of developers. One of those historians was Judith Flanders who worked in both games. This helped to keep the game as historically accurate as it possibly could, albeit with a certain level of creative freedom. More than creating an immersive narrative, it was important for Saunders, as the creative director, to create a game in which “darker and more political themes”, so relevant nowadays, could be explored (qtd. in Teixeira). As Saunders explains: “[W]e wanted to explore what it actually meant to be a sex worker in Victorian London – it wasn’t [sic] all fishnets and corsets!” (qtd. in Teixeira).

This way, Saunders addresses the importance of video games for considering the past through different perspectives and critically engaging with it. Moreover, the developer also helps to illustrate how representations of gender, which are commonly associated with a particular historical period, can also be reconsidered and subverted.

CHAPTER 4. RETHINKING GENDER IN NEO-VICTORIAN VIDEO GAMES

When talking about who plays video games, there is often a type of gamer that is held up as the traditional video gamer. [...] The stereotype of these gamers is that they are young, male, White or Asian, socially awkward, and willing to devote large amounts of time to playing complex first person shooter, roleplaying or strategy video games. Yet, the majority of work on gender in game studies are focused on women and girls. While much of this work is committed toward creating greater social equality, unfortunately this focus positions women and girls as the “other” in gaming. (DiSalvo 105)

In their article, Jo Bryce and Jason Rutter express that within game studies the debate over gender, and more specifically over gendered representations of characters, has become incessant for more than two decades now (301). Traditionally, male individuals were regarded as the target audience for most video games. Research has shown that in video games designed for a male audience, there seems to be a common, stereotypical representation of female characters. Either as damsels in distress waiting for a savior or as sexualized subjects, it is widely accepted that in video games, female characters have been narrowly represented. However, as Bryce and Rutter state, with the number of female gamers growing significantly – especially since these gamers play the same games as their male counterparts –, this stereotypical representation is an issue that needs to be addressed, not only for the sake of female gamers themselves and their sense of self-identification but also for male gamers and their learned perceptions of the world (301).

Naturally, gender – and more specifically representations of gender –, is the focus of studies concerning various types of games, RPGs included³⁵. Arne Schröder’s research, for example, focuses on RPGs and how gender and sexuality are represented and explored in these games. RPGs are games in which the player takes on the roles of fictional

³⁵ For a more comprehensive study of gender in RPGs see Schröder; See also Garcia. Furthermore, gender issues and Victorian London have also inspired tabletop games and RPGs in Portugal. Since 2021, Sérgio Mascarenhas and Atelier Publidrama have been developing Ludodrama, a non-digital system of RPG that adapts Portuguese works of speculative fiction to RPGs (ie “jogos narrativos”). See <https://www.facebook.com/groups/publidrama>.

characters. The acronym RPG is not only used to describe video games but it can also be used to identify tabletop RPGs, such as the well-known Dungeons & Dragons, for example. Focusing on Dungeons & Dragons, Antero Garcia considers how the representation “of race, gender, and power in a nondigital gaming system highlights how cultural-historical approaches to understanding learning within systems must begin with an understanding of the implicit biases of these systems”, and “how culturally constructed gaming systems shape the meaning making and experiences of their gaming communities” (233).

As Jeroen Jansz and Raynel G. Martis state, the objectification of women, as well as the perpetuation of gender stereotypes in video games, can be considered a reason why there are more male gamers than female gamers (147). The authors argue that, while male gamers look up to hypermasculine male characters as their ideal, and to hypersexualized female characters as desirable; female gamers are introduced to “disproportionately thin characters with exaggerated female characteristics that may teach them ideals about femininity and beauty that are possibly damaging to their health” (147). Notwithstanding, the authors also argue that the “Lara phenomenon”, which I will explore further, “may be empowering for female gamers” (147), since the female characters “they are playing may look odd, but they are competent and occupy a powerful position in the virtual world of the video game” (147).

It is of course, important to keep in mind that it is not only female characters that are underrepresented or represented in stereotypical ways. Hibby Thach notes how trans characters – that is, “any gender identity differing from the sex assigned at birth, such as transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming” – have been represented through very “harmful tropes” when they are represented at all (20). Thach argues “that trans representation is lacking” even when compared to other underrepresented groups of the LGBTQ community, and that is not particular to films or television, as most studies focus on those media, but it can also be noted with regard to video games (20). Furthermore, following the ideas put forward by Dyer, the author reflects on the harm that such representations can cause to these minority groups, especially if these are the only representations available (20).

Of course, it is just not possible to discuss the diversity of representation in video games, or lack thereof, without mentioning, even if briefly, the diversity of representation

in the gaming industry³⁶, or lack thereof. As Prescott and Bogg maintain, “like with other underrepresented groups within games and games culture, the industry itself lacks a diverse workforce” (7). Additionally, “[t]his lack of representation with the workforce that creates the games has a significant impact on the [...] representation within the games themselves”, as the way the people who are directly involved in the development of video games “express their sexual or gender identities impacts the representation of those identities in what they create” (Sender qtd. in Prescott and Bogg 7).

4.1. A Brief History of Female and Trans Representation in Video Games

Kowert, Breuer and Quandt maintain that “video game content is often more suited towards male players” (qtd. in Steenbakker 93). Although the latest statistical data seems to indicate that the percentage of female and male-presenting video game players is getting increasingly balanced, the idea that there are more male players than female is still very much established. Hence Kowert, Breuer and Quandt’s reflection. The truth is that the lack of diversity in the gaming industry, and the well-established ideas about who are the majority of players – even if those ideas no longer match the current gamer’s demographics – really contribute to the creation of video games that mostly appeal to male audiences.

No more than 30 years ago, gaming was quite different from what it is nowadays, as it was mostly “centered on Nintendo and Sega consoles at home and in arcades, with girls and women greatly outnumbered” (Kafai et al., “Preface” xiv). Many reasons could be listed as to why, at that time, female-presenting individuals just were not interested in gaming. Kafai et al. list some of them: “[T]he pervasive presence of violence found in many games, the need for spatial abilities to perform well in these games, the depiction of females as sexual objects, and the lack of general experience with technology” (“Preface” xiv). Most of these reasons could be considered the result of the lack of diversity within the gaming industry and its workforce. In the mid-1990s, the gaming industry acknowledged these issues and developed games specifically for a white and

³⁶ I will not do an exhaustive analysis of the diversity of representation in the gaming industry. For a more detailed analysis see Prescott and Bogg.

Northern American female audience (Kafai et al., “Preface” xiv). It was in the midst of all of this that “[t]he ‘girls’ games movement” emerged (Cassell and Jenkins 4).

According to Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins, this movement “emerged from an unusual and highly unstable alliance between feminist activists (who want to change the ‘gendering’ of digital technology) and industry leaders (who want to create a ‘girls’ market for their game)” (4). The “pink games” as they have come to be known are perhaps “[t]he most visible part of the girl games movement” (Kafai et al., “Preface” xv). These pink games are games created for a female audience, and with the intention to pass along “traditional values of femininity” (Kafai et al., “Preface” xv). As one might guess, these are highly gendered games, that work on top of the traditional gender roles, as well as of ideas such as that of the male/female binary, and of theories that conceptualize the differences between the male and female spheres. Case in point are the games in the *Imagine* series, as I have mentioned before, in which the players perform different tasks with traditionally feminine occupations or activities, such as childcare, housework, or beauty and fashion. However, when discussing the girls’ games movement, it is important to also look at the so-called “purple games” (Kafai et al., “Preface” xv).

Purple games are thus called because of the company founded in 1995, Purple Moon, and of its founder, the American game developer Brenda Laurel (Kafai et al., “Preface” xv). Unlike pink games, purple games place “less emphasis on ultra- feminine aspects of young girlhood” and more “on real- life issues of interest to girls and women”, one such example is that of the *Nancy Drew* game series, developed and published by the company Her Interactive (Kafai et al., “Preface” xv). Furthermore, these games no longer target younger audiences only but have now expanded to games that can be enjoyed by older audiences, like the games in the *Animal Crossing* series (Kafai et al., “Preface” xv).

The first game targeted at a female audience was released in 1994 and it was called *Hawaii High: The Mystery of the Tiki*. After this one, several other games were released, however, as Cassell and Jenkins note, none of them were significantly popular until the release of *Barbie Fashion Designer* in 1996 (10). These first games, although not overtly successful, were important as they introduced “some of the features that would dominate the girls’ games movement [...]: more character-centered plots, issues of friendship and social relationships, and bright colorful graphics (Cassell and Jenkins 10). Needless to say, these pink and purple games generated some controversy, and various opinions were voiced as the result.

For the most part, there was a concern about the hypothetical “ghettoization of girls” (Seiter qtd. in Kafai et al., “Preface” xvi). As I have mentioned, most of these games promoted the male/female binary and perpetuated traditional gender roles and gendered activities. It was, therefore, feared that because they offered “limited choices of identification with femininity”, they would prevent female players “from learning new skills and being exposed to new ideas” (Seiter qtd. in Kafai et al., “Preface” xvi). If we come to think of it, this would ultimately also have an impact on the gaming industry, since the existence of pink and purple games targeted at female audiences could give the idea that, because those games already existed, it would no longer be necessary to consider female players and the representation of female characters when developing more mainstream games. Additionally, it is also a matter for concern that the existence of these games is based on the preconceived idea “that all girls share the same likes and dislikes”, and the same can be stated regarding games targeted at male audiences (Kafai et al., “Preface” xvi). Ultimately, by “[f]ocusing on male-female differences [...] ignores the substantial differences that exist within gender” (Lazzaro qtd. in Kafai et al., “Preface” xvi), in the sense that it maintains the idea of gender homogeneity, and by doing so disregards just how complex and richly diverse the performance of gender is, varying with each different individual that identifies with said genre.

As I believe to have shown, the creation of video games targeted at a female audience or girl games, does not necessarily mean that all female-presenting players will exclusively play those games or that they will play them at all. Instead, over the years female audiences became increasingly interested in more mainstream video games – that were not necessarily created with female audiences in mind –, and for that reason, it is quite important to understand how female characters are represented in those games, and how they perpetuate or subvert stereotypical gender representations.

John Sellers points out that “the first game to star a female character” (qtd. in Esposito), and, consequently, the first to feature a female character as the protagonist was *Ms. Pac Man* (1982), the sequel to *Pac-Man* (1980). Fourteen years after the release of *Ms. Pac Man*, the arguably most well-known female character in the history of video games made her debut appearance.

Originally released in 1996, the first game in the *Tomb Raider* franchise introduced Lara Croft to the public. The protagonist of her own game, Lara Croft is a powerful female character, despite still being portrayed in an overly sexualized manner.

Throughout the years, Lara Croft's appearance went through some changes (see Appendix E), however, some characteristics remained similar. Physically, Lara Croft contrasts a strong body, the result of her gymnastic, shooting and fighting skills, and an overly sexualized figure, with big breasts, a tiny waist, and wide, rounded hips; all this accentuated by tight-fitting clothes – cropped top and shorts – Lara wears. Professionally, Lara is quite intelligent and successful, as an archaeologist and best-selling author.

According to Jansz and Martis, it was the character Lara Croft, or particularly what they call the “Lara phenomenon”, which “paved the way for a woman who contrasts the dominant steryotype [sic]” (141-2), that is, allowed for a subsequent “appearance of a tough, and competent female character in a dominant position” (142). According to the authors, in more recent video games – as opposed to earlier ones –, the number of female characters, both in leading roles and in supporting roles, seems to have increased (146). Although this is true, it is also unquestionable that some of the gendered stereotypes are still very much kept in place, as is the over-sexualization of the female bodies.

Maja Mikula reiterates some of the ideas regarding the character Lara Croft and adds to the discussion of the female representation in video games. Mikula begins by considering the question raised in a *The Face* magazine's article: “Is Lara a feminist icon or a sexist fantasy?” (qtd. in Mikula 79). On the one hand, Mikula states, by referencing the work of authors Linda Artel and Susan Wengraf that Lara Croft can be a “positive image” (79) for women despite not being an accurate representation of a “real woman” (79). Artel and Wengraf attempted to identify positive images in a variety of media materials, by evaluating them from a feminist perspective (qtd. in Mikula 79). To be considered a positive image, the materials had to follow some characteristics: “[P]resents girls and women, boys and men with non-stereotyped behaviour and attitudes: independent, intelligent women: adventurous, resourceful girls ... presents both sexes in non-traditional work or leisure activities ... women flying planes, etc.” (Artel and Wengraf qtd. in Mikula 79). However, Mikula presents some very different perspectives, including that of Germaine Greer.

Greer shows their disapproval of Lara Croft as a character in their book, where the author condemns “the enforcement of artificial and oppressive ideals of femininity through pop icons such as the Barbie Doll” (Mikula 79). According to the author's perspective, Lara Croft could never be considered a feminist icon or a positive image, because she ultimately embodies male desires (Mikula 79). Greer describes Lara Croft as

a “sergeant-major with balloons stuffed up his shirt” (Greer qtd. in Mikula 79) and goes even further by stating that: “She’s a distorted, sexually ambiguous, male fantasy. Whatever these characters are, they’re not real women” (Greer qtd. in Mikula 79). It is undeniable the importance of a character such as Lara Croft, and how she influenced the creation of many other video game heroines ever since. Nevertheless, even in characters like Lara, who are typically regarded as strong and subversive, stereotypes are still very much kept in place.

There have been many studies about gender and video games, focusing particularly on female representation. Dietz’s study on violence and gender stereotyping found that in 33 popular Nintendo and Sega Genesis video games, “the most common portrayal for female characters was the complete absence of females” (qtd. in Williams et al. 817). The author adds that in a sample of 33 video games, around 40 percent included no female characters whatsoever (qtd. in Williams et al. 817). Heintz-Knowles et al. also studied violence and gender stereotyping in a sample of 70 games, and found that in a universe of 874 characters, “73 percent were male and 12 percent were female” (qtd. in Williams et al. 817). The authors of this study further concluded that when female characters did indeed appear, they did so in secondary roles (qtd. in Williams et al. 817). The results of other studies also seem to confirm this trend. For example, a 1995 study, which considered the representation of female characters across 35 games, concluded that in most games these female characters were portrayed as damsels in distress (Dietz qtd. in Pereira 158). The same study also pointed to just how dangerous these types of portrayals can be, particularly to children, as “they will internalize these expectations and accept the idea that women are to be viewed as weak, as victims, and as sex objects” (Dietz qtd. in Pereira 158).

In March 2013, Anita Sarkeesian posted on the Feminist Frequency YouTube channel the first of a series of videos that explored gender and video game tropes, with particular emphasis on female representation, entitled “Tropes vs Women in Video Games”. In total, from March 2013 until April 2017, the Feminist Frequency team created two seasons with around 20 videos. I will not mention every trope explored in the series, however, and before I focus my analysis on the damsel in distress trope, I will refer to some of them.

In the first season of the series, Sarkeesian explores the “Ms. Male Character”, which Sarkeesian defines as: “A female version of an already established or default male

character” (“Ms. Male Character” 03:20-03:25). The original, and most famous Ms. Male Character is the character *Ms. Pac-Man*, who can only be distinguished from her male counterpart *Pac-Man*, through several female gender signifiers, “all part of our culture’s visual vocabulary, intended to convey information about gender to the viewer”, like the bow or the makeup that the character is styled within the original video game and the artwork of the arcade machine (Sarkeesian, “Ms. Male Character” 05:06-05:12) (see Appendix F). In the first season, Sarkeesian also addresses the “Women as Reward” trope, describing it as:

When women (or more often women’s bodies) are employed as rewards for player actions in video games. The trope frames female bodies and sexuality as collectible, as tractable or as consumable, and positions women as status symbols designed to validate the masculinity of presumed straight male players. (“Women as Reward” 04:57-05:14)

In the second season of the video series, Sarkeesian reflects on tropes such as “The Lady Sidekick” and what is referred to as “Not Your Exotic Fantasy”. Sarkeesian argues that these lady sidekicks are female characters that have been reduced to simple tools that the main, and often male, playable character can use in their missions (“The Lady Sidekick”). The “Not Your Exotic Fantasy” trope was coined by Sarkeesian to describe the female characters whose “race is falsely depicted as the defining aspect of their character and personality” (“Not Your Exotic Fantasy” 02:48-02:53). Female characters of color are often portrayed as alluring and are fetishized as a result of their cultural differences. Furthermore, their portrayal often evokes and helps to perpetuate racial stereotypes (Sarkeesian, “Not Your Exotic Fantasy”).

The first video in this video series is entitled “Damsel in Distress: Part 1 - Tropes vs Women in Video Games”, and looks at one of the most well-known, and widely used tropes in video games, hence the reason why there are, in the series, a total of three videos dedicated to it. The damsel in distress trope “is a plot device in which a female character is placed in a perilous situation from which she cannot escape on her own and must be rescued by a male character, usually providing the core incentive or motivation for the protagonist’s quest” (Sarkeesian, “Damsel in Distress: Part 1” 03:25-03:39). Needless to say, this trope is not only present in video games but it has, in fact, existed for far longer than video games themselves. As Sarkeesian observes, this “trope can be traced back to Greek mythology with the tale of Perseus” (“Damsel in Distress: Part 1” 04:02-04:06).

Later, in the Middle Ages, there was also a common trope used in songs or tales about chivalrous knights who risked their lives to save helpless damsels (Sarkeesian, “Damsel in Distress: Part 1”). At the turn of the twentieth century, women began to be portrayed as damsels in distress in films, like the silent short film *Barney Oldfield's Race for a Life* (1913), and *King Kong* (1933) –, and other types of media, such as books, like the Edgar Rice Burroughs’ pulp adventure *Tarzan and the Apes* (1912) (Sarkeesian, “Damsel in Distress: Part 1”).

In 1981, Nintendo tasked Shigeru Miyamoto to create a new arcade game, which is considered one of the first games featuring the damsel in distress trope, *Donkey Kong* (1981), closely followed by *Super Mario Bros.* (1985). *Super Mario Bros.* was the first game in the *Super Mario* franchise to feature one of the most well-known examples of the damsel in distress trope, Princess Peach, with the other being Princess Zelda, first introduced in *The Legend of Zelda* (1986) (Sarkeesian, “Damsel in Distress: Part 1”). In the 1980s and expanding into the 1990s, this trope became a trend featured in countless video games, like *Wizards & Warriors* (1987), *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1989), and *Violent Storm* (1993), just to name a few (Sarkeesian, “Damsel in Distress: Part 1”).

Sarkeesian maintains that the damsel in distress trope can be considered in terms of the subject/object dichotomy, in which the subject – the main playable character – can “act”, and the object – the damsel - is “acted upon” (“Damsel in Distress: Part 1”). This, as I mentioned before, emphasizes the objectification of the female character, and the female bodies and it can be quite dangerous, especially when combined with other tropes. Salen and Zimmerman note, as an example of the objectification of the female body, “that various games come with a ‘breast jiggle’ option” (qtd. in Munday 25), which allows the player “to control the level of movement, or ‘jiggle’, of a female character’s breasts” (qtd. in Munday 25), and some games even allow the player to control “the size of a character’s breasts” (qtd. in Munday 25). The biggest danger of this trope is that it reinforces the representation of the female character as incapable to act for herself, and as might be expected, when this trope is used time and time again, and the players play it repeatedly, it perpetuates negative stereotypes. Besides, as Sherry Turkle maintains:

If you market to girls and boys according to just the old stereotypes and don’t try to create a computer culture that’s really more inclusive for everyone, you’re going to just reinforce the old stereotypes.... We have an

opportunity here to use this technology, which is so powerful, to make of ourselves something different and better. (qtd. in Kondrat 179)

Of course, over the last three decades, the participation of female-presenting individuals in gaming – whether as players or as part of the gaming industry workforce – has greatly increased and there are a lot more female characters in video games. However, that participation is still not as equal in power as that of male-presenting individuals, and the representation of female characters is still one that heavily relies on stereotypes. Moreover, this is also true – and perhaps even more noticeable – if we consider the LGBTQIA+ community, particularly trans individuals and video game characters.

According to Claire O’Callaghan, feminism – or feminisms –, nowadays, “sits alongside queer *and* trans* politics to address women’s inequalities in theory and social practice”³⁷ (75). The author argues that, in more recent years, the dynamic interaction between the “feminist, queer, *and* trans* movements have expanded the meaning and signification of the category ‘woman’ itself, adding intellectual knowledge to an intersectional understanding of [...] oppression”, particularly women’s (75). O’Callaghan reflects on how “neo-Victorian of gender crossing and trans* figures are an important textual space to examine both past and present theoretical debates and modern socio-cultural politics”³⁸ (76). However, the author cautions about the impulse to classify all “neo-Victorian LGBTQIA+ texts” as queer, since doing so disregards the “nuances, experiences, and often aspects of political diversity” of each particular text (82).

Capuzza and Spencer note that “trans men, non-binary individuals, and genderqueer characters remain largely invisible”, as most trans representation in media is that of trans women (qtd. in Thach 22). Although research points to a slight increase in trans representation in media, that representation is still much less common than that of any other group (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation - GLAAD qtd. in Thach 22). More often than not, that representation “relies on narratives centered around suffering and violence” (Cavalcante qtd. in Thach 22).

³⁷ O’Callaghan uses the asterisk whenever mentioning the term “trans”, to point to “the multiple meanings at play in the terms ‘trans’ itself” (96). Whenever used regarding “transgender phenomena, the asterix [sic] is used [...] to open up transgender or trans to a greater range of meanings” (Tompkins qtd. in O’Callaghan 96). See note 1.

³⁸ See O’Callaghan for a more comprehensive analysis of trans identities and neo-Victorianism.

Over the years, it has been observed an increased interest in the representation of gender in video games, as the various studies I have mentioned thus far in this dissertation help to illustrate. However, Thach argues that not many of those studies focused on trans representation (22). Nevertheless, the author identifies some research about trans identities in video games.

Mejeur, for example, in a quantitative analysis of “gender in the LGBTQ Game Archive’s entries”, concluded that “‘Other’ and ‘Non-Binary’ representation remained mostly unchanged throughout the 1980s-2000s” (qtd. in Thach 22). Additionally, in another quantitative study of game content, Shaw et al. found “that non-binary and intersex characters were underrepresented, while gender non-conforming and trans representation has increased over time (albeit all at much lower frequencies than other queer identities)” (qtd. in Thach 22). In a different quantitative study of game content, Utsch et al. concluded “that gender non-conforming representation increased until 2002, then decreased in following years, while binary and non-binary trans representations increased at a low and inconsistent rate” (qtd. in Thach 22). Unlike these three studies, the one by Shaw and Friesem analyzed trans representation in games through a qualitative perspective and concluded “that explicit trans and intersex representations were less common in games than LGB representations” (qtd. in Thach 22). Furthermore, the authors also concluded “that trans women appear much more often than trans men, that localization makes it difficult to define characters as trans, and that there is a great prevalence of gender nonconformity in games” (qtd. in Thach 22). All these studies illustrate just how rare trans representation is in video games, and how there is still much to be done to guarantee a significant increase of trans representation in video games and of research about said representation.

Thach’s own study analyzed 63 games published between 1988 and 2019, that were listed as including trans characters, and found “seven emergent trends”, which were then “paired into four overarching trends” (20): Dysphoria/physical transition, mentally ill killers, trans shock/reveal, and ambiguity.

The first one of these four overarching trends is dysphoria/physical transition, and it encompasses two major trends, gender dysphoria and physical transition. This first trend includes “video games portraying trans bodies and trans minds through a ‘wrong-body’ narrative” (Thach 20), and deals “with how video games portray trans minds and trans bodies” (Thach 26). Thach notes how, Angof – an NPC in the game *RuneScape*

(2001) – and Naoto Shirogane – a playable character in the game *Persona 4* (2008) – are perfect examples of this trend (26). Both games portray the trans identities of these two characters in different ways, but the core of each representation is the “wrong-body model” (Bettcher qtd. in Thach 28). According to Thach, this model “links transness to dysphoria and physical transition”, and it can become dangerous if we consider how “it reinforces the assumption that transness must include this linkage” (28).

The second overarching trend, mentally ill killers, also includes two major trends, that of trans characters as mentally ill and/or as killers. This trend includes “video games representing trans people as dangerous and/or unstable because of their transness” (Thach 20). The mental illness trend includes “depression, anxiety, or any mental disorder or detriment to a character’s mental health”, and the killer trend “refers to characters who kill other characters in-game or are depicted/described as such” (Thach 29). Two examples of this overarching trend are “The Psycho”, a character in the game *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (2002), and Alfred Ashford, a character in the game *Resident Evil – Code: Veronica* (2000). Between the 1990s-2000s, it was common for the two major trends to appear together, however, from the 2010s, that became less common, leading Thach to suggest that this could, perhaps, “be indicative of the growing desire for less harmful and more nuanced trans representations” (31). Nevertheless, as individual trends, trans characters as mentally ill or killers are still frequent, but not as frequent in combination, as they previously were (Thach 31).

Trans shock/reveal is the third overarching trend and encompasses the trends of trans shock and trans reveal. This trend includes “video games showing transness to the in-game characters and/or audience through the revelation of unexpected gender markers” (Thach 20). On the one hand, Thach defines trans shock as the “actual shock and panic around unexpected physiology or genitalia” (31). On the other hand, trans reveal is used to define the “moments where transness is revealed without elements of shock or panic” (Thach 31). Thach points to two examples of this overarching trend, the characters Shablee – an NPC in the game *Leisure Suit Larry 6* (1993) – and Krem – an NPC in the game *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014). While Shablee illustrates trans shock and thus how “non-trans audiences perceive trans people as harmful deceivers”, Krem illustrates trans reveal and “how games can respectfully portray transness” (Thach 33). Thach concludes that from the 2010s onwards, trans shock showed a decline, as trans reveal began to appear (Thach 33).

Lastly, the fourth overarching trend, and the seventh overall, is ambiguity. This trend “refers to gender ambiguity, specifically instances where characters’ gender changed in localization or over time, are not explicitly stated, and/or are left open to interpretation” (Thach 34). According to Thach, “Japanese games seem to have the most cases of gender ambiguity”, although this might be a consequence of a bias in the study and in the database from which the study collected its data (20). Examples of this trend include the character Poison, from the game *Final Fight* (1989), and Zer0, a character in the games *Borderlands 2* (2012) and *Borderlands 3* (2019). While Poison’s ambiguity stems from localization – since the different places in which the game was released regarded the character’s gender differently –, Zer0’s ambiguity is manifested “via comments, or lack of comments, from producers and game designers”, since there has been no official confirmation regarding their gender (Thach 34-36).

I believe that all the perspectives I have discussed thus far contribute to a more complete understanding of the importance of female and trans representation in video games. On the one hand, regarding female characters, while it seems that these are still represented within a narrow stereotypical spectrum, which commonly ranges from purity – in characters such as defenseless princesses, mostly in fantasy video games – to sensuality, best represented in characters such as Lara Croft, it is interesting to acknowledge that “feminist debates have begun to explore the degree to which it is possible to understand a sexualized performance of traditional femininity as a form of empowerment” (Mikula 80). On the other hand, trans representation is still quite uncommon, regarding both the number of trans characters in video games and research focusing on said characters. Furthermore, much like what happens with female representation in video games, trans representation continues to rely heavily on stereotypes. However, no matter how controversial or stereotypical all of these female and trans characters are, their importance for video game studies, and the advancement of representation in video games, is undeniable. In most cases, these characters and representations were the ones that paved the way for other, more diverse characters, as they opened essential conversations – both inside and outside of academia – about issues such as gender and representation.

4.2. Representing Female and Trans Characters: An Analysis of *The Order: 1886*, *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* and *Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey*

In 2015, when *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* was released, the discussion around the diversity of representation in video games had already begun, particularly encouraged by the GamerGate controversy. The development team for the video game was also quite aware of this and decided to make a conscious effort to create a game that presented a different perspective of Victorian London, one that was more than a “negative, restrictive place”. This was achieved through the creation of a diverse cast of characters – which included both female-presenting and trans characters – to whom were allowed different experiences than those they would have been historically entitled to (Yohalen qtd. in Fishbune 28).

As a part of the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, which had previously only featured male playable characters³⁹, *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* introduced the first main female playable character, Evie Frye (see Appendix G), who alongside her twin brother Jacob, tries to free Victorian London from criminal organizations and Templar control. Yet, in this game, it is not only Evie Frye who can be distinguished as a noteworthy character. Throughout the game, the player is also introduced to Lucy Thorne (see Appendix H), a Female British Templar and one of the main villains in the fictional world of the game, and to Ned Wynert, the first trans character in the series (see Appendix I). Considering this, it becomes easier to understand why the game's disclaimer was adjusted to include gender identities and sexual orientations: “Inspired by historical events and characters, this work of fiction was designed, developed, and produced by a multicultural team of various beliefs, sexual orientations, and gender identities.” As Anita Sarkeesian states in her review of the game, there was a conscious concern to include characters, whether they be “women, people of colour (...) [or] trans folks”, in a fictional world that would be otherwise male-dominated (“*Assassin's Creed Syndicate* Review”). The same concern with diversity seemed to also have influenced the creation of *Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey*.

³⁹ This is only true if considered the main video games of the franchise, since in the DLC for *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* (exclusive to PlayStation 3 – or PS3 –, PS4 and PC), launched in 2013, the player could take on the role of Aveline de Grandpré, a French-African assassin (“*Assassin's Creed* Wiki”). For a comprehensive study on Aveline de Grandpré see Steenbakker.

Saunders, the creative director of *Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey* mentions how “Salix Games aims to be socially conscious”, and “to offer the representation and the level of storytelling that should be standard in 2020” (qtd. in Teixeira). Saunders illustrates the importance to be socially conscious when creating a video game that will eventually reach an audience by stating:

Ive [sic] got a very interesting background; my father’s side of the family is Persian-Indian, I’m a bisexual woman... These are all stories I want to tell. I wanted to talk about race and diversity and things that felt very personal to me. Things that should be spoken about in video games. I feel like some studios are afraid to talk about these things, but I don’t understand why. It won’t alienate audiences, maybe a small vocal minority on Twitter, but the world is changing. (qtd. in Teixeira)

In a review of *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate*, Sarkeesian states that the game in general – and the character Evie Frye in particular – is a “clear response to gamers’ increased desire for more capable and powerful female options” (“*Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* Review”). Sarkeesian also points to the intricate relationship between history, memory, and creative freedom that I have previously analyzed, in what I would describe as an ironic and critical tone:

While it might seem “unrealistic” to imagine women, people of colour and trans folks who are treated and respected as full human beings in 1868, realism is not really the goal in a game where Assassins and Templars have been waging a centuries’ old war over artifacts created by an ancient civilization, and where you can leap from the top of St. Paul’s Cathedral into a pile of leaves and walk away unharmed. [...] That believability is a result of the developers’ conscious decision to make the presence of these characters normalized and respected by everyone else in the game. (“*Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* Review”)

In the opening section of the game, the player is first asked to complete a short mission with Jacob, to then switch to Evie. Through this short mission, the player gets acquainted with each of the twins, and their strongest points, the things that make each one of them perfect for the different types of missions that will emerge throughout the game. Sometimes, the player is given the choice to complete missions with either Evie or

Jacob as the main character, other times that option is not available since the mission was designed for one of the characters and their particular interests and skill set.

Jacob is described as an efficient fighter, skillful at stealth and combat – although he prefers hand-to-hand combat –, he is athletic, an experienced brawler, and a master with several weapons (“*Assassin’s Creed* Wiki”). Jacob is the more robust and physically strong of the twins, as he takes “less damage when hit, make his pistol more accurate, and bring his opponents to near-death more quickly” (Fishbune 31). Evie on the other hand opts for a stealthier approach to her missions. Her greatest skill is to easily go unnoticed, something which defines Evie’s character at different levels, even regarding her weapons. While Evie is proficient with several weapons, according to her character description, due to her stealthy nature, she prefers “more subtle tools” (“*Assassin’s Creed* Wiki”). Moreover, it seems that Evie’s secretive nature, which determines her fighting skills as an Assassin, can also be identified when it comes to her personality.

While Jacob is described in terms of personality as “an impulsive, reckless and rebellious individual with a quick wit and an aggressive demeanor” (“*Assassin’s Creed* Wiki”), his sister Evie, is the more rational and focused of the two. Evie is described as the studious and intelligent Master Assassin (“*Assassin’s Creed* Wiki”). As a true tactician, Evie carefully plans out her missions. She is a loyal and obedient assassin that tries to devotedly follow her father’s teachings⁴⁰. Evie is the voice of reason and seems to frequently take on the role of Jacob’s mother, either by reprimanding him for his carelessness and imprudent actions or by having to intervene to resolve some of the situations her brother creates. Overall, it is Jacob’s story that dominates the game, and as Sarkeesian notes, “if players don’t actively choose to play as Evie in side missions, they don’t engage with her very often” (“*Assassin’s Creed* *Syndicate* Review”). This example intends to show how Jacob is much more the character created to play the hero, while Evie, without much of a choice, stands silently in her brother’s shadow. However, this is not something that can be only observed in the video game itself.

Until the release of the game, Evie stood quite hidden in the shadow of her brother. During the marketing campaign, Jacob Frye was the one given the spotlight. As Fishbune notes, the debut trailer for the game “only featured Jacob, shown jumping off rooftops

⁴⁰ Evie and Jacob’s father, Ethan Frye, was himself a member of the British Brotherhood of Assassins. He was the one to train Evie and Jacob in the Assassin’s ways.

and beating up bad guys.” (28). Furthermore, on the announcement of the game, it could be read: “In Assassin’s Creed Syndicate you’ll play as Jacob Frye, an assassin born and bred, poised to take over the criminal underworld of London during the Industrial Revolution” (qtd. in Fishbune 28; my emphasis). Later, other trailers that featured Evie were released, however upon reaching the release of the game, it can be noted that Evie continued to stand in the shadow of her brother, this time literally as she is placed in the background of the cover art for the video game, while her brother sits on the center of the image with his concealed gaze directed at the audience (see Appendix J).

Prescott and Bogg note how “[i]t is not just the games themselves which either underrepresent women or portray women in a negative light, but also game related materials such as magazines, game reviews and game covers” (103). If we also consider the covers for *The Order: 1886* (see Appendix K) and *Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey* (see Appendix L), it is possible to see how the female characters usually appear behind the male characters. Admittedly, that is expected in a game such as *The Order: 1886* where the main playable character is indeed male, however, that is certainly not expected in a game like *Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey*, where all three characters featured in the cover are the main playable characters. This is confirmed further by Burgess, Stermer, and Burgess’s study, in which they found – among other things – that when female characters appeared on the covers, “they were less likely to be the primary character, [and] less likely to be without a male character” (qtd. in Prescott and Bogg 103).

In *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate*, as the player moves through the game, and completes each of the nine gaming sequences, there is never anything that might make the player think that Evie is somewhat out of place in that world, just as there is never any questioning about her gender or her role as a Master Assassin. The same happens with Lucy Thorne and Ned Wynert. Lucy is quite high-up in the hierarchy of the Templars, she is regarded as a skilled fighter, and a worthy match for Evie Frye. At the same time, Ned “found the life outside societal constraints that he had been looking for” and has since made a name for himself “[a]mong thieves and petty criminals” (“Ned Wynert”). Gender, it seems, does not come up as a relevant category because the game’s development team chose to portray women and trans people, like they would any other character, just as capable, with access to the same opportunities, and the skills to perform the same tasks. There are some small moments in which we are reminded that these are female and trans characters, like when Evie wears a Victorian dress at a party in

Buckingham Palace, which restricts her movements – like what happens to Aveline de Grandpré in *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag: Freedom Cry* (Steenbakker 104), or when upon meeting Ned, Evie and Jacob share a look. However, neither Evie and Lucy's gender, nor Ned's identity as a trans man come up as something of significance in their experiences of the Victorian London of the game.

The same can be observed in *The Order: 1886*. Much like what happens with Evie and Lucy Thorne, Isabeau D'Argyll, also known as Lady Igraine, or simply as Isi, – an NPC in *The Order: 1886* – is also portrayed as an extremely talented and skilled fighter, and a strong character who is especially loyal to the Order (See Appendix M). Isabeau was trained by Grayson, with whom she developed a close relationship, and became the youngest member to ever be inducted into the Order. Although Isabeau is not the only female Knight of the Order, nor in other groups, she is the one with the most emphasis for the role that she plays in the game. Similarly to what happens in *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, in *The Order: 1886* the player is sometimes reminded of Isabeau's gender, for example when because of it she is considered weak by male characters – although that does not seem to faze her, as she directly addresses those remarks and uses them to fuel her competitive nature –, her gender does not limit her, or her experience as a Knight of the Order.

Assigning a minor – not significant – role to gender within the fictional world of the video game, I believe, disregards numerous possibilities of exploring it in an impactful way. When this happens, we must question if by including female and trans characters, these games were trying to reflect critically on how history has been represented, and how video games have tackled – diverse – representation, or if it was simply a strategy to appease the players and critics who demanded diversity in video games. Even though there is an attempt to break with common gender stereotypes, and deconstruct the male/female binary, it is important to understand that it is not without its flaws.

Although Evie is indisputably a strong, powerful female character, she is so by partaking in the so-called “male” activities, like chasing around criminals through the rooftops of London. In this sense, *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* perpetuates a representation of history that focuses on a male sphere, even if it goes the extra mile to include more diverse characters. There is no real deconstruction of the “male-centric” perspective, which is not only dominant in this specific game, but also in the video gaming industry. Furthermore, when comparing the twins Evie and Jacob, it becomes apparent

that some gender stereotypes perpetuated through video games – and that are, apparently, deconstructed in *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* –, are reinforced through the gameplay which surrounds both characters.

Evie's clothes are not revealing in any way, in fact, there is a similarity between her outfits and those of her twin brother, Jacob (see Appendix N)⁴¹. Her movements while fighting cannot be described as overly sensual, and her fighting abilities make her a skillful Assassin, just as much as her brother or any other assassin is. Regarding Lara Croft, Helen Kennedy maintains that the notion of a “transgressive stunting body”, through which “female figures ‘undermine conventional understandings of the female body’ by performing extraordinary deeds”, can also be observed in the character of *Tomb Rider* (qtd. in Engelbrecht).

Like Evie, Lucy's outfit was designed to not restrict her movements. Lucy's outfit incorporates some design aspects reminiscent of Victorian fashion, like the corset-inspired top or the ruffle detail on the back that hints at the bustle dress, for example (see Appendix P). Notwithstanding, Lucy's outfit aims to be nothing but practical for her also “transgressive stunting body” (Kennedy qtd. in Engelbrecht). The same can be argued about Isabeau D'Argyll's outfit.

Much like those of Evie and Lucy, Isabeau's outfit is above all things practical for her role in the video game, and it resembles that of her fellow Knights (see Appendix Q). Of course, it is slightly altered to define her waist, for example, but it does not objectify her in any way. It is also important to point out that, although Isabeau is in every sense a strong character, similar to what happens in *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, *The Order: 1886* also seems to also not be completely successful at deconstructing the male/female binary or certain gender stereotypes. For example, regardless of Isabeau's fighting skills, at some point in the game, she needs Grayson to rescue her from the half breeds, in a moment reminiscent of the damsel in distress trope, even if she immediately back on her feet and ready to fight. After all, as Sarkeesian argues, “the damsel in distress as plot device is something that happens to a female character and not necessarily something that a character is from start to finish” (“Damsel in Distress: Part 1” 14:56-15:04).

⁴¹ This refers to the character's main outfit, considering that the character has other outfits, such as the Steampunk and the Victorian Legends outfits (See Appendix O).

Evie Fry, Lucy Thorne, and Isabeau D'Argyll exist within a space that would traditionally be described as masculine, as they belong to two orders – Evie as a member of the Order of the Assassins, Lucy as a member of The British Rite of the Templar Order, and Isabeau as a member of The Knights of the Round Table – tasked to protect humanity, in some way or another. Kennedy adds that, because these female characters choose to exist within these traditionally masculine environments, instead of the “feminine private or domestic space[s]”, they openly reject the “patriarchal norms” enforced by their societies (qtd. in Engelbrecht). Not only this but they also subvert the Victorian stereotype of the “Angel in the House”⁴², which restricts women “to the private domestic sphere” while denying them “access to the same sexual and intellectual privileges of men” (Taddeo 44).

In *Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey*, Mary Jane Kelly is also portrayed as a subversive female character. Inspired by the real victim of The Ripper, the game’s Mary Jane Kelly is primarily subversive for working as a sex worker, although as she argues at some point in the game, she did not have much of a choice when becoming a sex worker. She is at no point confined to the private/domestic space, nor does she fit with the stereotype of the “Angel in the House”. Unlike Evie, Lucy, or Isabeau’s, Mary’s outfit is not designed to be practical, instead, it is much more aligned with what the real Mary Jane Kelly would have worn (see Appendix R), but then again Mary does not walk around Victorian London combating the Templars or fighting half-breeds. Alternatively, she joins Du Lac and Fey in their hunt for The Ripper, even if in the end she cannot escape the killer, just like the real Mary Jane Kelly could not. However, by placing her as one of the main playable characters, the creators of the game gave her the agency to be the hero of a story in which she had always just been a victim. As Saunders maintains: “She is the great mystery of the Jack the Ripper story, not the Ripper. She became the conduit we could put some fantasy into.” (qtd. in Teixeira).

In a DLC for *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* titled *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate: Jack The Ripper*, it is also possible to explore Victorian London at the time of The Ripper’s reign of terror. Released on December 2015, two months after the main game, the Jack

⁴² This is a stereotype that has been greatly contested, mainly because, as Mary Poovey suggests, “Victorian gender ideology from the start was “uneven” and “fissured,” with women maneuvering and undermining separate sphere ideology long before the “sexual anarchy” of the New Women of the 1890s” (qtd. in Taddeo 44). However, I mention this as it remains a significant aspect of how we, as a society, still regard gender in the Victorian era.

The Ripper DLC takes place 20 years after the end of the main game, and centers around the Whitechapel murders⁴³. I decided to include this DLC in my analysis because I believe it attempts to subvert gender norms, perhaps even more so than the main game. As Jack Gann argues, *Assassin's Creed Syndicate: Jack The Ripper* “seeks to bring a female-centric narrative to the fore in a way that the main game does not”. Notwithstanding, my analysis of this DLC is a brief one, as my intention is not to explore this game, as I have with the main one, but rather to point at how it is also subversive.

After her brother is kidnapped by Jack The Ripper, Evie returns to London to try and find him, while also trying to capture The Ripper, and helping sex workers in several situations. This is a clear subversion of the damsel in distress trope. Here, the character in distress is not a female, but rather a male, and the hero is not the typical young, strong, “knight in shining armor”, but rather a forty-year-old heroine. Evie’s age in this DLC is also a subversion of gender norms in and of itself. A woman in her forties, like Evie is in this DLC, would most certainly not be expected to be outside of the house running across the rooftops of London, chasing around killers, and playing the hero, not in the Victorian period, and perhaps not even nowadays.

It is also important to consider Evie’s relationship with the female sex workers targeted by the killer, as well as the sex workers themselves. While sex work was not explored in the main game⁴⁴, its existence is fairly well-documented in the real Victorian London. Moreover, regarding the content of this DLC, sex work was something that had to forcefully be featured, as it is impossible to explore the Whitechapel murders without addressing it. Unlike many other media representations, in this DLC, sex workers are represented as empowered women who, along with Evie Frye, work to capture the killer and free themselves from the men who intend to exploit and harm them. Many of the sex workers targeted by the killer worked with the Brotherhood of the Assassins, something that also allures to previous games in the *Assassin's Creed* franchise. This way, similarly to what happens in *Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey*, in *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* titled *Assassin's Creed Syndicate: Jack The Ripper*, the victims are also represented as more than just the victims of a story in which the killer is the main character.

⁴³ See Gann for an extended review and analysis of the Jack The Ripper DLC.

⁴⁴ Unlike other games in the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, where several NPCs were sex workers that helped the male characters navigate the world unnoticed and complete their missions.

According to Gann, it is only natural that the sex workers would turn to Evie for help, rather than to any other male character, because only Evie could engage “with their concerns and, specifically, with their safety”. Especially since Evie, much like them, “is a transgressive figure within the strict morals of the day”. Overall, while the game does not try to condemn sex work, it asserts “that these women should be free to do whatever they want for a living” (Stephen Totilo qtd. in Fishbune 29). Much like Evie, I would argue, who is not limited by societal restraints to live her life as a Master Assassin. Notwithstanding, this DLC is not altogether successful in turning away the focus of the story from the killer to the victims, because it also gives an important role to The Ripper, as the player is asked to play as the killer, and at one point the player is introduced to The Ripper’s backstory, and a possible motivation as to why he began his killing spree.

This way, the *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* titled *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate: Jack The Ripper* DLC gives relevance to gender and by doing that, deconstructs gender stereotypes in a more effective way than the main game does, and although it is still not a perfect representation of what that deconstruction could potentially be, it is an interesting and promising attempt.

CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I considered how Victorian London has been represented in video games, and how through that representation it is possible to reflect on the limitations of binary gender discourses, and how those discourses can be, and are at times deconstructed. It was my intention to analyze how neo-Victorian video games can become important sites of “historical re-vision” (MacDonald and Goggin 2) and spaces to reflect on representation and discourses of gender. To this effect, I focused my analysis on three video games, *The Order: 1886*, *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate*, and *Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey*, and on different female and trans characters from said video games, Isabeau D’Argyll from *The Order: 1886*; Evie Fry, Lucy Thorne, and Ned Wynert from *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate*; and Mary Jane Kelly from *Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey*. I decided on these female and trans characters considering that these would allow for a more significant deconstruction of the binary gender roles.

As a field of studies, game studies has significantly grown over the last decades, mostly because technology has rapidly evolved, and games, particularly video games, have also followed that tendency. It is possible to talk about millions of players – if not more – worldwide, who play games every day, on one platform or another. Nowadays, it is impossible not to recognize the importance of video games and the relevance of their study in academia, as they have reached a noteworthy position in the lives of millions of people from all over the world.

In more recent years, with the improvement of technology, video game developers have attempted to create more complex and coherent fictional worlds, capable of immersing the players. However, it could be argued that this is not only a consequence of technological developments and improvements but also of the impact of the players in the development process (Jenkins qtd. in Menon 108; Williams et al. 829). Ultimately, this has come to mean two things. On the one hand, developers have the option to create their games as a way to appeal to their audience by, for example, featuring “more males and so attract more young males to play” (Williams et al. 829). On the other hand, players have the option to critically reflect on the video games they consume and demand that those games address their social concerns, like the lack of diverse representation in video games. For example, after prominent Simmers – players of *The Sims 4* (2014) –, among which YouTubers and streamers, began to voice their concerns about how the game reflected the binary male/female gender discourse and was not inclusive to all the players,

the developers began to address those concerns by creating game updates that added more customization to the characters, in terms of gender and sexuality.

Regarding video games set in a historical period, particularly the Victorian era, as it is the period in which I have centered my analysis, the developers of such games are also faced with an emergent decision. They can either choose to perpetuate and reinforce the male/female binary or to contest and deconstruct it through the subversion of gendered stereotypes and the inclusion of more diverse casts of characters.

Looking back to the introductory section of this essay, particularly to the ideas put forward by Tara MacDonald and Joyce Goggin, that for a variety of contemporary media, “the Victorian period remains an important site of historical re-vision” (2), I believe to have shown, not only how in *The Order: 1886*, *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate*, and *Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey* there was a conscious attempt to create video games that look back at Victorian London as an important space to rethink gender stereotypes and discourses. However, as I also analyzed, the inclusion of more diverse characters did not come without its limitations.

On the surface, Evie, Lucy, and Isabeau are, in every aspect, strong, capable, and independent characters. They are not sexualized or objectified in any way, and it cannot be said that they were designed to fulfill any male desires or fantasies as it could be said about Lara Croft. However, if we explore further we begin to realize that might not be the case, not regarding Evie, nor Lucy, nor Isabeau. Thus, why I state that the attempt to deconstruct the male/female binary and break with stereotypes was limited. The same can be said about Ned Wynert, whose identity background as a trans man never emerges as something that influences his experience in the fictional world of *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate*.

In *The Order: 1886* and *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate*, gender seems to have been disregarded as a significant aspect that would impact the experience of these female and trans characters inhabiting the Victorian London represented in the games. As I discussed, gender was hinted at times, but it never emerged as something that would limit the characters in any way. While that is refreshing, because it does not reinforce representations of these characters – particularly the female characters – as weak, or incapable, it can be argued that it also reflects a missing opportunity to openly question and challenge both Victorian and contemporary gender discourses. As Alana Harris states

regarding *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, “although Ubisoft made a big deal of including a female protagonist [...] there's no attempt to consider women's history” (qtd. in Gann). Harris adds: “Including a protagonist who has agency in a time when women had none could have lead to some enlightening moments [...]. Syndicate is willing to address issues such as child labour, but sanitises race and gender” (qtd. in Gann).

The development team for *Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey* also had the intention to be socially conscious and address representation, as they believed that “that should be standard in 2020” (Saunders qtd. in Teixeira). Unlike *The Order: 1886* or *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, however, how those concerns were addressed in the game was slightly different. As it intends to portray the period of the murders of Jack The Ripper, *Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey* aims to subvert the stereotypical representation of the real victims, by placing Mary Jane Kelly as one of the main playable characters, who hunts the killer. In *Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey*, Mary Jane Kelly is given back her agency in a story that was never centered on her, and yet, her tragic ending is fulfilled despite her best efforts.

In conclusion, it is undeniable the importance of games, which look at the past to question it, and that way allow for new interpretations to emerge. I believe that the best way to achieve that is to find ways to grant a voice to those who have been silenced throughout history, either by placing them as the main playable heroes of their own games or by assuring that they also have a place within the gaming industry, working in the development of the games. *The Order: 1886*, *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, and *Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey* aimed to do just that. Certainly, it is possible to identify some limitations in their attempt to create a more diverse representation, however, all three video games strived to do more and aimed to go further than their precursors, and the results are three interesting, promising, and more inclusive alternatives.

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APPENDIX A

Assassin's Creed Syndicate Promotional Art: Big Ben View from the River Thames

Ubisoft. “*Assassin's Creed Syndicate* Promotional Art”. *Assassin's Creed Wiki*, n. d., assassinscreed.fandom.com/wiki/Assassin%27s_Creed:_Syndicate?file=ACS-E3_promo_3.jpg#Promotional_media. Accessed 15 August 2022.



APPENDIX B

Historical Figures of *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*

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APPENDIX C

City of London from *The Order: 1886*

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APPENDIX D

Scenes from *Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey*

Vasile, Cosmin. “*Dance of Death: Du Lac & Fey* Review (PC)”. *Softpedia News*, 15 April 2019, softpedia.com/reviews/games/pc/dance-of-death-du-lac-fey-review-525675.shtml. Accessed 15 August 2022.



APPENDIX E

Lara Croft's Appearance Through the Years

Marie, Megan. "20 Years of *Tomb Raider*". *BBC News*, 26 October 2016, bbc.com/news/uk-england-derbyshire-37619114. Accessed 10 May 2021.



APPENDIX F

Ms. Pac-Man Artwork from the Arcade Machine

Midway. "Artwork from the Arcade Machine (Side Art)". *Pac-Man Wiki*, [pacman.fandom.com/wiki/Ms._Pac-Man_\(game\)](https://pacman.fandom.com/wiki/Ms._Pac-Man_(game)). Accessed 25 August 2022.



APPENDIX G

Evie Frye

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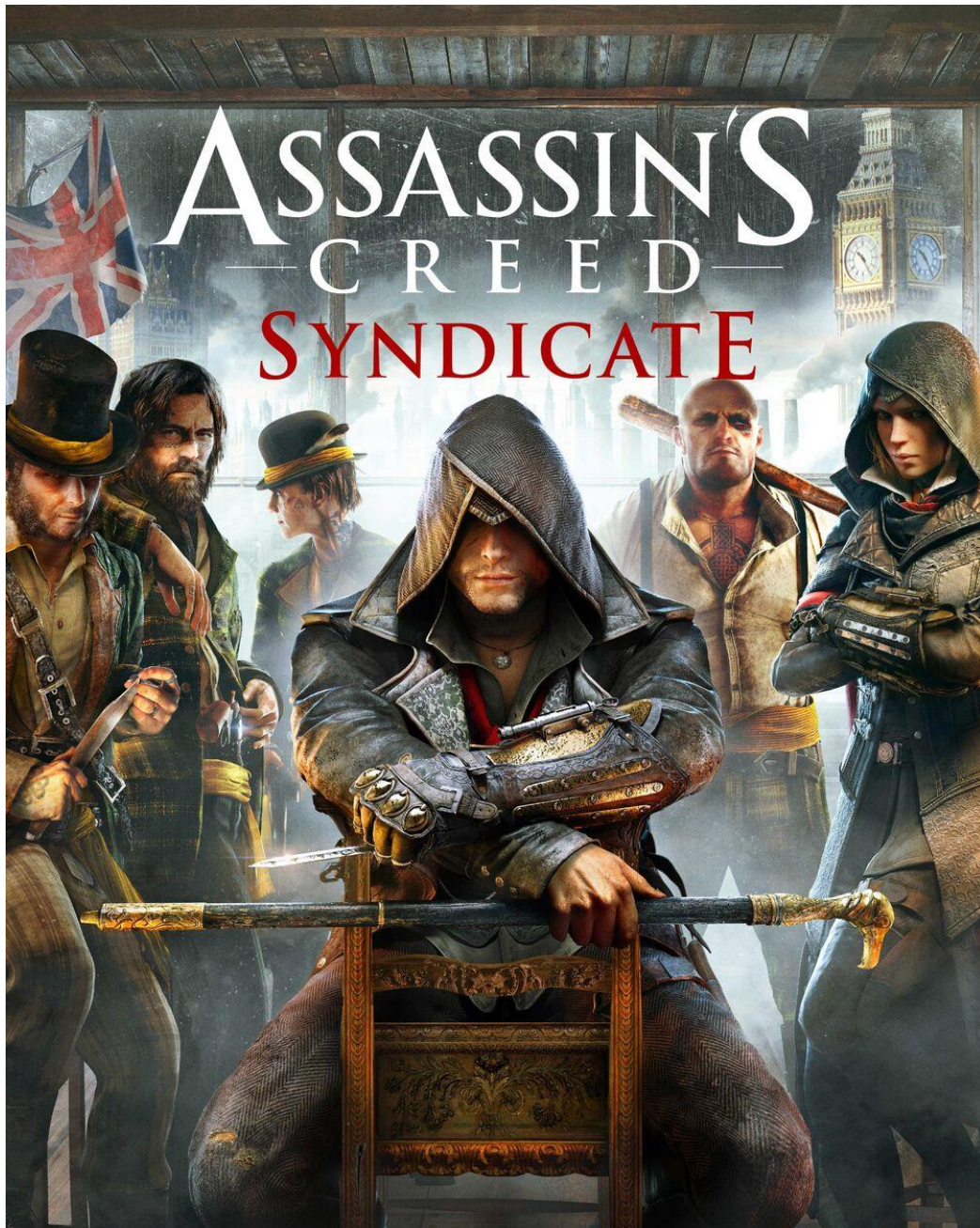
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