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Edited by Agata Zarzycka

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American Culture in Games and Game Studies

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Editorial: American Culture in Games and Game Studies

Popular culture comes up with a variety of ways to navigate the exchanges between the transcultural platforms it provides for people from different parts of the world to share interests, emotions or codes of communication; the glocalized phenomena that adapt those platforms to particular societies; and the local contributions that, having originated from specific contexts, get embraced by global audiences.

As a pop-cultural medium whose impact has significantly grown over decades, digital games add to the complexity of such oscillation between the global and the local by combining narrative and visual dimensions with gameplay architectures, and therefore by expanding the spectrum of processes or phenomena in which such dynamics may manifest themselves.

This issue of *Anglica Wratislaviensia* is devoted mainly to exploring the said potential in the context of broadly understood connections between digital games—plus one tabletop role-playing game which, however, has exerted a prominent influence on the development of the digital medium—and the United States. As put by Carly A. Kocurek, "[a]s the video gaming industry exploded in the United States during the 1970s and early 1980s, the medium became a point of articulation for anxieties surrounding broader cultural and economic changes". Since that time, the scope of those changes may have been shifting and expanding—from pedagogical or psychological concerns about games' impact on young people, to more recent insights into the issues of diversity, representation and intersectionality in game content as well as game development—yet games have remained a prominent element of the American economic, social and cultural landscape. Simultaneously, with the United States' remarkable formative power with regard to globalized cultural and media discourses, American locality has also been influencing the international gaming culture, as well as the medium itself. Examples of that influence include, among others, the significance of producers such as Electronic Arts or Microsoft; the recognizability of America-inspired settings, for example, Night City, originating from the tabletop *Cyberpunk 2020* and digitalized in the Polish *Cyberpunk 2077*; or the visibility of American narrative formulas, such as

hard-boiled detective fiction tropes traceable in the Estonian *Disco Elysium* and Lovecraftian horror in the French *Call of Cthulhu* or Ukrainian *The Sinking City.*

In the academic realm, the dynamics between digital games and the United States have inspired multiple publications focused on various specific overlaps between games and American reality, including book-length texts, such as Kocurek's *Coin-Operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood at the Video Game Arcade* (2015) or *Video Games and American Culture: How Ideology Influences Virtual Worlds* by Aaron A. Toscano (2020), as well as projects particularly concerned with game studies' methodologies, for instance, *Playing the Field: Video Games and American Studies*—a collection of essays edited by Sascha Pöhlmann (2019)—or its follow-up, *Video Games and Spatiality in American Studies*, edited by Dietmar Meinel (2022).

The papers collected in the "Game Studies" section of this *Anglica Wratislaviensia* issue contribute to the research on games in the American context by scrutinizing the topic's specific aspects or approaching them as elements of a bigger picture.

Discussing a non-American take on the iconic American expansion myth in "Last Remnants of the French Wild West: Remembering *Colorado* (1990)", Jakub Majewski demonstrates the relevance of figurative and literal perspective flexibility when dealing with both narrative formulas and gameplay limitations. For that purpose, he evokes a French game set in early 19th-century America and representing a unique transitional stage in the medium's technological development.

"Are Dwarves Protestant? American Religion and *Dungeons & Dragons*" by Leonid Moyzhes is the only paper in the "Game Studies" section dedicated to a non-digital game, namely the tabletop *Dungeons & Dragons* series. Usually indicated as a foundational role-playing game, and major inspiration for the entire genre, including its digital branch, *Dungeons & Dragons* has also become a complex artefact of American culture. Among many other things, it can, according to Moyzhes, be useful in identifying some characteristics of religious thinking in US society, as despite their fantastic renderings, the game's employments of religion can be traced back to a logic typical for American Christianity.

Eleonora Imbierowicz's paper, "Consumerist Environmentalism in *The Sims 4: Eco Lifestyle*", explores another kind of underlying logic by identifying what the author sees as a misrepresentation of globally relevant ecological concerns and environmental activism, and locating its sources in the American paradigms of individualism and consumerism. One of the most popular game titles worldwide, *The Sims* game series, is discussed as a carrier of problematic approaches to the protection of the environment that originate from both capitalist premises in general and their American renditions in particular.

In "Turnt, Trippy, and Tipsy: Video Games, Drugs, and Allo-Ludic Play", Mike Piero aims for a systematic consideration of the ways digital games depict intoxication and what he calls "drug culture" in order to investigate politically and socially problematic aspects of American drug policies and the discourses they generate.

Moreover, he reflects on the possible impact of parallels between those discourses and conceptualizations of digital games on the medium's cultural functions. The paper refers to multiple game examples, from those of American origin to those that, while produced in other countries, sustain United States-influenced drug tropes.

The "Game Studies" section is closed by Aleksandra Mochocka and Radosław Piotr Walczak's insight into a single game, investigating its literary entanglements as established by the factors characteristic of the game medium, such as gameplay focalization and in-game music. "Focalization, Subjectivity, and Magic(al) Realism in *Night in the Woods*" shifts its focus from the game setting's compliance with the American "Rust Belt Gothic" to its ontological ambivalence indebted to magical realism.

The "Literature and Culture" section of this *Anglica Wratislaviensia* issue comprises Marek Pawlicki's "'A Flight from History'? Nadine Gordimer's Congo Journey"—a paper in which the author tracks down the transformation of Nadine Gordimer's political views and considers the imprint of colonial preconceptions about nature on her otherwise liberation-supportive attitude towards the freshly won independence of the Congo state. The author reflects on the effectiveness and limitations of a white writer's strategies of developing an Afrocentric perspective.

Agata Zarzycka
Wrocław, 29 September 2023

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Game Studies

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Last Remnants of the French Wild West: Remembering *Colorado* (1990)

Abstract: Few settings are as quintessentially American as the Wild West. In games, the myth of the American frontier is the myth of American expansion. This myth explores, sometimes with enthusiasm, at other times with a tinge of regret, the conquest of the "wilderness" with its Native inhabitants and wildlife, and its replacement by "civilization" represented by settlers and railroads. Yet, European expansion on the frontier is not exclusively an Anglo-American story. It was the French explorers, traders, and trappers that first set out westward (and southward) along the rivers from Canada and the Great Lakes. The French experience of the frontier was radically different: for them, with the limited resources of their soon-to-be-sold colonial empire, the wilderness was effectively untameable, its Native inhabitants unconquerable: it was thus a place of permanent danger, where one might, with equal probability, eke out a living, earn a fortune, or simply perish. Only once has the French West appeared in a digital game, in Silmarils's *Colorado* (1990). This paper examines *Colorado* as an artefact of French game development in the 16-bit era, as a unique depiction of the forgotten French West, and, finally, as a 2D predecessor of today's sprawling 3D open-world games.

Keywords: historical fiction, Louisiana, French America, fur trapping, side-view perspective, wilderness, exploration, Native Americans

1. Introduction

Studies in American literature (and games), with their understandable preoccupation with the United States of America, can at times eclipse an important substrate of American soil: the colonial, but non-Anglo-American history of today's United States. This paper seeks to excavate and bring to light one case study of this pre-American history: *Colorado* (1990), a video game set in the West prior to its acquisition by the nascent United States.

Colorado is neither well known nor influential: to be blunt, the game is mostly forgotten. What, then, is the value of analyzing a game of seemingly little consequence and significance? Firstly, though the limitations of game storytelling *circa* 1990 prevented *Colorado* from engaging deeply in its topic, it is nonetheless the only game that attempted to depict the territories west of the Mississippi River before these lands became the American Wild West. *Colorado* thus evokes the Western genre in some ways, but, at the same time, it pre-dates the Wild West, and therefore must inevitably reject key tropes of this genre. In some ways, the game's setting has more in common with the geographically and chronologically distinct setting of James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* (1823–1841) depicting an earlier stage of Anglo-American westward expansion from upstate New York to the Mississippi. Despite its relative narrative shallowness, *Colorado* seems to evoke the quintessential American themes of Cooper's work, thus forming a sort of bridge between the French historical perspective of its creators, and the American setting it depicts. Finally, a close examination of *Colorado* reveals what might be jokingly called an evolutionary "missing link": here is a game that, constrained to depict its action in two dimensions, still strives to build a 3D world open to exploration. *Colorado* thus doubly fits the definition of what Janet Murray (89–90) calls an incunabular game, once in the general sense of early digital games, and then more specifically as an incunabular precursor to later first-person open-world games.

Each of the arguments made above will be discussed here in the context of a textual analysis (cf. Fernández-Vara) of *Colorado*. However, given the game's connection to the Western genre, there is a need to provide at least a brief history of Western-themed video games. Additionally, the older, pre-Western narratives of James Fenimore Cooper need to be introduced.

2. The Wild West in games

As a genre, the Western has been perceived as quintessentially American, both in the sense of being the most American of genres, and the most expressive of American myth (Kitses 1). The thematic composition of early Westerns was characterized by messages of taming the frontier by subjugating nature (and the Native Americans), by settlement and the building of railroads, and, finally, by imposing control on the rough outlaws living on the frontier of civilization (cf. Slotkin 29–62). The classic Western involved dichotomic values: good vs evil, law vs crime, civilization vs untamed nature, white Americans vs Native Americans. There was little doubt which option was to be preferred and which must ultimately triumph, even if in some cases, such as nature and the Native Americans, there was a more wistful tone, reflecting the sense that while conquest was good, something admirable was also being lost in this process (Kitses 13; see also Simmon 3–98).

With the rise of digital games, Western-themed games were quick to emerge, starting with *The Oregon Trail* (1971), a game that would launch a series continuing until today. *The Oregon Trail*, as an educational game (Caruso), aimed to expose players to the wide variety of hardships faced by American pioneers as they travelled in wagons from Missouri, across the landscape of the Wild West into Oregon on the west coast. Here were the clear themes of the early Western: the unambiguous positiveness of the expansion of civilization, and the depiction of nature as a hostile barrier to overcome.

Western games in the 1980s and 1990s were dominated by a focus on the gunfighter—by far the easiest form of Western-inspired action to convert into gameplay—only rarely touching other aspects of the genre. While some of these titles well warrant a closer look, especially given the interesting Japanese arcade forays into the genre in games like *Gun Smoke* (1985) or *Sunset Riders* (1991), for the purposes of this paper, these early gunfighter titles will be set aside due to their narrow thematic focus. Even so, and additionally setting aside the continued sequels and remakes in the *Oregon Trail* series, the Western genre is too abundantly represented across multiple genres to allow a listing of all relevant titles. A key early title with complex narrative is the adventure game *Gold Rush!* (1988), which invokes the *Oregon Trail* tradition by having the players spend a significant part of the game on a journey from New York to California. Subsequently, *Lost Dutchman Mine* (1989) again depicts the life of a gold miner; notably, like *Colorado*, this title is effectively an early open-world game, and, like *Colorado*, it invokes the myth of fabled lost gold mines, though its approach to the search for gold is far more simulation oriented. The next two games would be *Mad Dog McCree* (1990) and its 1992 sequel, *Mad Dog II: The Lost Gold*, both of which were in fact typical action-based "shooters", whose claim to complexity stemmed from the use of live-action video recordings used to strongly affix these titles to the cinematic Western genre. Then, there were two adventure games: *Freddy Pharkas: Frontier Pharmacist* (1993), a comedy title that was more parody than Western, and the richer, much more narratively complex *Dust: A Tale of the Wired West* (1995), again featuring live actors. Finally, the first-person shooter *Outlaws* (1997) concentrated on gunfights, drawing inspiration extensively from the so-called spaghetti Western (Hudak).

Progression in computer hardware in the next two decades led to increasingly sophisticated, though somewhat less numerous titles—excepting the simple gunfighter games, which found a revival on mobile and VR platforms. The most prominent titles of the 21st century included the *Red Dead* series (2004–2018), especially the acclaimed *Red Dead Redemption* (2010) and its 2018 sequel. Other notable Western-themed games included *Gun* (2005), the *Call of Juarez* (2006–2018) series, a 2014 remake of *Gold Rush!* and its 2017 sequel, and, finally, *This Land Is My Land* (2021). Although gunfighters continue to be the dominant topic of these games, they depict a much broader range of Western-derived thematic ele-

ments, as well as embracing the moral complexity and ambivalent portrayal of the classical Western heroes. Apart from the *Gold Rush!* series and *This Land Is My Land*, every title listed here depicts a gunfighter lead character as an anti-hero. In the context of *Red Dead Redemption* and its sequel, the Wild West is depicted in its terminal stages, stressing the violence of the dying frontier, and the ruthlessness with which its representatives, whether white or Native, were being subsumed by encroaching civilization.

Aside from the increased ambivalence about the expansion of American settlements, perhaps the most notable evolutionary trend in the Western, both cinematic and game-based, has been the elevation of the Native Americans from the status of non-characters, almost a hostile force of nature, to fully realized actors with complex values. Native American characters have been present in Western games from the beginning, but their depictions ranged from positive but incidental in *The Oregon Trail* to the disturbing "object of rape" portrayal in the controversial *Custer's Revenge* (1982) (Plunkett). The complexity of these depictions grows in the 1990s and in the later decades, with *Colorado* again an early example of more nuanced, though stilted representation. Increasingly, the land's Indigenous inhabitants gain agency *vis-à-vis* their white interactors. This progression seems to culminate with *This Land Is My Land*, a game in which the player, as a Native American warrior, takes up arms against white settlers; the caveat must be made, however, that the game has been criticized for depicting a generic, undefined tribe and thus possibly reinforcing some stereotypes (Giroux).

In the same way Western cinema, originally quintessentially American, was eventually greatly influenced by European cinema in the form of the spaghetti Western, so game Westerns were also frequently non-American. Aside from the already mentioned Japanese arcade games, there were numerous European intrusions, which include the French *Colorado*, the Polish *Call of Juarez* series, the half-American, half-British *Red Dead* series, the German remake and sequel for *Gold Rush!*, and, finally, the Ukrainian *This Land Is My Land*. Significantly, the European-made games seem to more frequently depict Native Americans in a sympathetic light, a fact that some journalists connect to a longer European tradition of the Indian "Noble Savage", tracing back to the writings of many writers across Europe: Karl May in Germany, who is indeed invoked by the designer of *This Land Is My Land* (Campbell), Gustave Aimard in France, Alfred Szklarski in Poland, and at least several others. It is unknown whether the French designers of *Colorado* were familiar with any of these writers, but the possibility of especially Aimard or May influencing the game is open.

This summary of the Western genre in games highlights *Colorado* as an early outlier of the genre. At the same time *Colorado* is not a Western at all. Though sharing some themes, it belongs to an earlier tradition, which we will now examine.

3. Cooper's Wild West *avant la lettre*

English settlements in today's United States began on the east coast of the continent. Thus, there had always been a western frontier of American settlement, a land that was not always called the Wild West, but was surely perceived as such by American colonists. This frontier leaped far westward when the thirteen colonies of the United States became independent, acquiring the Northwest Territory up to the Mississippi from Britain as part of the peace settlement. The true "Wild West" would then be acquired as part of the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, which expanded American territory across the Mississippi all the way to the Rocky Mountains in the west. The final act of expansion would be the seizure of California and the south-west from Mexico in 1848. However, borders on a map outpaced actual control: always to the west of the towns and settlements was an "untamed" wilderness inhabited by Native Americans. These early westward movements were perhaps best represented in James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* (1823–1841). Cooper's novels mostly track the tumultuous expansion of civilization in upstate New York from 1740 onwards, but with the chronologically last novel, *The Prairie* (1827), set in 1804 immediately after the Louisiana Purchase, the area of interest shifts westward into this newly acquired territory—which would later come to be known as the Old West, but which, from Cooper's perspective, was a New West (Kelly 85–128).

Cooper's novels are a key reference for American cultural identity (Kelly vii–viii). His most famous book, *The Last of the Mohicans*, saw no fewer than eleven film or TV adaptations in the United States alone, starting as early as 1909. However, Cooper's works are definitely not seen as part of the Western genre and are more typically considered historical novels (Lukács 64–65), even if, in the case of *The Prairie*, Cooper was describing near-contemporaneous events.

Thematically, Cooper's works are notable for the greater complexity of the depiction of both the wilderness and its Native inhabitants. Cooper's portrayal of the latter is not uncritical, and Georg Lukács (64) notes it is the *decline*, both physical and moral, of the Native Americans that is a key theme in his works, with the depths of moral decline being highlighted in the depictions of those tribes hostile to the heroes. Their decline is seen as inevitable—the demise of the primitive in the face of progress—but also tragic. The same is the perception of the novels' hero, the trapper Natty Bumppo. He is the pioneer and pathfinder (notably, both words show up in titles of Cooper's books), who paves the way for civilization to advance, and then moves on. The chronologically final novel, *The Prairie*, highlights Bumppo running away from civilization, whose onset is expressed by the clearing of the forests the trapper relies on. He is not hostile to civilization, however; indeed, the plot of the novel involves him paradoxically assisting those very

same settlers whose efforts gradually efface his own habitat. This relationship with civilization, which Bumppo runs away from, but at the same time paves the way for, could be interpreted as tragic, but also, in the modern postcolonial tradition (cf. Jayanth), it could be seen as hypocritical and deceitful. In this latter perspective, one might note Bumppo befriends Native Americans, while simultaneously knowingly assisting the settlers who will dispossess them. Indeed, Bumppo fits closely in the concept of the frontiersman, essential to what Theodore Roosevelt somewhat nostalgically described as "winning the West" in the multiple stages of American expansion (Slotkin 29–36).

Given the numerous films—not to mention radio, opera, and comic-book adaptations—produced based on *The Last of the Mohicans*, the book clearly is influential, even if its impact has somewhat diminished recently (Kelly vii); one might therefore reasonably expect it to show up also in video games, either adapted directly, or providing looser inspiration—particularly since, as Daniel Vella notes, "the lone individual in the untamed wilderness" is a trope that very naturally transitioned into digital games. This is where *Colorado* steps in: the story of a trapper, a "lone individual" indeed, setting out into Indian territory deep in the West, an "untamed wilderness", using, like Bumppo, a long barrel-loaded rifle, and navigating rivers via canoe, not only builds on a longstanding trope, but also more specifically makes clear references to the *Leatherstocking Tales*.

4. *Colorado*: An analysis

Released in 1990 by the French game development house Silmarils, *Colorado* is a computer game released on the PC, Commodore Amiga, and Atari ST. Although the studio's founders had significant earlier experience, Silmarils had only been established in 1987 (Kralka 1), making *Colorado* one of its first titles. Additionally, *Colorado* came at a time when Silmarils had just abandoned making games for the Amstrad CPC, an 8-bit computer popular in Europe, and with which Silmarils's founders had worked extensively. The new target machines featured mixed 16-bit and 32-bit architecture, which, without delving into technological details, afforded radically larger and more complex games, a difference especially prominent in audiovisual quality (see Fig. 1). The visual quality of Silmarils's 2D art would be repeatedly highlighted in this era (Nagórski).

Colorado tells the story of fur trapper David O'Brian, as he sets out westward from St. Louis in the spring of 1801. The timeframe established here seems significant: France had previously ceded the territories of Louisiana, including St. Louis, to Spain in 1762, then briefly recovered them in 1800, only to sell them to the United States in 1803. It seems probable that the developers specifically chose this year to highlight the brief return of France's colonial empire. Conversely, France is never mentioned in the game, and the name chosen for the hero is clearly not French,

Figure 1: Different versions of Silmarils's *Targhan* (1989): (A) Amstrad CPC; (B) Amiga

Source: (A) "Targhan (Amstrad CPC) Screenshot: Let Us Go Forth!" *MobyGames*. Retrieved from https://www.mobygames.com/game/6172/targhan/screenshots/cpc/344483/. 5 May 2023. (B) "Targhan (Amiga) Screenshot: Starting Point." *MobyGames*. Retrieved from https://www.mobygames.com/game/6172/targhan/screenshots/amiga/33049/. 5 May 2023.

but Irish; this ambiguity might have perhaps been intended as a compromise, allowing French players to see the game in the context of French colonial history, while international audiences would perceive it in the more accessible tradition of the American Western.

The game's narrative is mostly—and sparsely—told in text, perhaps because for a French developer oriented towards European markets, excessive text would bring localization challenges. Digitized speech, while available, was only rarely used at this time in game history. Thus, the story and its hero are established in the game's manual through the conceit of an extract from O'Brian's memoirs. Subsequently, when the player would speak to characters in the game, the initial greeting would be vocalized with the stereotypical, monosyllabic "how" drawn from the novels of Cooper and May, but the rest of the conversation was limited to textual communication: the other character would drop a paper letter, which the player could pick up to read. The game's ending was also told in a text screen. One of the consequences of this approach is that the name O'Brian seems to be divorced from its bearer: players could easily forget the name, or even not know it if they ignored the manual. For players, their character was simply "the trapper", easily recognizable through strong visual codes, such as tasselled clothes and a racoon-tail hat, reminiscent of the depictions of American explorers Lewis and Clark (compare Figs. 2 and 3).

As the manual explains, O'Brian sets out from St. Louis towards the titular lands of Colorado. Somewhere along the South Platte River, he aids an old Cheyenne warrior fighting against a group of Pawnees. In return for a promise of proper burial, the mortally wounded warrior gives the trapper a map to the legendary mine of Pocahontas (a peculiar intrusion of a character from an entirely different age and area). O'Brian follows the map along several rivers; the game begins as he nears his goal and ends with the finding of the mine.

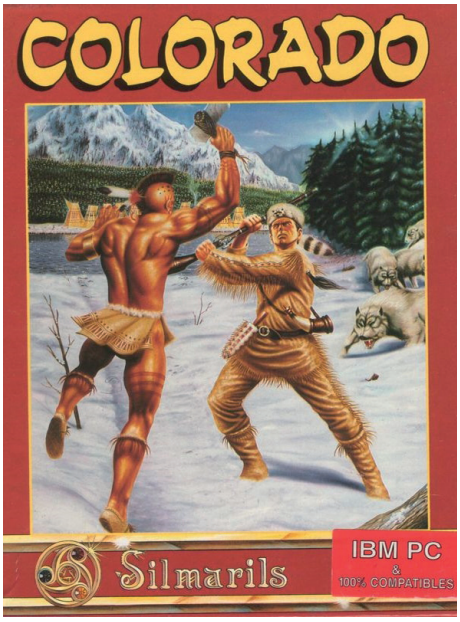

Figure 2: *Colorado* box art

Source: "Front Cover for Colorado (DOS)." *MobyGames*. Retrieved from https://www.mobygames.com/game/1722/colorado/cover/group-24629/cover-62552/. 5 May 2023.

Figure 3: *Lewis and Clark at Three Forks* by Edgar Samuel Paxson

Source: *Lewis and Clark at Three Forks by Edgar S. Paxson, 1912*, Public Domain. Retrieved from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lewis_and_Clark_at_Three_Forks_by_Edgar_S._Paxson,_1912.jpg. 2 Nov. 2023.

In terms of gameplay, *Colorado* is an action–adventure hybrid (Kralka 2), where the bulk of the player's actions involve either combat or, less frequently, simplified problem-solving by using items to manipulate the environment. Silmarils as a company had a diverse output, but the bulk of their titles in the 1988–1991 period were action games based around a side-view perspective exemplified by *Targhan* (1989; Fig. 1 above), where the player controls the hero character looking from the side, with the implication that the hero could typically only move sideways across the screen, or navigate the screen vertically by climbing ladders, jumping, falling, and so on, moving across the screen from left to right. The focus on 2D side-view games was primarily a technological limitation faced by most action-game developers, and though limited use of first-person perspective was available for slower-paced role-playing games, such as *Dungeon Master* (1987; see Barton 234–36), the difficulties of implementing a convincingly fast-paced first-person experience would not be resolved until 1992 (King and Borland 106–10; for a fuller discussion of the technical and historical context, see Mäyrä 101–15; Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca 61–150). Nonetheless, *Colorado* and the slightly earlier *Le Fétiche Maya* (1989) showed Silmarils was searching for technical means to enact, if not a full transition into 3D space, then at least a more complex perspective facilitating a more complex use of game space. In *Colorado*, this search manifested in two ways. Firstly, the side-view perspective adopted in most of the game was slightly distorted in a manner similar to many adventure games of the time (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca 85–89). While the hero was still seen fully from the side, the landscape was frequently shown from a tilted view, as if slightly elevated relative to the player, allowing a wider landscape that could be navigated not only sideways, but also diagonally. Secondly, a sort of "fake" 3D view was implemented for those sections of the game where the player would canoe down the river. These two basic views of *Colorado* are shown in Figure 4.

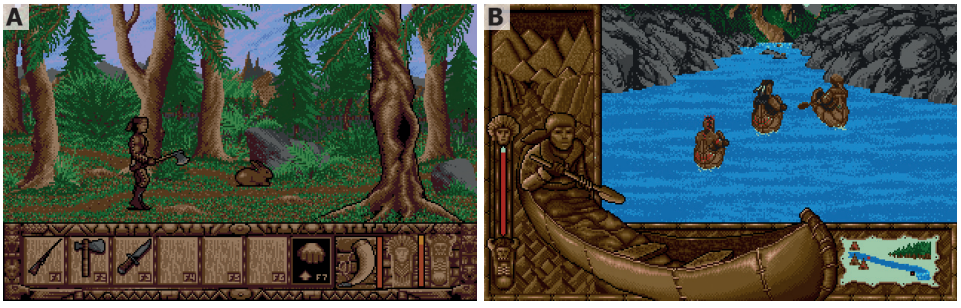

Figure 4: Selected views from Colorado: (A) tilted side-view; (B) behind-the-player canoe view

Source: (A) "Colorado (DOS) Screenshot: C'mere Little Rabbit." *MobyGames*. Retrieved from https://www.mobygames.com/game/1722/colorado/screenshots/dos/341609/. 5 May 2023. (B) "Colorado (Amiga) Screenshot: … When You Can Also Encounter Enemies." *MobyGames*. Retrieved from https://www.mobygames.com/game/1722/colorado/screenshots/amiga/808037/. 5 May 2023.

Both solutions were significant in allowing *Colorado*'s game mechanics to match its narrative themes. Within Michael Nitsche's typography of game spaces (171–89), *Colorado*, while requiring the player to navigate the game space from start to end, provided sufficient branching to qualify as a multicursal maze rather than a unicursal labyrinth. By depicting the landscape in a way that facilitated branching paths leading to multiple exit points from the screen, the game could include a more expansive and complex environment. Unlike the typical side-view action game, but appropriately to the search quest assigned to O'Brian, the player now had to explore the environment to find all possible paths, and, at least hypothetically, could even get lost by taking the wrong exit off a given screen, or by not finding the right exit. Visually, the game environments were constructed from repetitive graphical elements, combined into subtly unique landscapes, which often required multiple experiences both to yield all their secrets, and also simply to be recognized or internalized. Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan describes the process of the human being entering a new space, and gradually coming to understand it sufficiently to internalize its image and structure, to the point where a vaguely understood space becomes a concrete place in the person's mind (67–84). This is what *Colorado* accomplished: instead of the player passing through the game's landscapes just once in a linear manner, the player would circle around, return, re-walk, re-navigate, until the landscape was internalized as place.

Central to navigating the game landscape was the river, which O'Brian navigates along a linear track (Nitsche 172–76). The river provides a spine for the game, with key indicators of progress: the canoe sections allow only forward movement on the rapid-flowing, rocky river, with the player only allowed to exit the canoe at rare beaching locations, with a deadly waterfall awaiting if the player misses the final beaching location. The ground-exploration side-view sections of the game are divided into four main areas; of these, three are positioned at beaching points along the first river, with the final, fourth area being accessed likewise, after traversing the land to another river.

The inevitable forward movement along the river could be reversed by the player by opening overland, or rather underground, connections between the playing areas, through the tunnels of a gold mine: by using dynamite to clear obstacles, O'Brian could unblock passages exiting in an area further up the river. This was unlikely to be achieved in the player's first playthrough; consequently, although *Colorado* may be played from start to finish in about an hour by a player familiar with the game (readers may find such playthroughs on YouTube—e.g., Le Fétiche Micro), the game is intended to require multiple attempts and many hours of exploration. The game thus leverages the digital medium's spatial quality (Murray 79–82), resulting in an experience radically different to its literary predecessors: Bumppo could lose his way in the linear narrative of the book, but still always moved forward with that narrative, but O'Brian could *actually* become lost, searching and backtracking until the player found the way again. In this sense, the game also dif-

fers in its use of space from later open-world games, and even more so from the walking simulators that Melissa Kagen (23–28) describes as a combination of explicit avant-garde tendencies and the playfulness of the adventure game that allows players to enjoy freely walking anywhere. *Colorado* can be seen as a precursor to open worlds, but it is decidedly not open; the clear barriers and paths of the landscape combine into a maze rather than merely a dense but open forest. Equally, the carefully designed structure of its world, which requires the player the make the correct moves and use the correct items in the correct locations in order to progress through the maze, abjures the leisurly, post-conflictual (cf. Majewski and Siuda 227–38) form of the walking simulator.

The river, whose traversal seems to allow players to rapidly move many miles forward, is central to a landscape of multiple distinct environments joined together in what Espen Aarseth (133–34) defines as ludo-compression. This technique, which game designer Shane Liesegang elsewhere discusses under the name of impressionist gameplay (Liesegang), involves designing the gameworld in such a way as to create the impression of far larger spaces, while keeping travel times short by effectively compressing the spaces "in-between" key sites.

Apart from the river, which serves as both a highway and as an obstacle to be overcome when attempting to reverse the direction of travel, the player's progress is blocked by enemies. These come in two forms: animals—wolves, bears and eagles—and people. In the latter case, the enemies are mostly coded as Indians, whose garb loosely evokes historical tribes, but who are generally not strictly labelled in the narrative. However, while most people the player encounters in the game are hostile, there are individual characters and even whole groupings, specifically the Cheyenne village, who are friendly, providing information or material assistance in exchange for the player performing set tasks, such as rescuing a Cheyenne chief's baby, who had been kidnapped by an eagle (*sic*).

Whether friendly or hostile, the Native characters the player encounters are connected to different cultures, in turn attached to specific environments. There are thus forests whose inhabitants are presumably the same Pawnee we encounter in the manual, desert highlands with a pueblo, presumably inhabited by Puebloans, and the open plains dominated by a Cheyenne settlement. The hostile denizens of the mines are not defined, but are dressed like Europeans. A final area is a frozen mountain forest inhabited only by wolves, whose central feature is a burial ground with numerous elevated platforms, such as those used by some Great Plains tribes (Polony). Of the identifiable tribes, only the Cheyenne are friendly, with their village providing a resting point after the player defeats one warrior in a duel; among others, one character in the pueblo area provides the player with assistance, after being given a peace pipe. A selection of these locations, Indians, and animal encounters is shown in Figure 5. No explanation is ever offered concerning the immediate hostility between O'Brian and most other characters. Viewed from the perspective of colonial studies, certainly this hostility may be understood as part of

the standard trope of the all-conquering white protagonist (cf. Jayanth). However, the caveat should be made that across Silmarils's oeuvre, the inexplicable hostility of other characters regardless of location and ethnicity is standard, with combat simply constituting a core gameplay component of their side-view action games. Indeed, compared to *Manhattan Dealers* (1987), *Targhan*, and *Star Blade* (1990), *Colorado* may be noted for the unusal presence of many *friendly* characters, who both aid O'Brian and must also be aided by him.

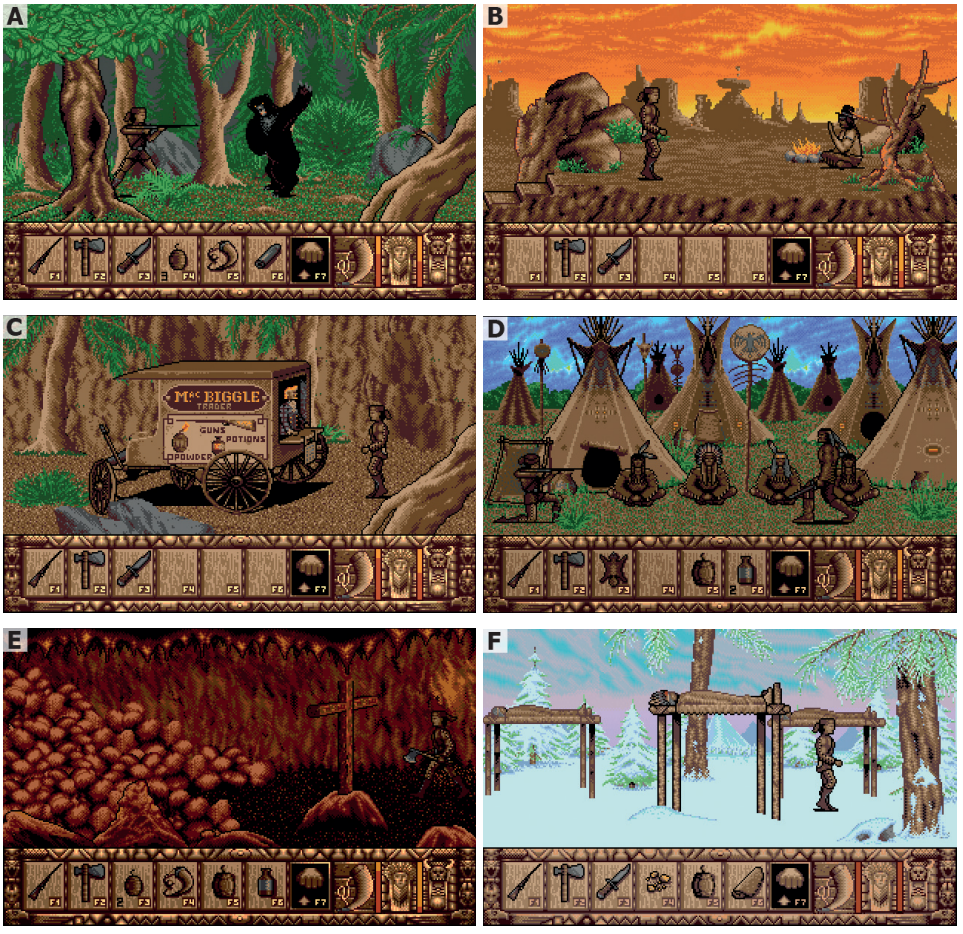

Figure 5: A selection of situations from *Colorado*

Source: (A) "Colorado (Amiga) Screenshot: Nice Bear, Nice Shot." Retrieved from https://www.mobygames.com/game/1722/colorado/screenshots/amiga/368769/. (B) "Colorado (Amiga) Screenshot: Hugh Yourself!" Retrieved from https://www.mobygames.com/game/1722/colorado/screenshots/amiga/88092/. (C) "Colorado (Amiga) Screenshot: The Trader." Retrieved from https://www.mobygames.com/game/1722/colorado/screenshots/amiga/88089/. (D) "Colorado (Amiga) Screenshot: Be Zen, Kill Indians." Retrieved from https://www.mobygames.com/game/1722/colorado/screenshots/amiga/368770/. (E) "Colorado (Amiga) Screenshot: Hmm, a Sign?" Retrieved from https://www.mobygames.com/game/1722/colorado/screenshots/amiga/368771/. (F) "Colorado (Amiga) Screenshot: It's Winter Time." Retrieved from https://www.mobygames.com/game/1722/colorado/screenshots/amiga/808034/. All screenshots are from *MobyGames*, retrieved on 5 May 2023.

The visually diverse (for 1990), and relatively historical, if still rather flat and stereotypical, Indian tribes are among the strongest markers of *Colorado*'s Western connections. However, the nature of combat in *Colorado* connects the overall experience to something rather different: unlike in most Westerns, where progress to some extent equals the white subjugation of the continent and its inhabitants, here is a vision of a permanent wilderness, to be traversed, never to be subjugated. This is highlighted by the weaponry available to the player, limited to a hand axe, a knife, and a front-loaded rifle. The rifle affords only one shot before it needs to be slowly reloaded, making it not so much useless as indeed dangerous to use against many opponents: if the player misses, or if the enemy is tough enough to endure a shot, the opponent may close the gap before the player can reload. Most of the combat against Indians is thus hand-to-hand, placing the player on even footing. To further emphasize the player's vulnerable position not only *vis-à-vis* the Natives, but also against nature, bears are one of the toughest combatants, capable of enduring multiple rifle hits, or of inflicting heavy damage on the player in close quarters. Nonetheless, while O'Brian is seemingly as powerless *vis-à-vis* the wilderness as Cooper's Bumppo, just like the latter, O'Brian is a signifier of the approach of white civilization, and, in the game's conclusion, uses his new-found gold to establish "the most famous trading post in the region", and thus clearly also contributes to the ongoing "taming" of the frontier.

Key resources for the player are health and gunpowder: the former constantly whittled down in close combat, the latter significantly reduced with every shot. The need to restock these resources, and to obtain dynamite, is resolved by the game through the introduction of an itinerant trader, MacBiggle, whose wagon can be encountered at various locations. No explanation is given as to his presumably friendly relations with the otherwise hostile Indians, but certainly such trade did occur. MacBiggle provides the player with healing potions, gunpowder and dynamite in exchange for resources found by exploring the gameworld or by combat: animal hides, gold nuggets and Indian necklaces. All these resources are pre-determined by the designer, and thus strictly limited: if the player fails to progress through the game efficiently enough, O'Brian will run out of gunpowder or simply be overcome in combat. *Colorado*'s gameplay is thus designed to highlight the player's precarious role as an explorer trying to get through the territory, rather than a conqueror capable of subjugating it: precisely the experience of the dying French colonial empire, which had struggled to attract mass settlement, and relied on a precarious system of fur trapping and trade (Fernández-Armesto 84).

5. Conclusion

The complexity of navigation with the possibility of getting lost or simply drowning in unexpected river rapids, the pauacity of resources, and the strange combination

of power and vulnerability granted in combat by the cumbersome barrel-loaded rifle, combine together into a sense that it is the experience of *being* a vulnerable fur trapper in unknown lands that is central here, rather than *conquering* the land or *beating* the game. Arguably, the game thus fits the definition of what Adam Chapman describes as game-based historical reenactment (198–230), bearing also all the limitations of such reenactment, such as the unwillingness to engage with complex and morally challenging aspects of the reenacted history, and the sanitization of violence. Nonetheless, *Colorado* provides a rare glimpse into the French West before it was subsumed into the American Wild West; though seemingly casting the player as an Anglo-Saxon (or Anglo-Irish?) character, and playing mainly with motifs borrowed from Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*—possibly also Aimard's and May's novels—there is a sense that O'Brian lives in a different world to that of the Western hero, a world in which the white man is only an intruder, not an inevitable conqueror. This is the world of France's colonial empire, where traders and fur trappers, largely deprived of military support, would often seek to establish friendly relations with the Native inhabitants of the land.

Apart from its unique setting and narrative convention, what is notable about *Colorado* is how—typically for a Silmarils game—the relatively uncomplicated gameplay is tailored to expand on the game's narrative themes. In the case of *Colorado*, this results in something truly peculiar: a game that tries to build 3D spatial exploration into a game built around two dimensions. This mode of exploration, though clearly a technological compromise, is unexpectedly successful: when viewing the playing area from the side, it is possible for players to miss passages hidden behind trees or bushes, something that is harder to achieve in a fully 3D and first-person based game. Similarly, though the definition of an open gameworld is a wide, nonlinear map structure, *Colorado*'s construction around the linear spine of the river did not prevent it from being open to exploration: instead, it simply provided a more directed, maze-like experience that made the player a traveller passing through the world rather than permanently inhabiting it. Yet, it is clear full open worlds were precisely the direction Silmarils wanted to take: four years later, they would produce *Robinson's Requiem* (1994), a first-person game far closer to modern open-world titles. Though this futuristic science-fiction game had a radically different setting to *Colorado*, as well as far more complex survival mechanics (Schreiber), a path of evolutionary development can be traced between these titles. *Colorado* was a transitional title, constrained by the technology and resources of its developers, but still establishing a prototypical open-world game oriented towards long and careful exploration.

As we conclude, it is worth noting *Colorado* is no longer the only game exploring this fragment of American history. There are two other games that in some ways relate to the timeframe and rough geographic area of the American colonial frontier: *Assassin's Creed III* (2012) and its spin-off *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (2012). These titles, part of a series of fully open-world games that have repeatedly been cited by scholars as prominent case studies of historical reconstruction in games

(cf. Granström), and coming three decades after *Colorado*, are certainly impressive visual showcases, depicting the colonial architecture of Boston and New Orleans, their social milieux, as well as the wilderness of the colonial frontier, whether on the peripheries of Boston, the *bayoux* of New Orleans, or, indeed, sharing the upstate New York area and time period of *The Last of the Mohicans*. The connection between these titles and Cooper's works would be well worth exploring. However, given the games' status as part of a long-running series, they never have the liberty to truly explore the proto-Western themes visible in Cooper's work and in *Colorado*: they are always, first and foremost, *Assassin's Creed* games. The assassin, capable of dispatching several armed soldiers in seconds, easily capable of slaughtering bears and wolves in the colonial countryside, simply cannot evoke the setting, nor the Cooperian literary references of *Colorado*. Still, as open-world games made by a French company, they are perhaps *Colorado*'s distant descendants.

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Are Dwarves Protestant? American Religion and *Dungeons & Dragons*

Abstract: I analyze the ideology of representation of religion in the tabletop role-playing game (TRPG) *Dungeons & Dragons*. I approach TRPGs as a type of protostory, an interactive set of stories governed by rules which provides affordances to create different stories. Whether a specific story is relatively hard or easy to instantiate from the protostory indicates if this particular instantiation serves as a preferred, negotiated, or oppositional reading of the TRPG rules. Based on an analysis of the dimensions of religion proposed by Ninian Smart, contrasted with Harold Bloom's idea of American religion, as well as the concept of intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientation, I discuss the similarity between the way *Dungeons & Dragons* simulates religion, and the traditional understanding of religion in American culture.

Keywords: Ninian Smart, religious studies, *Dungeons & Dragons*, game studies, tabletop RPG

1. Simulating religion

My article considers the ideology behind the approach of the tabletop role-playing game (TRPG) *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) to simulation of religion. For the purpose of this article I define religion as a way to mediate the transcendental, spiritual, or supernatural and make these accessible for believers (Meyer and Moors 6). While this definition is not without its flaws, it appears fitting for *D&D*, considering the importance of gods, encoded as clearly real but, at the same time, separated from the material world.

Games, whether analogue or digital, have an ability to represent and make statements about different phenomena through rules, creating what Ian Bogost called *procedural statements* (28). Another pioneer of game studies, Gonzalo Frasca, wrote about simulation: "to simulate is to model a (source) system through

a different system which maintains to somebody some of the behaviors of the original system" (224).

Both Bogost and Frasca contrasted simulation with more traditional "representation"—the depiction of real-world phenomena through textual or audiovisual signs. However, both representation and simulation depend on what Tom Apperley called *resonance* (21), a feeling that a game or some of its elements remind a player of something outside of the game, for example, a religious institution.

Resonance could be caused by textual, visual, or behavioural familiarity. However, as Sebastian Möring (210) pointed out, the feeling of recognition may be caused by the similarity between a game and traditional cultural conventions dictating how a simulated system should behave, not a system itself.

Thus, I approach relationships between games and systems they simulate as a three-part scheme. First, a society produces an understanding of a particular phenomenon, influenced by dominant ideology, historical circumstances, and other sociocultural conditions. Second, this understanding spreads, creating what Roland Barthes called *myths* (109). Finally, myths influence games, both at the level of game design and reception of the game by the audience, both intended by game designers and not.

Since resonance relies so much upon cultural conventions, an understanding of "how religion works in *D&D*" tells us nothing about how religion actually works. It does, however, elucidate how players perceive its workings, making research into this topic a promising way to understand the image of religion in modern society, that is, the *myth of religion*.

To complicate matters further, *D&D* does not simply "mirror" our culture—it has an agency of its own. For example, one of the game creators, Gary Gygax, a practising Christian and a Middle Ages aficionado who was willing to make a medieval-themed wargame during a time when this historical period was not popular among hobbyists, obviously shaped the game according to his personal views and aesthetic preferences (Peterson 54–80, 177).

In fact the surprising attention that *D&D* paid to religion in general, with Cleric being one of the only three initially conceived character classes, might have stemmed from Gygax's interests. However, the immense influence of *D&D* on later popular culture means that it does not simply copy existing myths, but forms new ones.

Take the class of Cleric as an example. As Jon Peterson showed, it did not have the same clear-cut prototype in the fantastic milieu of its time as so-called Fighting-Men and Magic-Users. Instead, the Cleric class combined different popular tropes, from cross-wielding priests fighting vampires to medieval chivalry orders (Peterson 260–70). But nowadays Cleric itself has become a staple of popular culture, surpassing even *D&D* in the level of recognition after its inclusion in multiplayer online role-playing games, such as *World of Warcraft*.

This makes an analysis of *D&D* extremely relevant for understanding the place of religion in the modern world. And the specific research question of this article is

"How, according to the *Dungeons & Dragons* role-playing game, does the system of religion function, and what myths of religion does that game encode?"

2. Tabletop role-playing games as a protostory

I approach TRPGs as a type of *protostory*: a hypothetical set of all possible stories that could be created, with specific stories emerging from it through a process called *instantiation* (Koenitz 2).

Instantiation consists of two interrelated processes. First, a player uses objective game rules to create specific in-game situations. If, according to *D&D* rules, an attack lowers the number of opponents' hit points to sixteen, participants, being a part of the game's *magic circle* (Huizinga 10), have to acknowledge that.

Second, a player, with the help of signs encoded in the game by its creators and cues provided by other participants of the game, interprets a situation turning it into a part of a coherent narrative. A decrease of the amount of hit points can be interpreted as a wound, fatigue, or as an abstraction with no concrete narrative meaning. Players constantly produce their individual interpretations, which are harmonized with the Dungeon Master acting as a mediator, a judge, and a facilitator, producing so-called *shared imaginary space* (Hammer et al. 293).

Objective actions and subjective interpretations of the game strongly influence one another. Actions and rules limit and shape the flow of the game, while interpretations set the particular logic and goals. And both rely upon the *affordances* provided by the game (Linderoth 4). Jonas Linderoth writes about affordances in the context of video games: "Game-play is to perceive, act on, and transform the affordances that are related to a game system or to other players in a game" (8). A game, therefore, is a constant string of perceiving and realizing particular affordances.

In principle, lack of technical limitations and reliance on social conventions between participants means that any TRPG provides affordances for any conceivable action. Still, by analyzing rules and narrative signs presented by the game, it is possible to organize sets of affordances for the instantiation of specific stories in accordance with the hierarchy of *readings* presented by Stuart Hall, marking some of them as *preferred*, *oppositional*, or *negotiated* (102). The main question would be how hard is it to instantiate a particular story, both in terms of finding necessary rules and interpreting in-game situations created by them.

In the case of *D&D*, stories about heroes fighting an army of monsters would be one of the game's preferred readings. A story about intrigues at the royal court, with minimum battles, but echoing traditions of the fantasy genre—a negotiated reading. A story of social workers rehabilitating monsters whose parents died at the hands of adventurers—an oppositional reading.

I will focus on the preferred decoding of *D&D* rules regarding religion. In that sense, my research focuses on what Lars de Wildt (35) described as representation

of religion in games, consciously excluding consideration of the way games are produced and understood by actual players.

This approach runs the risk of trapping research in the echo chamber of their own, inevitably subjective, theories, for example, confusing ubiquitous religious imagery in games with interest in religion as a real-world institution (de Wildt 21). To avoid this, I emphasize the need to approach TRPGs as protostories. My research does not claim to objectively describe how any portrayal of religion in *D&D* games would go—only what narratives on the topic are easier to instantiate. I hope that in the future the research presented in this article may serve as a theoretical framework for a player-oriented work, contrasting affordances provided by the game with the actual experience of players from different cultural and religious backgrounds.

3. *Dungeons & Dragons* and religion

Throughout its fifty-year history, *D&D* has created a wealth of content resonating with the idea of religion. Cults, gods, character options, etc., are scattered across dozens of supplements: descriptions of settings, races, fantastic cultures and suggestions for Dungeon Masters. Still, there are three groups of books that may serve as a basis for this analysis.

The first group of sources is, of course, information on religion contained in the main rulebooks: *Player's Handbook*, *Dungeon Master's Guide*, and *Monster Manual*. Most, though not all, of *D&D* editions revolve around this "big three", a set that should be sufficient for any game.

The second group of sources are books dealing specifically with the topic of religion. The first supplement of this type, *Supplement IV: Gods, Demi-Gods & Heroes*, came out in 1976, merely two years after the release of the original *D&D*. Later, *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* (*AD&D*) was complemented with *Deities & Demigods*, and *AD&D* 2nd edition—with *Legends & Lore*. Particularly important is the second book titled *Deities & Demigods*, a supplement for *D&D* 3rd edition, written by James Wyatt, a game designer graduating from Union Theological Seminary in 1993, who even worked as a minister for two years. It was during this time that Wyatt started writing for Tactical Studies Rules, the publisher of *D&D* (Ryan 2). Later editions cannot boast similar religion-themed source books, but provide more information about religion in the core set itself.

Finally, the third group of sources are books on the Planescape settings, especially *On Hallowed Ground*. This setting paid remarkable attention to gods, religion, and the afterlife. Specifically, Planescape enshrined the idea that punishment or reward awaits every mortal after death in the realm of a god they worshipped in life, despite the fact that some older books mentioned the idea of reincarnation for some races. While Planescape was discontinued by the end of the 1990s, its influ-

ence on the interpretation of gods and religion in *D&D* far surpasses other sources outside of "core" books and dedicated supplements.

These three groups of books somewhat correspond with the three main venues of interaction between the participants of the game and religion: the afterlife, character options (classes in particular), and gods.

Religious classes appeared in *D&D* very early: *AD&D* already featured Cleric (a priest), as well as subclasses of Paladin (a divine-powered Fighter), Druid (a more nature-oriented Cleric), and Monk (a martial artist inspired by *wuxia* films). The latter three became independent classes in subsequent editions, and all four of them remain the core options for those willing to play as a religious hero. Although additional supplements often expanded this list with options like Divine Chosen or Spirit Shaman, they remain outside the scope of this paper.

In the current, 5th edition of *D&D* it has become easier to play a character of any class as being religious. This is achieved by the inclusion of separate religious archetypes for some "secular" classes, like Zealot and Totem Warrior for a barbarian, and through the addition of the Backgrounds system. It allows players to determine a hero's occupation before adventuring, and includes the obviously religious Acolyte, as well as an affordance for a religious interpretation of a Hermit.

Ironically, gods entered the *D&D* milieu a bit later than the concept of Cleric, but only barely. By the time *Supplement IV: Gods, Demi-Gods & Heroes* was published, the concept of deities as important elements of the campaign world had already gained traction, although the focus was on providing gods with combat statistics and a short description of them as characters.

The original *Deities & Demigods* as well as *Legends & Lore* did not include new deities made specifically for *D&D*—instead, they adopted a list of gods from historical myths and popular fiction of the era. The gods created specifically for *D&D* were excluded from the core set of books until the 3rd edition. Also, starting with the supplements for that edition, the logic of describing gods somewhat shifted from combat-oriented statistics and abilities towards their teachings and roles in fictional worlds.

4. Dimensions of religion

While particular settings of *D&D* may boast an impressive array of pantheons and religious institutions, for the purpose of this article I analyze "*D&D* religion" as a single, unified imagined tradition, based on its unified approach to contacting the transcendental, exemplified by the universality of "religious" classes and spells.

This singular tradition can be analyzed through the concept of *dimensions of religion*, introduced by Ninian Smart (*Mao*, *Dimensions of the Sacred*). A staunch anti-essentialist, Smart thought that religious studies should be preoccupied not

with the search for a singular nature of religion, but with ways to organize and systemize our knowledge of the field. For this purpose, he created the concept of seven religious dimensions—different types of mechanisms for preserving religious experience. Supposedly, all dimensions are present in any religion, though their relative importance varies greatly.

The *doctrinal dimension* is an intellectually coherent expression of the main ideas of a religion, especially concerning ontology and metaphysics. The duality of body and soul, or the natural world and eternal God, are important elements of Christian doctrine.

The *mythological and narrative dimension* consists of all narratives that possess religious meaning in the eyes of believers. The story of Jesus is an obvious example of this dimension in Christianity.

The *ethical and legal dimension* consists of prescribed norms of behaviour, including a stance on what actions are considered good or bad in terms of morality, as well as specific religious laws and restrictions. The Ten Commandments and numerous commentaries on them are a good example.

The *ritual* or *practical dimension* includes actions and behaviours prescribed to or avoided by believers. Daily prayers, fasts, and masses form this dimension in Christianity.

The *experiential* or *emotional dimension* includes psychological states that possess a special meaning for the believers, or emotions saturated with religious meaning, with meditations and religious ecstasy serving as examples.

The *social dimension* of a religion encompasses the inter-religious social relations, as well as contact between a religion and the outside world, including other institutions, like the organization and politics of churches and congregations.

The *material dimension* encompasses artefacts, both man-made and found in nature, that the spiritual tradition endows with a special meaning. Church buildings, crosses, ceremonial clothing, and other objects constitute this dimension for Christianity.

Specific practices, objects, and ideas may belong to more than one dimension. For example, Christian mass in its entirety combines practically all of them. It is used as a way of remembering the life of Jesus (mythological), while being strongly based upon Christian ontology (doctrinal). It includes preaching of specific values (ethical), and the denial of communion can be used for policing a congregation (social). It is supposed to create an elevated state of psyche in participants (emotional). Finally, the ceremony often involves elaborate trappings (material).

Using Smart's methodology it is possible to untangle this web of relationships by, for example, pointing out which dimensions are more important than others based on historical and modern practices. The same operation can be performed with the fictional religious teachings constructed in *D&D*.

5. Dimensions of religion in *Dungeons & Dragons*

In order to compare the depiction of religion in rulebooks with the scheme described by Smart, I address the following question: which dimensions of religion are easier to include than ignore while instantiating a preferred type of story concerning religion? This implies analyses of both game mechanics providing affordances to include actions resonating with different dimensions of religion, and imagery and narrative signs providing affordances to interpret situations as something resonating with religion. Such an operation will allow for the dimensions of religion of *D&D* to be organized in a hierarchy according to the relative ease of including them in a game.

The emotional dimension is at the bottom of this hierarchy. While some spells and abilities, such as a monk's need for meditation or a religious barbarian's rage, might resonate with religiously themed altered states of consciousness, and descriptions of individual deities associate them with specific emotions, *D&D* contains few affordances for the systematic elevation of some feelings and emotional states in general, and religion is not an exception.

The ritual dimension is in a similar position. While *D&D* is full of rituals, up to the appearance of the word "ritual" as a term in the latest edition, it lacks affordances for portraying rituals as a religious duty. They are encoded as a means to an end, helping heroes solve practical problems, or, in the case of rituals available for Acolyte in the 5th edition—fixating changes in social status. The performance of rituals itself is not encoded as important, with few affordances to differentiate between rituals performed by members of different religions, or even by a Cleric and a Wizard.

The same can be said about the material dimension. There is a significant number of material objects in *D&D* associated with religion: holy symbols, holy water, material components for religious spells, and magical items connected with gods. However, the extremely pragmatic approach to magic and universalization of its rules make it difficult to instantiate stories where the material side of religion occupies an important place.

At first glance, there are many more affordances for instantiating stories that highlight the mythological dimension of religion. The very idea of mythology as a collection of narratives about deities and heroes resonates with the way *D&D* depicts religion, with its focus on personalities, names, aesthetics, and deeds of gods and pantheons. *Deities & Demigods* (3rd edition) practically identifies the creation of a religion with the creation of a pantheon.

However, from Smart's point of view, mythology is not just information describing the world and its most powerful inhabitants. It is a set of stories with a special meaning for the members of a particular religion. And the objective reality of

gods in *D&D* makes stories about them, despite their stylistic similarity to mythology, an objective history.

In a way, *D&D* follows the Enlightenment's understanding of myths as a sort of pseudo- or alternative science, a primitive way to describe the world, which, in the case of *D&D*, happens to be the right one. But acts of telling and veneration of said stories are practically absent in *D&D*: there are neither game mechanics, nor narrative incentive for a religious character to retell key myths of their religion, or for their player to come up with them at all.

The social dimension is in a similarly contradictory position. On the one hand, starting with early editions, *D&D* highlighted the existence of a social sphere of religion, with names of individual levels of Cleric often corresponding with ranks in Christian churches in the original *D&D*.

On the other hand, almost as early the social dimension of religion became evident in the case of antagonists: in *Temple of the Frog* (1975) adventure players fought a religious organization—a sinister cult. Over the years, "cultists" have become one of the typical *D&D* adversary groups, while evil gods became the single reason for the unethical behaviour of races such as orcs and the drow.

But the game provides few affordances for the further interaction with the social dimension. Adventurers belonging to "religious" classes do not have any game-mechanical obligations binding them to a particular organization, or even narrative restrictions imposed on them. Dungeon Masters can effortlessly ignore the social side of religion, while still staying completely within the preferred reading of the rules.

Moreover, the secular approach to religion as individualized practice is encoded as morally preferable over its more institutionalized forms. A players' party often includes followers of different religions, who, by definition, have to work together by overcoming or ignoring their differences, while their enemies often belong to cults of evil gods. This provides a lot of affordances to instantiate a story about a multi-religious party, united thanks to their "don't ask, don't tell" attitude towards religion, fighting against a faith-driven, homogeneous, and intolerant group.

The doctrinal dimension can be classified as one of the two most significant dimensions of religion in *D&D*. This was most noticeable during the existence of the Planescape setting and the cosmology associated with it, when a certain worldview acted as a universal basis for all *D&D* religions. The discontinuation of Planescape in 1998 (Appelcline 96) reduced the importance of religious ontology in *D&D*, but its metaphysics continues to influence the representation of religion and, in particular, the image of the afterlife to this day. Even gods and their deeds belong more firmly in the doctrinal, not mythological, dimension, for the reasons stated above.

Finally, the most important dimension, almost impossible to disregard during the instantiation of a story including religion, is ethical. *D&D* gods throughout history have been characterized by their place on the alignment chart, a simple mechanic simulating the moral and ethical perspective with the help of two axes: Good

versus Evil, and Law versus Chaos. The recommendations for religious classes position them as guardians and teachers of certain ways of life. For example, the description of Cleric in the 5th edition states that two most important questions for players are what god they serve and which principles they want to embody.

An interesting consequence of this attention to the ethical dimension is the need for evil deities to have equally coherent, if unattractive, ethical teachings, presented, for example, in the 3rd edition of *Deities & Demigods*.

This book describes deities in the logic of their dogma, directly using terms such as "teaching" and "philosophy" to explain what attracts people to worship a god. And the 1st edition of *Deities & Demigods* stated:

> Deities of all types, from the highest to the lowest, expect a great deal of work from their clerics in return for the power to perform miracles. Clerics are expected to behave in a manner exemplary of the teachings of their faith. Even common everyday concerns must be viewed in the light of their beliefs. Clerics must stand out from the common fold as role models of correct behavior, exhibiting greater wisdom and thoughtfulness, and living out the precepts of their religions and alignments. (*Deities & Demigods* [*AD&D* 1e] 9)

This principle of "exchanging" the adherence to certain ethics for divine assistance lies at the centre of *D&D*'s preferred decoding of religion, with other dimensions revolving around it. The doctrinal dimension acts as reasoning and additional motivation for ethical behaviour; the social dimension provides an environment where ethics of various religious teachings clash in humorous or violent ways; the mythological dimension consists of examples and justifications for specific ethics, etc.

This "architecture" of religious dimensions bears little resemblance to polytheistic religions supposedly resonating with *D&D* on an aesthetic level, but strongly corresponds to what Harold Bloom called an *American religion*, as well as the opposition between intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientations introduced by Gordon Allport and J. Michael Ross.

6. American religion

In *American Religion*, Bloom describes the religious outlook of the Americans as a form of gnosticism. He identifies the following elements as present in the teachings and practices of a wide array of American religious movements: individualism and scepticism towards society, a pragmatic attitude towards action, the idea of man's fundamentally divine nature, and an emphasis on information given by God to his followers.

He writes:

> James's italics center the Emersonianism of his vision, and bring us closer to crucial elements that mark the American difference: **solitude, individuality and the pragmatism of feelings, acts, and experiences rather than thoughts, desires, and memories.** The "personal"

> modifies "experiences" and prepares for the American Christ of the twentieth century, who has become a personal experience for the American Christian. (Bloom 8, emphasis added)

According to Bloom (16), the Jesus of American Christians is not the Jesus who died or the Jesus who ascended into heaven, but resurrected Jesus, remaining in eternal and direct contact with each individual believer in the endless period between Easter and Pentecost. Importantly, this contact with the divine is described as something natural and constant, even routine, thanks to, as Bloom claims, the American understanding of the divine presence in man. He also describes religious fundamentalism as a constant threat lurking in the American religion, with individualism serving as a defence against it, allowing Americans to refrain from changing the society in accordance with their religious views by focusing on personal practice as the core of religion.

It is important to mention that Bloom's ideas can be considered problematic, and for the purpose of this article they should not be taken as an accurate description of sociological situations in the United States. Instead, his work serves as a way to present an American myth of American religion, an intellectually coherent statement about what religion *might* be, supported by a number of previous thinkers and preachers, instead of what it *is* in reality.

And this myth strongly corresponds with the way religion functions in *D&D*. Religious characters remain in constant contact with their gods, at the same time remaining goal-oriented and pragmatic. The divinity of believers is encoded through the mechanics that allow Cleric to serve some abstract principle instead of deity, sometimes even openly stating that divine powers come from believers, not from gods. *D&D* strongly favours objective information about gods and intellectually coherent philosophies, a *gnosis* of different gods, over conflicting mythologies of their deeds.

But even more importantly, the American religion of Bloom and religion in *D&D* share a similar structure of religious dimensions, with ethical and doctrinal dimensions at the centre, and material, ritual, mythological, and, to a lesser extent, emotional—at the periphery.

They also share an anxiety about religious social institutions, showing them as ubiquitous, but somewhat redundant, thanks to the supposedly personal character of belief, and potentially dangerous because of the constant threat of religious fundamentalism, which could be countered by the individualized orientation of religious practice, encoded as "good". *D&D* provides many affordances to instantiate a story of a conflict between individuals who practice their religion in private, and a fundamentalist group trying to impose their will upon a community, or even the whole world, with a clear ethical preference for the former. This resonates with both Bloom's ideas and the scientific concept of intrinsic–extrinsic religious orientation, important for understanding religion in the United States.

7. Intrinsic–extrinsic religious orientation in *Dungeons & Dragons*

The concept of different *forms of religiosity* among believers has been researched by a number of scholars (e.g., Clayton and Gladden; Fichter). In this article I adopt the approach of Allport, later developed in collaboration with Ross. He identified three broad categories of so-called *orientations* among believers—approaches to the question of what it means to follow a religion: *intrinsic* (religion has its own independent value); *extrinsic* (religion acts as means of obtaining certain goals, such as social status, comfort, peace of mind); and *indiscriminately proreligious* (positive relation to religion in general, without seeking anything in particular in it).

Among different traits of orientations, Allport highlighted their relationship to prejudice. His research showed that intrinsic believers are the least inclined to prejudice, while indiscriminately proreligious are the most prejudiced. Allport wrote:

> the intrinsic religious orientation is not an instrumental device. It is not a mere mode of conformity, nor a crutch, nor a tranquilizer, nor a bid for status. All needs are subordinated to an overarching religious commitment. In internalizing the total creed of his religion, the individual necessarily internalizes its values of humility, compassion, and love of neighbor. In such a life (where religion is an intrinsic and dominant value) there is no place for rejection, contempt, or condescension towards one's fellow man. (Allport and Ross 441)

It is worth mentioning that neither content nor context of specific religious ethics were considered by Allport, who automatically assumed that religions, first of all, teach some values at all, and, second, that those values are connected with humility and compassion. This makes his research problematic and colonial as a universal approach, but it does reflect the specific situation in American Christianity, strongly influenced by the American Protestant tradition of contrasting an internal faith with an outward appearance.

Such contrast sheds further light upon the architecture of religious dimensions of *D&D*, by elucidating the reasons for their organization described above—a necessity to provide affordances for playing a religious but tolerant character. In *D&D*, tolerance serves as a way to encode some characters as "good", and, more importantly, as a gameplay necessity to provide the opportunity of creating a multireligious party.

However, as exemplified by both Bloom and Allport, American religious culture connects tolerance with personal adherence to religious ethics, implicitly contrasting it with the more outward dimensions of religion, especially with the social one. *D&D* simply reiterates this approach, encoding good Clerics as exemplar intrinsic believers, and juxtaposing them with cultists and evil races resonating with the image of extrinsic believers, more bigoted and less sincere at the same time.

The surprisingly thorough appropriation of Allport's scheme by *D&D* may indicate the deep connection between American culture and the specific understanding of religiosity present in both of those texts.

8. Conclusion

If we approach games as *simulations*, we should be able to distinguish which parts of a simulated system are necessary in order for players to recognize said system and which parts can be sacrificed without losing the resonance. In the case of *D&D*, the simulation of religion revolves around the image of divine beings who judge their followers on the basis of their abilities to follow the specific ethical systems provided by them.

This fixation on ethics as core of religion means that the dualism of extrinsic and intrinsic orientation is presented as universal, with no affordances, for example, to role-play a believer with, for example, orientation of *religion as quest* (Batson and Schoenrade), accepting its mystery and limitation of their own knowledge. Only "evil" religions do not provide affordances for imagining intrinsic believers, instead often focusing on the social dimension.

This makes all of the religions in *D&D* just different forms of American Christianity, with players choosing only what kind of Jesus (elven Jesus, dwarven Jesus, female Jesus of Magic) their religious characters should follow, and often fighting a good fight of individualized religious practice against religious fundamentalism, resonating with Bloom's ideas.

At the same time, scholars such as Mark Chaves (2) have strongly criticized the assumption that to follow a religion means to adopt an internally coherent creed and to allow this creed to dictate your day-to-day behaviour. *D&D* does not simply portray this form of religiosity as preferable, but also transplants this specifically American approach to a completely different aesthetic resonating with medieval imagery and non-Western cultures. Considering the extensive influence of *D&D*, this process may be actively harmful in terms of distorting the understanding of both Western pre-modern period as well as quite modern practices and views of people from different cultures, whose religions and views do not adhere to myths of American religion.

This article does not address the historical and practical reasons for this approach to religion, which deserve an article of their own. For example, the pragmatic understanding of the ritual dimension came to the forefront because of the pragmatic nature of *D&D* games in general, especially in the beginning of its history, when it was more of a war game than an RPG in the modern sense. Similar reasons can be brought up in the case of other dimensions. The important thing here is that despite all of those game-imposed limitations, simulation of religion

in *D&D* still maintains the behaviour of the simulated system to millions of players, reiterating already existing cultural preconceptions, and spreading them further around the globe.

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Consumerist Environmentalism in *The Sims 4: Eco Lifestyle*

Abstract: In 2021, the United States was the second largest emitter of greenhouse gases globally (after China, whose population was then over four times larger). The scale and urgency of the problem has been broadcasted for years, but the necessity and methods of dealing with it on a national and individual level seem to be quite obscure. Recycling is not the norm, oil and meat consumption is high, and excess spending is common. Consumption is still seen and presented as the means of satisfying most of one's needs as well as a necessary condition for achieving a high social status. Dealing with climate change, as much as materially possible, involves dealing with the specificity of American geopolitics and culture: among other factors, its post-Protestant views on money and poverty, imperial position, and extreme individualism.

The expansion pack *The Sims 4: Eco Lifestyle*, produced by California-based Electronic Arts, fits into the consumerist approach to climate change popular in the United States. *Eco Lifestyle* introduces air pollution, recycling, living off-grid, and local politics, as well as the styles and activities related to pro-environmental attitudes. However, these activities are stripped of their material sense, as the actions depicted in the game are not what limits emissions and carbon footprint in the real world. This seems to be more a strategy than an error; and yet, it is hard not to regret a missed opportunity of creating a playable and ecologically sound *Sims* expansion for the lovers of the gameworld—and the world.

Keywords: digital games, video games, environmentalism, environment, consumerism, simulation, carbon footprint, capitalism

1. Introduction

The expansion pack *The Sims 4: Eco Lifestyle*, produced by California-based Electronic Arts (EA) and released in 2020, represents a peculiar interpretation of environmentalism and misrepresents environmental action. There are more reasons for this than simply adapting the pro-environmental mindset and behaviours so

they can exist in the gameworld. In fact, *Eco Lifestyle* represents a characteristically American stance towards caring for the environment: a consumerist, individualistic, severely limited approach. This article explores chosen historical and psychological reasons why US citizens, as well as other people living under the influence of American culture and politics, are especially prone to reject or distort environmentalism. It also analyzes the *Eco Lifestyle* expansion pack, focusing on how the game embodies American consumerist environmentalism and on how it could represent the actual environmentalism better.

2. United States v. environment

Among threats to the Earth's environment, three are the most substantial (Greenfield and Weston). First, climate change, caused mostly by emissions of greenhouse gases, such as CO_2 and methane, mainly due to unsustainable heating, transportation, production, and farming. Second, pollution, both by chemicals and by discarded objects. Third, the exploitation of natural resources, such as land, seas, fuels, and water, which is related to higher emissions of greenhouse gases, loss of biodiversity, and, again, pollution. The United States significantly contributes to all three of these interconnected threats. In 2021, it was the country with the second highest greenhouse gas emission rates in the world, preceded only by China (Ritchie, Rosado, and Roser, "Greenhouse Gas Emissions"), whose population in the same year was over four times as large as the population of the United States (World Bank). This was mainly due to the excessive use of oil, gas, and coal for the production of electricity, heating, and transportation, as well as extensive manufacturing and consumption of goods, agriculture, changes in land use, and mining (Ritchie, Rosado, and Roser, "Greenhouse Gas Emissions"). The United States is also the country with the highest production of waste in the world; in 2018, it produced 265.2 million metric tonnes of waste, dominating over much more populated states, such as China or India. It is also the second-biggest producer of municipal waste per capita in the world (Alves).

There are many reasons why the United States contributes to the destruction of the environment to such a high extent, and they arise from its economy and politics as well as from its culture and history. Capitalist values, as in valuing an individual's prosperity and financial freedom above the well-being of the surrounding world, both human and non-human, have been ingrained in the US culture since the colonial period. The early settlements of Pilgrims and Puritans in North America were the place where they could, after years of persecution and exile, cultivate their variants of Protestantism. Their belief in predestination inclined them to see financial success as a sign of God's grace (Monbiot). And to the next generations, it was something perhaps even more dear: a dream sanctified with their ancestors' sacrifice, worth crossing the ocean for; something they ought to achieve no mat-

ter the damage dealt to others. Years later, writers such as Thomas Paine, Hector St. John de Crèvecœur, and Benjamin Franklin, who named and started to shape American identity, described Americans as men of action and commerce; they saw financial well-being not only as a worthy but also as a truly American goal. These claims were made at the dawn of the Revolutionary War, and were meant to address the major issue the thirteen colonies had with being colonies: they could have benefited so much more from selling the fruit of their (and slave) labour than from sending it to Britain without much profit. Paine even went as far as to describe profit as a human right, while subsequently declining basic rights to Native Americans: "[Britain's] politics", he wrote, "instead of civilizing, has tended to brutalize mankind, and under the vain, unmeaning title of 'Defender of the Faith', she has made war like an Indian against the religion of humanity".

The following development of the sovereign United States was based on territorial and economic expansion. The advancing frontier and the corresponding concept of Manifest Destiny established the foundation for modern American imperialism: vast perspective, ambition, and the focus on one's greatness with little regard for the cost of one's actions, especially the cost borne by others—and to say that the cost borne by Native Americans, other nations, animals and environments targeted was severe is an understatement. The rapid development of industry in the 19th century, coupled with large-scale immigration to the United States, as well as the developmental leaps the American economy took while the rest of the world was immersed in conflicts—resulting in the lavish 1920s and prosperous years 1945–1970 (Greenspan and Wooldridge)—reinforced the myths of American culture: the American dream, the self-made man, the land of possibility, the unyielding American optimism. Such economical progress was related to the exploitation of natural resources as well as the use of fossil fuels. The practices of obtaining and managing fossil fuels have both shaped current American capitalism (Altvater) and caused enormous greenhouse gas emissions: historically, the United States has produced the most emissions in the world and currently it still accounts for almost 30% of all CO_2 emissions ever produced (Ritchie), even though the growing economies of the world are chasing the United States in these statistics (Liao and Cao).

The current economy of the United States, along with the environmental threats that it poses, is strictly related to the political situation of the country. Like other countries with imperial claims, the United States has engaged in a series of wars over resources (Altvater) and spheres of influence; it has also, like other political powers, such as the European Union or China, dominated other countries economically, for example, through flooding them with cheap goods or making them dependent on its aid. As Andrew J. Bacevich claimed, the aggression Americans had to employ to free themselves from British rule made them show "little reluctance to employ force" against other countries as well as against individuals (123). What is interesting in American imperial politics is that the country's ability to engage in wars is supported by its predatory capitalism. In the American system,

social policies are either scarce or non-existent, which means that the accessibility of healthcare, higher education, and much-needed benefits, such as maternal leave, which for many means simply the possibility of raising children, relies on one's financial status. Signs of financial success, such as material goods, are, in turn, associated not only with luxury, prestige, or pleasure, but also survival, safety, and stability, and become even more desired indicators of status as they are treated as requirements to prove one's resourcefulness, competence, attractiveness, popularity, and so on.[1] Both harsh necessity and desire make US inhabitants fight for a higher income. In a society with little equality of chances, it often means supporting the empire's war-related potency directly: joining the army is still a way of getting an education, achieving financial stability, and gaining respect. Other ways of striving for a higher income include directly reinforcing the system that causes such need in the first place. Many attempt to become entrepreneurs, and those range from multi-level marketing (MLM) victims, through medium-size business owners, to brand-making celebrities and the uncanny mixtures of superheroes and supervillains, the likes of Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk. Those who cannot or do not want to be soldiers or entrepreneurs often become the under-appreciated workforce, supporting the system after all.

Environmentalism understood as a "political and ethical movement that seeks to improve and protect the quality of the natural environment through changes to environmentally harmful human activities" (Elliott), especially at a time when there is a dire necessity for it, poses several threats both to the American variant of capitalism, and to the acceptance of imperial politics in the United States and other countries. It challenges the rationale of the system, such as the myth of everlasting growth or the infatuation with consumption, as well as the importance, compared to other dangers, of fears necessary for the system to last: the fear of war, of social chaos, of the loss of position among those who have already accomplished something within the system, or those who feel they can do so in the future. If one was to accept the environmentalist point of view, especially a person who has already participated in the capitalist system in any capacity, they would have to face several emotional difficulties: cognitive dissonance ("How can I be a good person if I did that?"), internal conflict ("How can I address environmental issues fully if I want to keep things that have so far been giving me comfort, safety, or pleasure?"), fear ("My loved ones, my community, and I are in danger"), or even, as Kris Kevorkian and Clive Hamilton argue, grief related to the degradation of the natural environment ("How do I deal with the fact that the future I have imagined for my-

[1] Even though brand marketing is present all over the world, brands have a special significance in the United States, and that includes peoples' names. For example, on the frieze of Columbia University's Butler Library, there are several words. They do not form a maxim or a motto, though; they are just a list of names: Homer, Herodotus, Sophocles, Plato, Aristotle, Demosthenes, Cicero, and Vergil, which carries meaning, of course, and sheds light on Columbia's foundations, but also reads almost like Chianti, Balenziaga, Dior, Coco Chanel, Aspen, Paris, Italy, and breadsticks.

self and the world is forever lost?"). The complexity of the climate crisis makes it that much harder to comprehend and that much easier to deny (Weber and Stern). No wonder so many people, especially those immersed in systems like the American one, choose to deny climate change and reject environmentalism, or, subconsciously, to not notice it at all.

It is not surprising, considering the role of industry in the US political system and the expectations of high engagement in chasing profits put on US citizens, that when it comes to climate change, "Americans report higher levels of disbelief in climate change and lower levels of concern about the problem than … citizens of many other countries", even other "wealthy industrial capitalist democracies" (McCright et al. 184). They are also less convinced that climate change has a human cause (Weber and Stern 317). However, the American public is far from united on these matters (McCright et al.). It is the US citizens from the political right that declare impact scepticism—"the belief that climate change impacts are not serious or dangerous or are even exaggerated"—while the views on climate change of leftist or centrist US citizens do not differ significantly from the views of people with similar political preferences in other countries (McCright et al. 184).

Climate change denial in the United States has risen significantly in the 1980s and 1990s, when environmental problems, such as the depletion of the ozone layer or biodiversity loss, were first covered on a wider scale, and when the United States, compared to other countries, was already an economical superpower. As Aaron M. McCright et al. explain, American conservatives were then challenged, more strongly than ever before, with the risks and fears related to the system they approved of. Since then, the US Republican Party has increased its denial efforts and created an organized climate denial movement meant "to challenge the reality, human cause, and seriousness of climate change", a movement "strong, enduring, and influential" like no other (McCright et al. 184, 186). Since then, the perception of the severity of climate change effect has shifted on both sides, but it has decreased especially significantly among Republicans (Weber and Stern 322). Currently, political views are strong predictors of environment-related attitudes, and the factors used to describe one's political inclinations turn out to be associated with climate change denial in the United States. Such factors are, for example, "identifying as a conservative Protestant, regularly viewing Fox News or other conservative media, [and] espousing free market ideology" (McCright et al. 186). These are much stronger predictors of climate change views than other important factors, such as "education [or] scientific literacy" (McCright et al. 186), which is why the (significant) environmental movement in the United States has only limited success, and perhaps also why high consumption of oil (Worldometer) and meat (Kuck and Schnitkey), excess spending (Tighe), and insufficient efforts to properly manage waste (Stein) are not addressed enough. The characteristically American denialist movement also impacts other countries, especially the UK, as there is no language barrier (Weber and Stern 322).

The psychology behind climate change denial in the United States goes beyond historical, political, and emotional motivations, and even beyond the psychological processes that make like-minded, or like-situated, citizens follow the Republican Party's lead and lean towards "anti-reflexivity, system-justification, and climate change skepticism" (McCright et al. 186). One of the core traits of American culture is its individualism. Individualistic societies are ones where "the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family" (Hofstede qtd. in Kim 4). Some researchers directly tie individualism with consumerism (Bylok). Individualism is the opposite of collectivism; collectivist societies are tightly-knit and often perceive good social relations as more valuable than personal freedom. According to Uichol Kim, communities that had to cooperate more closely in order to ensure their survival developed more collectivist cultures. An opposite process shaped US culture: it is, after all, a country comprised of the descendants of individuals who took a risk to sail to it, of those who left their communities and went west, and of those who defied their surroundings and changed social class—and were praised for it. In fact, according to many authors (e.g., Triandis, McCusker, and Hui), American culture is the most individualistic in the world.

Individualism in the United States influences both the way Americans perceive the climate crisis and the way they aim to deal with it. In a given situation, members of collectivist cultures focus on the social circumstances and environmental factors influencing the individual involved, while people living in individualistic cultures tend to attribute responsibility to the individual—their decisions, capabilities, and personality traits. They are prone to make an error that Lee Ross called the fundamental attribution error: the mistake of overestimating the agency of an individual and underestimating other factors. Therefore, in relation to the environmental crisis, Americans are more willing to see both causes and solutions within the realm of individual actions. The focus on the individual might discourage people from committing to activities that make the most sense when seen from a communal, or even global, level, and make them more prone to climate change denial, which, in turn, will be related to attributing the "problem" to the environmentally minded individuals and seeing them as ridiculous, illogical fanatics.[2] Those who commit to more environmentally friendly ways of living, however, will overestimate the importance of the actions individuals can undertake, such as making informed choices in terms of consumption, diet, transportation, and so on, which, as much as they are imperative, are only accessory to the changes that industry and the legal system have to undergo. Some individual changes, limited in their scope, can easily be adopted within the (unchanged) system, and even used to its benefit.

[2] This trope usually includes hippie-like clothes, shallow interest in Eastern religions, and a certain lack of logic in the fanatics' actions, especially those related to their pro-environmental beliefs, or, if it is present, to their vegetarianism or veganism (TVTropes). Phoebe Buffay from *Friends* might serve as an example of such trope.

Environmentalism has already become a trend complete with heavily marketed products that might, especially if bought on a whim, do more harm than good. One of the products that appeal to individuals with the environment in mind is the game discussed in this article—*The Sims 4*, and its expansion pack *Eco Lifestyle*.

3. *The Sims 4: Eco* (?) *Lifestyle*

Eco Lifestyle was released on 5 June 2020, as the ninth expansion pack to *The Sims 4*, first published by EA in 2014. *The Sims* series goes back to the first *The Sims* game released in 2000, and it is consistent in its main mechanics: the players control a citizen who works, engages in relationships, and expands their home, the primary setting of the game. Even though *The Sims* game series is based on simulation and free play, the procedural rhetorics (Bogost) are clearly and strongly capitalist. In *The Sims* (2000), the most challenging achievement the game pointed the players towards was to succeed in one's career, accumulate wealth, and move into the best house in the game, the house on a hill. The game has been called a simulation of North American suburban life, where "commodity consumption is the *raison d'être*" (Kline, Dyer-Whiteford, and de Peuter 275–76), and an "ideological tool of late capitalism" (Sicart 5). Since then, *The Sims* games have been supplemented with multiple mechanics allowing the players to enjoy more activities and choose their own path more freely, but most mechanics are still pretty consistent with the aspirations of conservative neoliberalism (Staśko). The focus on earning and consuming, besides being clearly visible in the procedural rhetorics of the game, is also present in EA's sales model: the expansion packs are sold, but the basic game, which does not contain much more than an enticement to play, is free.

The *Eco Lifestyle* expansion pack adds a new town, Evergreen Harbor, to the game. Many worlds in *The Sims* series resemble particular cities or regions of the world, mostly of America, or point towards places known from American pop culture. To list just a few: Willow Creek is New Orleans, Del Sol Valley—Los Angeles, Sulani—Hawaii, StrangerVille—New Mexico with clear references to the Roswell incident. Evergreen Harbor is a post-industrial town, complete with a desolate seaport and abandoned salt mines; it alludes to the North American industrial past along with its environmental cost, and it is weirdly beautiful (perhaps particularly to an industrial-town-risen, nostalgia-stricken Pole). Evergreen Harbor also serves an important role in the game: it is a world where the new mechanics of eco footprint are first introduced.

The name "eco footprint" references the term introduced by Mathis Wackernagel and William E. Rees in *Our Ecological Footprint: Reducing Human Impact on the Earth*, which relates to the irreversible damage excessive human activity can cause to the environment, but the actual game mechanics of eco footprint more closely resemble carbon footprint (Huisman) as well as air pollution. The

eco footprint of a particular neighbourhood (Evergreen Harbor consists of three neighbourhoods) can either be neutral, green, or industrial. Achieving a particular eco footprint changes the look of the neighbourhood and affects the sims: in neighbourhoods with a green eco footprint, sims are happier and healthier; in those with an industrial footprint, the opposite. However, an industrial footprint makes succeeding in a career connected to the industry easier. The eco footprint is affected by the items on the lot, both the lot of the active sims family, and other lots in the neighbourhood. Trees, outside plants, recycled materials, and gadgets, such as Eco-Matic Smog Vacuum (Huisman 48), promote a green footprint, while appliances using electricity or oil, fireplaces, as well as other chosen materials (such as brick or metal) promote an industrial footprint. Appliances have a rating that determines how much electricity and water they use; sims with the handiness skill have a possibility of upgrading the appliances so they affect the environment less severely. One can also choose to live off-grid and produce energy and water in environmentally friendly (rain collectors, solar panels, wind turbines) or unfriendly (water generator, producing and using fuel) ways.

Besides the new world and eco footprint-related mechanics, the expansion pack adds new furniture, appliances, clothes, and activities to completely enable the eco *lifestyle* promised to the players. Sims can now recycle trash (for which they gain good reputation), make household objects and furniture out of recycled materials, wear second-hand-looking clothing, have a career in city planning, go dumpster diving for food or other things; they can even nap or have sex in the dumpster. There is also a political side to the game: local politics are represented by the mechanics of neighbourhood action plans. Sims can vote for them using their influence points (ten points equals one vote), or use their influence points (five points each time) to persuade others to vote for a chosen plan. Influence reflects privilege, outlet, and position—one can gather points through getting promoted at work, getting a degree, engaging in relationships with other sims, being active on social media, increasing one's fame level, donating money, hosting events, and, if some specific neighbourhood action plans have been implemented, through engaging in activities valued in the community, for example, gardening, fishing, repairing broken appliances, expressing oneself creatively, having a career in tech and so on.

Neighbourhood action plans can, besides establishing new values for the town, require all sims to conform to policies that might include saving energy or water. There are also implementable policies that do not affect the eco footprint but affect the community in other ways, for example, they make the neighbourhood greener (Green Initiatives plan), prompt the renovation of the town, which changes its looks and brings the townies more prosperity, directly increasing wages but also taxes (Modern Development plan), liberalize the community's attitude towards relationships (Free Love plan), promote certain values, such as caring for one's body, recycling, or conservative values (Rock Your Body [and Mind] plan, Upcycling Initiative plan, Back to the Old Days plan), allow violence between non-active sims

(Roughhousing Encouraged plan), promote stealing (Sharing Is Caring plan), or even force sims to wear paper bags on their heads (We Wear Bags). According to that last proposal, bags are piling up; wearing them is supposed to be a way of protecting them from being wasted. Perhaps the neighbourhood action plans are supposed to mimic not only the possibility of influencing one's community or country through politics but also the confusion and frustration one can feel while navigating policies as well as facing not only election programmes that contradict one's own values but also ones that are clearly misguided. Some neighbourhood action plans reference values declared by particular sides of the political spectrum, liberal or conservative. The political entanglement of the environmental viewpoint visible in many countries and prevalent in the United States can therefore play out in the game—and the gameworld can be made and perceived to be just as divided as the real world.

The two clashing spheres within the game—industry and the environment—are represented by two sims inhabiting Evergreen Harbor, Knox Greenburg and Bess Sterling. Knox is an "eco master" who shows up on the active sim's doorstep in order to educate them about voting for the sake of the environmental gain of the neighbourhood. He seems to be inspired by Robin Greenfield, although his looks and behaviours might also be the result of an active stereotype. In the description of Knox's family it is said that "sometimes he takes 'fighting' [against pollution] a little too literally", even though he does no harm to the other sims, and has no traits suggesting such actions (*The Sims 4: Eco Lifestyle*). It is hard to pinpoint what exactly prompts this description other than the game presenting deep environmentalism as something too extreme and making fun of Knox's controversial behaviours, such as dumpster diving, thus situating him within the eco-fanatic trope.

Bess Sterling, on the other hand, is an entrepreneur, and a corrupted one—it is said that she uses her position as Civil Designer to implement politics that favour her business. She educates the player on the possibility of voting in order to boost one's ability to earn money and asks the player to invest in her business, which seems shady, but which brings profit to those who invest. She also runs a scam asking sims to pay her money (one simoleon only) in order to be happy. After paying, sims become happy for a short time. This short-term happiness references the pleasurable but also environmentally and socially harmful practice of purchasing attractive but unnecessary items and services on a whim, which is usually embedded in and heavily propagated by capitalist systems, especially advanced ones like the United States. In addition, Bess's scam has an almost magical power—yes, the money is lost, but the feeling is real—and the harm done by Bess's scamming is not addressed. The game, even though it directly calls Bess a scammer, at the same time describes Bess and her boyfriend, Jules Rico, in a visibly more positive way than Knox—as "cheerful and charismatic [people who] hustle around Evergreen Harbor like an entrepreneurial whirlwind" (*The Sims 4: Eco Lifestyle*). As with all other aspects of the game, also here the player is the one to interpret the situation, which

is far from clear, and decide what to do; the game does not reprimand players for their decisions, and the gameplay does not change drastically whatever they decide.

The idea of introducing environmental concerns to a life simulation like *The Sims 4* is fascinating, and even though it is implemented only to a limited extent, it is still interesting and entertaining. That said, there are several problems with the way *Eco Lifestyle* represents the environmental factors working in the gameworld. Even though the problems of heating and powering households are addressed, and local politics are also represented in an adequate way, other issues, like the carbon footprint of different modes of transportation, are not included in the game at all. It might have been difficult to do, as in *The Sims 4*, unlike in other games in *The Sims* series, vehicles, such as cars, are not shown, just mentioned. It is the same with air travel, which supposedly happens when sims are travelling to other, possibly distant worlds. Even though there are no cars or planes shown in the game, sims can build spaceships in their backyards, and using them produces no eco footprint and is ecologically neutral.

More importantly, other problems are left out of the eco footprint equation because they would challenge the core rhetorics of *The Sims*: pleasure gained from earning money in order to consume, mostly houses and household items, and from the everlasting change of styles. Some materials, such as brick, promote the industrial eco footprint. However, changing the materials houses are made of produces no pollution at all, and often promotes the green eco footprint, which, with the exception of toxic materials, such as asbestos, and of emission-producing vehicles and appliances, is the exact opposite of what actually contributes to the carbon footprint in real life: producing, buying, and consuming new objects, rather than using ones that have already been purchased, even if in the first place they were not the most environmentally friendly materials. In other words, using the plastic object one already has is much more sustainable than buying a new one made from sustainably produced or recycled materials. The environmental costs of producing clothes and make-up, and especially the cost of fast fashion, are also completely missing from the game. Even though the *Eco Lifestyle* expansion pack introduces some new, second-hand-looking clothes to the game, there is no environmental benefit from wearing them other than simulating a hipster. One can even pair them with make-up looks by Mac available in the game, and it does not affect the gameplay at all. The selective and hypocritical application of the eco footprint mechanics is the main source of disappointment with *Eco Lifestyle*: it is more *style* than *eco*. It is about a lifestyle, rather than about a change, even if a simulated one. And the game does not even hint at minimizing one's consumption instead of simply changing one's consumer habits, even though it is one of the most powerful environmentally friendly actions a consumer can take.

The changes introduced by *Eco Lifestyle* apply to the other contents within the game to a limited extent. The eco footprint and neighbourhood action plans can apply to other worlds than Evergreen Harbor (if they are not disabled manually).

Objects from the main game and other expansion packs, however, do not affect the eco footprint, which is especially significant in relation to the *Cottage Living* expansion pack, which introduces farm animals (cows, chickens, and llamas) to *The Sims 4*. Meanwhile, in the real world farming is a sector that significantly contributes to the climate crisis through the unsustainable use of land and other resources, as well as greenhouse gas emissions, mostly due to breeding farm animals, especially methane-producing cows, for meat (Steinfeld et al.; Naqvi and Sejian). At the same time, meat consumption in the United States is very high (Kuck and Schnitkey), and meat advertisement is extremely popular and contextually related to health, including fast food ads on sporting events (Kuhn and Anderson). There is also a strong link between the anti-environmental and conservative mindset and attitudes towards meat consumption, including disregarding the cost on the side of animals consumed and the environment (Dhont and Hodson), which is exactly what happens on the level of the procedural rhetorics of *The Sims 4*. The suffering of each individual animal—the loss of life, bodily integrity, freedom, and relationships—I will not discuss here, but the costs go far beyond the already very high emissions and pollution (Singer; Foer). In *The Sims 4*, however, breeding animals, farming, and dietary choices do not impact the environment, unlike in real life, where the choices of vegans, vegetarians, semi-vegetarians, and even people avoiding beef help to lower greenhouse gas emissions significantly (Ritchie, Rosado, and Roser, "Environmental Impacts of Food Production").

Even though the environmental cost of one's diet is missing from the game, vegetarianism is represented in *The Sims 4*. It is introduced to the game as a character trait that makes sims nauseous and sad if they accidentally consume meat, because it is, as the in-game description says, "against the rules" (*The Sims 4: Eco Lifestyle*). This representation speaks nothing of the empathy and solidarity that guide such rules, but it is not significantly more superficial than the ways other principles and beliefs are represented in the game. There are some hints of interspecies closeness related to farm animals, too. For example, sims (non-vegetarians too) can feel sad if a farm animal known to them dies or is eaten. The killing of animals for meat, however, is presented in a hypocritical way. Animals are not killed by the active sims directly; they are sent away to be killed and sims receive meat by mail. Except for this inconspicuous horror, the countryside is perfectly *palatable*: idyllic, frugal, trendy, marketable, cottage-core.

4. Conclusions

Why did EA, a giant digital games publisher, one of the leaders of the American gaming industry, and a company with highly capitalist values, which can be seen both in their games and in the workplaces they organize (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter; Nisen; Cooper), even bother with the topic of environmentalism, and not just

as a marketing gimmick? As Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter argue, a lot of content in digital games reflects the predatory capitalist reality of the companies they are created in (380), which is strictly related to their representation of various aspects of environmentalism. Paweł Frelik notes that "the energy rhetoric in commercial video games … becomes the question of complicity in this wreckage" (92). Even serious games addressing climate issues seem to be influenced by the games dominating the market and tend to lack imagination when it comes to designing new energy-related power structures (Wagner and Gałuszka). Even though *The Sims 4: Eco Lifestyle* is concerned with environmentalism, it does not go against the grain. Quite the opposite: it perfectly fits the positions of American capitalism, which does not reject the topic of environmentalism; it capitalizes on it. Environmentalism is too visible now to be fought directly; misinformation, commoditization, and pointing environmentally minded people towards less radical (and less effective) solutions is a much more promising strategy. The YouTuber lilsimsie, after admitting that she enjoyed the *Eco Lifestyle* expansion pack, said that she did so as she was "one of those environment people". I, too, purchased the game with the hopes of simulating the change I wish for outside of the digital world. I was, however, disappointed with the quality and purpose of the simulation.

Addressing environmental issues correctly would require implementing major changes in *The Sims 4*, and not just within the mechanics of the game. The pleasure of playing is connected to the pleasure of overcoming in-game resistance (Csikszentmihalyi; Chen; Janik). In the *Sims* series, that resistance has always been created by career and financial difficulties. Succeeding in the game, in turn, allowed the players to consume freely—coveted consumerist pleasures, however, used to become boring shortly after the resistance was gone. Removing the resistance from the game altogether would make it unenjoyable. However, the career struggle and consumption desire are not the only possible mechanics of creating resistance within the game. A demanding environmental challenge, instead of an incomplete set of *Eco Lifestyle* mechanics that do not affect the gameplay significantly, could have been the source of in-game resistance and pleasure, if not more: a new paradigm for the game to be organized around. It would certainly be fascinating to be challenged in an environmentally correct simulation in a world as detailed and as playable as the *Sims 4* gameworld.

EA claims "to strive for environmental action" (Huisman 34), even though the purpose of the game was to be "more of a storytelling tool than an educational tool" (Webster). It is true that thanks to *Eco Lifestyle* environmentally minded people have gained an outlet in *The Sims 4*. The game is becoming more and more inclusive and allows the players to both see themselves represented, and to engage in recreating the stories of others. In the case of *Eco Lifestyle*, these are stories of eco-freaks, dumpster divers, kombucha brewers, social activists, minimalists. Even though the game tends to ridicule and distort these characters rather than promote

environmentalism, it is largely up to the players how many stereotypes they include in their own play. Perhaps engaging with such stories, as well as comprehending some visual and behavioural parts of environmentalism, can trigger the mere exposure effect and decrease discrimination towards the people represented, whether this representation is positive or not (Izard, Kagan, and Zajonc). Simulating a life one could have had—wished to have—outside the game might even empower environmentally minded people to openly question the status quo. Or it could go another way: players' need for environmental action could already be satisfied within the game, while they are actually contributing to the crisis (even if in a minor way). After all, the very act of playing a digital game increases one's carbon footprint (Möring).

However, the main problem of *Eco Lifestyle* is not its misrepresentation of environmentalists, but of the environment itself along with the actions that affect it. Neighbourhood action plans change only what individuals within the neighbourhood will do; and whether they decide to save water or wear paper bags on their heads, the system remains the same. The environment in the game, although slightly affected by the player's actions, and often not the ones that matter in real life, actually remains the same, too. It is indestructible: it worsens only to a certain point and can always be saved by buying a few solar panels. In this way, *Eco Lifestyle* faithfully follows the American approach to the environmental crisis. It questions the severity and human cause of climate change. It focuses on individual consumers' actions rather than on industries and politics. It also presents these actions in a distorted way in order to fit them into the capitalist system so it can remain largely unchanged and even benefit from what was initially a threat.

The environmentalist aspect of *Eco Lifestyle* can be equated with what Arne Naess called the "shallow ecology movement": a surface-level interest in seeking solutions to environmental problems that do not involve challenging the core factors that contribute to such problems: anthropocentrism, disregard towards non-human life, consumerism, the myth of everlasting growth (Drengson). Shallow ecology does not necessarily stand against what Naess describes as "deep ecology"—the change both within the results and the causes of environmental problems—it just does not go as deep. However, seeing "shallow" principles enacted while "deep" concerns are thoroughly omitted might lead the players to the conclusion that consumerist environmentalism is enough. The game is not strictly educational, but some players clearly perceive it as such (Grązka), which increases its potential of contributing to misinformation. And it is hard to believe that EA does not design its games with full consciousness of the fact that by addressing some problems and concealing others they are clearing the name of numerous flawed industries, such as (fast) fashion or (factory) meat—and under the pretence of playfully addressing ecological innovation, they are normalizing and excusing overconsumption.

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Turnt, Trippy, and Tipsy: Video Games, Drugs, and Allo-Ludic Play

Abstract: This article offers a flexible method for analyzing drug representations in video games as they map onto lived social realities outside the game with a particular focus on US cultures. While drugs have received ample attention in popular culture studies—especially in film and television studies—game studies has been slow to produce systematic analyses of these important cultural artefacts expressed through the video game medium. Drawing upon Donna Haraway's cyborg politics and Steven Conway's ludic framework (with the addition of allo-ludic play), this essay offers game studies scholars a flexible—perhaps even a "turnt"—taxonomy for analyzing the imbrication of virtual drugs inside the game and oppressive, discriminatory, and inequitable conditions of life in America outside the game. Through a brief analysis of stimulants, depressants, and psychedelics in Triple-A and indie games, the essay argues for the importance of studying drugs in video games to understand the complex, intersecting histories of the rise of the video game medium alongside the changeful histories of US drug policies, laws, and enforcement.

Keywords: drugs, video games, ludicity, social justice, American culture, alcohol, play

1. Introduction

As part of a larger project that investigates the parallel cultural histories of the rising dominance of the video game medium and the changing tides of US drug policy, enforcement, and rhetorics, this article establishes a flexible and changeful—or "turnt"—taxonomic framework for analyzing drugs in video games. While drug representations in new media have received extended scholarly attention with regard to popular forms like film and television, analysis of drugs in games remains relegated mostly to passing reference or an occasional article. This interdisciplinary cultural study investigates how covert and overt drug representations and the phenomenology of virtual highs map onto out-of-game lived, material realities

as mediated by drug cultures, rhetorics, and institutions (like law and medicine). As such, video games have also been integrally tied to these disparate, changing, and oftentimes oppressive narratives concerning drugs, addiction, medicine, and policing, the medium itself even being publicly charged with being addictive, not unlike a drug. By analyzing the various imbrications between drug culture(s) and video games, players and scholars alike can begin to see how these cultural narratives shape the experience of an entertainment medium that has grown up, as it were, during one of the most profound periods of change in recreational drug use, policy, and enforcement in the United States.

Following Adrienne Shaw and Bo Ruberg's call for game studies to move beyond rigid player taxonomies, narrow definitions, and simplistic analyses of video games divorced from their material and social realities, the following historical contexts provide intersectional frames through which to understand the various and often overlapping modes of oppression related to drug policy, policing, and sentencing, a lived reality for many of the most marginalized players within gaming communities (Shaw and Ruberg xviii). While game studies—itself a diverse, inter- and multi-disciplinary global community of researchers, designers, and scholars taking a variety of approaches to studying games—has seen an increase in research that attends to social contexts and social justice over the past decade, the idea of a "playful researcher", as Shira Chess terms it, has not. Building upon Paolo Ruffino's work on creative game studies, Chess describes such a role as being "not just to inform; it is to disrupt, produce anxiety around, and influence as a kind of dramatic intervention into a product", an intervention that finds only occasional company in a field still heavily influenced by less playful, more static frameworks, however useful they might otherwise be (Chess 12). This article's turnt taxonomy finds its theoretical footing in Donna Haraway's cyborg politics put alongside Steven Conway's framework of gaming ludicity. These theories are deployed throughout against the backdrop of post-structuralist conceptions of reading and meaning-making (Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Wolfgang Iser, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, Marshall McLuhan, etc.) that emphasize the role of reader, contexts, and the playfulness of language in meaning formation beyond totalizing understandings of authorial intent. Indeed, players make meaning as they play in a gameworld, and such play can transgress the (intended) structure of that game text (Piero, *Video Game Chronotopes* 22–24). By thinking through the relationships between drugs and games with both Conway and Haraway, ludic play becomes charged with the uncertainty and undecidability that governs lived reality, including the semiological narratives and cultural contexts that bear on video games, despite the ostensible stability of the algorithm.

Haraway's 1985 "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" continues to serve as a germinal essay in cultural studies, posthumanism, and new media studies among a wide array of other fields. In disrupting the longstanding oppositions and hierarchies of human–animal, organism–technology, physical–non-physical, and nature–culture,

Haraway imagines a cyborg ontology "resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity" that is "oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence" (67). The cyborg is a networked being that embraces partiality (over totality), polyvocality, connection, and the changefulness of threshold play, particularly the "*pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and … the *responsibility* in their construction" (Haraway 66). Viewing the world—and video games—through a cyborg perception enables players and scholars to see the threshold (i.e., boundary) experience of play itself, a topic I have written about at length elsewhere (Piero, *Video Game Chronotopes* 53–63). Players make meaning as they play, unlocking the potential agency to unpack, queer, or otherwise complicate the dominant narratives, images, mechanics, and play experiences related to drug representation and use through critical interpretation. In addition to hacking, glitches, speedrunning, modding, and other procedural interventions, the gameworld becomes a cyborg space that transcends the limits of the game itself. The analysis of drugs in games and their multifaceted connections to out-of-game drugs, drug use, and drug discourses requires a flexible mode of analysis, such as the one Haraway provides, even though some scholars might prefer a more fixed, "reproducible" analytical framework privileged by Western colonialist discourses.[1] This taxonomy may, therefore, be disorienting to some readers with its resistance to the scientific averaging away of that which cannot be reduced to data or (ostensibly) stable categories: contingency, playfulness, alterity, and undecidability.[2]

Powering this turnt, cyborg taxonomy are the ludic effects of these drugs, which I describe using Conway's model of ludicity in games ("Hyper-Ludicity"). In attempting to better describe the experience and design of ludicity—the Latin *ludus* primarily meaning "play" or "game"—Conway, building upon Roger Caillois's theory of play, offers a flexible framework of analysis that demonstrates how games offer players empowerment (hyper-ludicity), resistance (contra-ludicity), and even deprivation of play (hypo-ludicity) as a means through which to keep players engaged, playing, and otherwise in a flow state (Conway, "Hyper-Ludicity", "We Used to Win"). This is important to this study of a cultural history of drugs in games because virtual drugs are most often consumed to effect a particular hyper- and/or contra-ludic effect. All drugs are ludic, insofar as they each play with sense.

Building upon this framework, I also add "allo-ludicity" to the spectrum, "allo" deriving from the Greek meaning "other" or "differently", to express the larger disorienting change of sensation, feel, and atmosphere that games can evoke ("allo-, comb. form."). The allo-ludic encompasses a *sensoria* of play that "defamiliarizes"—in Viktor Shklovsky's sense of the literary term (11–12)—a particular set-

[1] For more on archipelagic thinking and metaphorical literacy in game interpretation and scholarship, see pp. 121–25 of my *Video Game Chronotopes and Social Justice*.

[2] For a more detailed critique of the hegemony of quantificatory thought, see my "Dialogical Numbers: Counting Humanimal Pain in J.M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*".

ting, haptic play experience, or sensation for the player.[3] The allo-ludic as a term captures a significant disorienting, changeful, perceptual, and sensory alteration of the gameworld that, crucially, "others" the feel and atmosphere of the game for the player. As an illustrative example, an otherwise hyper-ludic moment, such as consuming a power pellet in *Pac-Man*, also dramatically alters and disorients the player with regard to the gameworld: music changes and quickens, non-player characters (NPCs) flash, game rules radically change, and so on. The hyper-ludic, therefore, induces an allo-ludic experience that significantly others the play experience and game feel in a disorienting way. By contrast, a hyper-ludic moment in a role-playing game (RPG) whereby one equips a stronger longsword that empowers players to deal more damage is not allo-ludic because there is no significant, disorienting change in the feel and sensation of the game for the player. Drugs in games can be both hyper- and contra-ludic, giving players more energy, speed, and health and at the same time punishing them with vertiginous effects or lowering the player's strength, stamina, health, or other abilities. Additionally, they can also be (though are not always) allo-ludic in how they engender changeful experiences for players beyond a *single* ludic rule, mechanic, or object alone. Drugs' allo-ludicity can change the colours, sounds, the feel of the game environment, along with a character's sense of balance/footing in that world. Put another way, the allo-ludic might also be characterized as the overarching experience of ludic alterity: the gameworld becomes significantly less familiar, more othered. This is important because, at bottom, "play involves a close contact with alterity within a mutable system" (Piero, *Video Game Chronotopes* 99). Beyond drugs in games, the allo-ludic is a useful addition to Conway's framework for any games wherein play evokes a changefulness of sensation, sense, and what game designers call "game feel" (Anable 43–46).

While this article attends to US drug and gaming culture for the sake of scope, it is important to note that such issues regarding games and drugs span the globe and neither originate from nor centre around American culture. The games analyzed below hail from countries around the world, each game a product of its own culture(s) and each deserving of a separate analysis from that standpoint. These games developed abroad also, however, operate semiologically as cultural imports within a system of differences that constitutes US games and cultures; as such, the interpretive analysis rests not on selecting games developed only in the United States but instead on interpretations that trace how those games operate in the contexts

[3] McKenzie Wark writes about *sensoria*, describing it as "a plurality of cultural, technical, and social forms of apparatus through which the world is known" (5). She later adds to her considerations of how we come to know the world: "Rather than attempt to cure misperception through reason, or unreason through sensation, perhaps it's a matter of mapping the borders of different bundles of reason and perception as they congeal together in particular ways of knowing" (Wark 5). The allo-ludic attempts precisely such a mapping in and across moments of gameplay wherein the rational rule and a sensory change mingle together to engender a changeful, threshold experience for players, one that is disorienting in its alterity.

of US cultures, histories, and norms that US players bring to the game, given their popularity and influence. It is also worth mentioning that prohibitive and inequitable US drug policy has shaped global drug policies and cultures throughout the 20th century in ways that would require much more space to address. Using this ludic framework alongside a cyborg politics, this essay proceeds to analyze some culturally and historically inflected instances of stimulants, depressants, and psychedelics in games. Due to spatial constraints, the other drug categories and more extensive examples and histories I attend to in my larger study of over 150 drugs in games going back to the 1970s must wait for a larger venue, categories including steroids, medical drugs, psychoactive compounds, and opiates. The games chosen for analysis here from that larger work were selected to illustrate the diversity of how games feature drugs in various ludic ways across genre, decade, studio size, and narrative themes. Similarly, franchises like *Saints Row*, which include large amounts of drugs and drug references (and the added complexity of parody), would require a much larger space and, frankly, deserve their own dedicated space of analysis. It would be easy to focus this analysis on, for example, three games with heavy drug content—it would be neater, perhaps more convincing, but such an approach would erase the messy, complex nature of drugs in games, which include but are not limited to Triple-A games with heavy drug content. Drugs also appear within indie games, queer games, and as brief moments in games that otherwise are "not about" drugs: this article makes space for such games in its turnt taxonomy. Here and now, a handful of illustrative examples are provided to establish (1) the relevance of studying drug cultures and histories in games, and (2) the usefulness of a cyborg-ludic approach to these histories.

2. Stimulants: The hyper-ludic drugs we all want to hit

One of the most familiar drug experiences in games involves stimulants: drugs that energize, strengthen, speed up, and intensify a character's abilities. Sometimes these in-game drugs are modelled and named after out-of-game drugs—such as tobacco in *L.A. Noire*, *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, *World of Warcraft*, or *Fujiwara Bittersweet*, to name a few—and at other times they occur as their own Franken-drug creations that blend out-of-game drug names, properties, and effects. For the purposes of this article, the class stimulants will be used to describe any in-game item or effect that increases strength, speed, endurance, combat abilities, or energy beyond the character's typical maximum performance. These uppers generally provide hyper-ludic effects for players, helping them defeat enemies, solve puzzles, or speed through a level. With that being said, stimulants in games inform a host of player experiences, including allo-ludic and hypo-ludic play or sometimes just NPCs consuming a drug in the background or in a cutscene. One of the earliest instances of a stimulant drug in a video game is *Pac-Man*, first re-

leased in 1980 on arcade machines. Without any direct drug references in the game, the veritable "power pellets" Pac-Man consumes fit the description of a stimulant drug: they make him faster, stronger, able to then pursue and consume the ghosts that have turned blue (in vertiginous fear), and able to clear the maze quicker. The power pellets or "energizers" as they are sometimes called result in drug-like, hyper-ludic effects for the player. As previously mentioned, they are also intensely allo-ludic insofar as (1) the music changes to a quickened pace, (2) the pursuing ghosts become the pursued, (3) the ghosts (Blinky, Pinky, Inky, and Clyde, all of whom have slightly different AI movements) turn blue with a frightened, anxious expression, and (4) Pac-Man changes speed and turns into the aggressor in a game wherein he otherwise spends his time fleeing the ghosts. As such, the stimulating power pellets radically change the game environment, characters, and temporality, and the play is inverted and energized.

Even more explicitly, the 1984 DOS text adventure game *Drug Wars* specifically speaks to the geopolitical drug conflicts occurring routinely in the 1980s after two decades of "war on drugs" policies crafted by US President Richard Nixon's administration and then intensified during the Ronald Reagan presidency.[4] The 1980s see the mainstream use of both video games and so-called "hard" recreational drugs, especially cocaine (powder and "crack" versions) and heroin along with cannabis. Reckless politicians and journalists at the time proffered racialized (and racist) narratives to the public about the evils of crack cocaine that demonized Black cocaine users and communities. This coverage often coincided with articles and segments decrying the scourge of powder cocaine corrupting "innocent" white, suburban youth, creating a cocaine–crack opposition in the public mind that became a long-lived trope of racist drug discourse in America. Making precisely such a division, after all, was the intent behind the "war on drugs" at its onset. From its earliest incarnations, Nixon designed this legal and enforcement framework to punish, demonize, and marginalize Black bodies, voices, and communities. As detailed in Antony Loewenstein's analysis, Nixon's lead domestic policy advisor, John Ehrlichman, made their intentions clear:

> The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the anti-war left and black people … You understand what I'm saying? We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or blacks, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities, we could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did. (qtd. in Loewenstein 2)

It is no surprise then that a game like *Drug Wars* and its representations of cocaine and speed, in particular, would kick off a series of games featuring similar drug use, from *Payday 2* and drug dealer/empire games like *Meth Master* and

[4] The "war on drugs" will be kept lowercase and in scare quotes throughout to signal its illegitimacy as, in fact, a war on drugs.

Cocaine Dealer to games like *The Adventures of Crackhead Jack*. Drugs in video games are never simply drugs; they are always vehicles for dominant cultural values, ideologies, assumptions, and norms, which players bring to the game and which are encoded—to use Stuart Hall's term (484)—in the game itself through its creative and technical development. As Paul Manning has written in his landmark study of drugs in popular new media forms, "practices of intoxication are embedded within popular culture", which is always representing it and "associating it with other dimensions of social reality" (13). In *Drug Wars*, the New York "inner city" gets painted as a crime- and drug-laden landscape, one that fits the various moral-panic models of understanding public response to drugs, first set out by Stan Cohen in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* in 1972 (Manning 26). The destructive, racist narratives of "crack heads" as the new folk devils making "our" communities unsafe took hold in the 1970s, growing throughout the 1980s and 1990s. As Manning points out, this "cocaine narrative" dovetails nicely with Reaganonmics, shrinking the welfare state, and ramping up enforcement and imprisonment campaigns (26–27). The flight of white, middle-class residents of the southern neighbourhoods of the Bronx between the 1930s and the 1950s—such "white flights" occurring across the United States throughout the 20th century, buttressed by garden-variety racist narratives—was encouraged, in part, by these narratives of drug dangers in cities, especially communities of colour. While *Drug Wars* is about building a drug-dealing empire, the game moves players into virtual, racialized slums wherein players play poverty, as Adam Crowley has astutely analyzed (76–79), often through drug play.

Given their topological character, video games sometimes reproduce these damaging stereotypes and at other times resist them. In *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, for instance, the stimulant drink Skooma is associated with the racially inscribed and maligned Khajiit, an indigenous race of Tamriel, stereotyped as being thieves and known for their cultivation of moon sugar, which distils into the narcotic drink. In *World of Warcraft*, a luxury-grade brand of tobacco called Grimm's Premium Tobacco is said to be "a delicacy enjoyed by every single person of importance that visited Stratholme", including King Terenas, Uther the Lightbringer, and Highlord Fordring (Wowhead). A stimulant drug that has been similarly devastating to public health, Indigenous communities, and poor communities, tobacco nevertheless is often accompanied in media by cultural values such as luxury, seduction, work ethic, and other values not associated with fear, criminality, or illness. In other games, stimulants are not as much racially coded as they are simply added for their hyper-ludic effects. In *EVE Online*, "medical boosters" often have stimulating effects when consumed, such as increasing the range, speed, or radius of certain attacks. In *The Binding of Isaac*, popping pills is compulsory, and a full range of hyper-, contra-, and allo-ludic effects occur depending on which randomly generated pills appear in each basement. Like most drugs in games, the ludic effects take precedence over stopping to consider the cultural and ethical implications of such virtual highs.

3. Depressants: Live in your world, drink in ours

While many ludic drugs engender hyper-ludicity to boost speed, performance, and strength, depressants tend to operate more contra-ludically, but again, the ludic effects of drugs, unlike many other non-drug game items, can span the ludic spectrum even within one drug item; hence, why a flexible, "turnt" taxonomy is needed. Among "downers" in games, alcohol reigns supreme as being the most prevalent depressant in games based on my working review of drugs across game genres. Furthermore, the simulation of drinking is ubiquitous enough to merit its own content warning categories from the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB). Under the "Substances" Content Descriptor on ESRB's website, only six categories are listed: Alcohol Reference, Use of Alcohol, Tobacco Reference, Use of Tobacco, Drug Reference, Use of Drugs. In the world of gaming self-regulation, it would seem that the demarcation of drugs lies mostly on two legal categories that are restricted to minors in the United States and then a catch-all category that makes no discrimination between a puff of pot and shooting up heroin within a game. This emphasis on naming, labelling, assessing, and regulating alcohol and tobacco references in games makes sense given that the ESRB was established in 1994 around the time when high-school tobacco smoking and underage drinking were at their peak according to the National Youth Risk Behavior Survey started in 1991 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Trends", "Youth Risk Behavior"). While both of these trends have been declining during the ensuing decades, newer drugs and vaping continue to be popular among teenagers and young adults. ESRB substance categories, however, remain the same, which is not surprising given that the ESRB "was founded by and inherently reflects the creative and economic interests of the game industry" (Ruggill and McAllister 79–80).

With scant references to sedatives, such as benzodiazepines (e.g., Xanax), Kava, GHB, and barbiturates—the benzo-like sedative Pentazemin in the *Metal Gear Solid* franchise is one exception, having originally been called Diazepam—alcohol is clearly the dominant depressant within video games. More often than not though, games feature alcohol in cutscenes, as part of the virtual world's background, as in-game quest/mission objects, as a consumable or a mechanic, in game narratives, and sometimes as the primary theme of a game. In other words, the use–reference dichotomy used by the industry to classify alcohol use in its games falls far short of reflecting the actual ways that alcohol is presented to and experienced by players. Alcohol abuse and alcoholism are known to be devastating for individuals, families, communities, and public health, and while drinking rates are down among younger generations—despite a rise in alcohol use and alcohol-related deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism)—the longstanding, go-to drug for intoxication in the United States continues to wield a great deal of economic power in the country as a nearly $2 tril-

lion market, with beer leading the sales. Beer-themed video games, like the drunk zombie first-person shooter (FPS) *Zombeer* and the *Diner Dash*-esque *Beer Bar*, then, should come as no surprise. These bartender games are by no means new, as one might recall Bally Midway's 1983 arcade game sponsored by Anheuser-Busch, *Tapper*, where the player must serve patrons beer from the tap at increasingly fast paces amidst Budweiser ads aplenty. These arcade games were mostly destined for US bars, though the following year saw the release of *Root Beer Tapper*, a sanitized version sold to "family friendly" arcades; the game was rebooted by Square One Studies with their 2011 mobile release of *Tapper World Tour*.

While not much attention has been given to drugs in video games, alcohol use has drawn the eye of a few scholars. In the sole mention of video games in his *Drugs and Popular Culture*, Manning mentions *World of Warcraft* as a virtual world that stages alcohol and intoxication, citing Gabriel Thorens et al.'s study of alcohol use within the game (Manning 137; Thorens et al.). *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*)—an incredibly successful medieval-themed fantasy online RPG—features inns wherein one can buy and consume drinks, which cause the player's view to become tipsy and dizzying, and any number of holiday feasts, festivals, quests, and items that make reference to or involve consuming alcohol. For example, the quest "The Perfect Stout" requires players to collect six Shimmerweed for a local brewer, Rejold Barleybrew, who wants to appropriate this herb used by Frostmane trolls in—according to Barleybrew—their "strange, tribal rituals", a common *WoW* theme of colonialist demonization of the "savage" Other.[5] The systemic domination of colonizers intersects with systems of gender oppression through the privilege afforded to hegemonic masculinity. The drinking games in *WoW* represent out-of-game drinking games in which intoxication often results in the performance of hypermasculinity in social settings, often to the exclusion and even abuse of women. In mapping out "the consequences of the typology of contra-, hypo-, and hyperludicity", Marc Ouellette directly connects these ludic states to "proving masculinity, losing masculinity, and enhancing masculinity" (211–12). A man who can "hold his liquor" despite the contra-ludic effects—including to sexual performance—proves himself; similarly, games often position players in roles of proving themselves worthy of hyper-ludic rewards and progress.

Other video games invent pasts and futures whereby some mix of US history and fiction govern alcohol's use and representation, all the more true given the intersecting relationship between fiction and history (White 23). *L.A. Noire*'s detective-style crime game set in a *film noir* Hollywood style imagines 1947 Los Angeles through the lens of young, white police officers bent on fighting crime and advancing careers. Setting aside for the moment the game's far-reaching narra-

[5] The Troll race is coded most explicitly, according to Jessica Langer, as "black Caribbeans … in terms of accent and appearance … with Jamaican voice actors perform[ing] the Troll accent" (91).

tives surrounding opiates, war, veteran's health, and PTSD, it is worth mentioning here that drinking is a prominent part of this game's setting, which simultaneously pays homage to a genre convention within *film noir* and hard-boiled crime fiction while also encoding cultures of drinking and intoxication in the United States (and across the globe). One murder the player must investigate occurs inside Levine's Liquor Store; detectives attend to crimes and suspects hiding out in local bars; and for one case, the player picks up and inspects a beer bottle for clues. NPCs in the game can be seen drinking, and alcohol can be found in the homes of suspects. In this virtual post-World War II Los Angeles, drugs are often coded in racial and class terms with low-level drug dealers of colour demonized, while wealthy, often white, and well-connected drug lords emerge unscathed. Similarly in *Disco Elysium*, another murder-mystery detective game, alcohol in this dystopian world can be purchased legally at the Frittte kiosk and when consumed increases the player's Physique while lowering Morale. Drugs are so common within the game that some players have opted to do sober runs without the use of any hyper-ludic effects from those drugs. Drugs in the game are usually both hyper- and contra-ludic, which is true to the nature of the *pharmakon*, which in Greek meant both poison and remedy (Piero, *Video Game Chronotopes* 147–49; Derrida 70). Even more interesting is the rhetorical purchase of such a mechanic and how players have responded to it: in a game in which consuming drugs is the norm (even if not required by the game), a sober run becomes a kind of subversive play, one that indicates that playing sober—that is, without the hyper-ludic effects offered by the game—is considered the more difficult route. By giving players the genuine option of whether or not to use drugs in the game, *Disco Elysium* also increases its replay value, an important consideration for games in "the cultural economy of repetition" enabled by how games stage temporality (Hanson 113–21).

And then there are games like *BANG! BANG! Totally Accurate Redneck Simulator*, wherein alcohol and intoxication are a given, and beer bottles alone offer context for the main character's behaviour, the Meta Quest VR game *Galactic Bar Fight* that involves hyper-ludic drinks set within an interstellar bar, and the VR game *Drunken Bar Fight*, which is mostly what it sounds like. *Sea of Thieves* likewise offers tankards of grog for consumption and aesthetic effects; overindulge in one's drink, and characters become dizzyingly drunk and vomit all over other characters and the player's screen. Minor NPCs like Nurse Witless in *Alice: Madness Returns* are portrayed as having severe alcohol use disorder, always in search of that next drink. In the mobile game *Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp*, for instance, players can craft "Vacation Juice" with five Natural Essence, twenty Preserves, one Sparkle Stone, and a few other items, the final product resembling a fruity, tropical cocktail even though no mention of alcohol is made. Many players, it would seem, are "in" on the joke, since recipes exist for an actual rum-based drink based on the game's Vacation Juice (Experience Bar). These examples show just how ubiquitous virtual depressants are in games.

Video games can also stage alcohol and drugs in ways that foreground marginalized histories of drug prohibition often erased from more dominant public histories. Mo Cohen's *Bottoms Up: A Historic Gay Bar Tycoon*, for example, positions the player as proprietor of a queer speakeasy during Prohibition, navigating alcohol prohibition, police raids, and at times belligerent customers. Similarly, Cohen's *Queertastrophe* is a browser game wherein the player serves drinks to various queer "hotties" while avoiding one's ex-partners. NPCs with drinks are signalled by flashing hearts to help the player remember who has already been served a drink.[6] In many histories of drugs and alcohol, queer experiences are often omitted or otherwise straightwashed by historians and journalists, such as the thriving drag scene in New York City in the 1920s, especially in Greenwich Village. While drag performances in NYC date back at least to the Harlem masquerade balls of the 1860s, the criminalization of alcohol during Prohibition dovetailed with the ongoing oppression and criminalization of queer lives in the city (and across the United States). This created a scenario whereby some mob-run speakeasies that flouted the law became a home to drag shows and contests attracting thousands of people across racial and class lines, an important history at a time when drag shows, trans youth and adults, and LGBTQ+ communities are increasingly vilified, attacked, and criminalized by US laws, Republican rhetorics, and radical evangelical Christian nationalism (Piero, "A Far Cry from Greatness"). Video games offer designers the ability to engage the nuances of complex drug histories, and they offer scholars the space to unpack those histories with an eye towards contemporary social justice.

4. Psychedelics: Old traditions and new frontiers

Psychedelics appear throughout video games in colourful, musically imbued, and hallucinogenic ways. Consumed by ingestion (often as magic mushrooms or some potion), injection, or pill, psychedelics often function allo-ludically to change the sensory experience of the game, including transporting players via hallucination to different places in space and time. More so than other drugs in games, psychedelics play with player perception and "defamiliarize" the gameworld as well as the aesthetic feel of the game (Shklovsky 11–12). Sometimes, as in *Super Mario Bros*., consuming a psychedelic mushroom will simply cause the player to grow in size, whereas other psychedelic drugs—like the hallucinogenic "Bliss" in *Far Cry 5*—effect visual, haptic, auditory, and movement changes for the player. At a time when individuals, start-up companies, research institutions, and speculative investors are profiting heavily from psychedelic medical research and commodification of drugs like *psilocybe* mushrooms, peyote, ketamine, LSD, DMT, and

[6] I am indebted to Bo Ruberg for their excellent book *The Queer Games Avant-Garde: How LGBTQ Game Makers Are Reimagining the Medium of Video Games* and appendix of LGBTQ+ indie games, where I first discovered *Bottoms Up* and *Queertastrophe*.

others, Indigenous communities that have used these drugs for ages in ceremonial and medicinal contexts are mostly left out of the experience, business, and wealth generated by these endeavours, as Keith Williams et al. have recently discussed. The authors, paraphrasing Walter Mignolo's research, have rightfully taken issue with the "Imperialist baggage" of framing this upsurge in psychedelic interest as a "renaissance" given how the European Renaissance's creativity and economic growth were fuelled by "the riches plundered from the so-called Third World and what are now the contemporary settler states of Canada, the United States, Mexico, New Zealand, and Australia" (Williams et al. 508). Video games have historically appropriated psychedelic drugs and mechanics to contribute to game narratives, player disorientation, and various other allo-ludic effects, though such uses are often plucked from their Indigenous, spiritual, religious, and community contexts outside the game. In so doing, many video games further the ongoing erasure of Indigenous cultures occurring outside the game, something that occurs as much through video-game timespace itself as through specific elements and objects, like psychedelic experiences.

The *Far Cry* franchise, for example, often uses psychedelics in its games. In *Far Cry 3*, players retrieve magic mushrooms for a doctor who wants to create a medicine from them in the mission "Mushrooms in the Deep". Upon finding the mushrooms, the player experiences disorienting and psychedelic effects from picking the mushrooms—perhaps from some kind of mushroom cloud of spores they are giving off—making exclamations such as "This is new". Upon returning the mushrooms, players earn the "Magic Mushrooms" achievement. Dr. Alex Earnhardt, a white inhabitant of the game's archipelago setting—Rook Island—uses his Oxford education to produce and sell drugs to local pirates. In line with other games featuring the chronotope of the archipelago, white, Western scientific knowledge can be—though by no means has to be—used to "reinscribe reactionary, colonialist habits of thought and player decisions" (Piero, *Video Game Chronotopes* 120). In *Far Cry 4*, Yogi and Reggie stab the player with a needle containing a psychedelic drug without their consent. The assault makes the environment more colourful and engenders some metaphysical reflection, the player asking things like, "Who am I and where do I go in life?" The drug, therefore, is weaponized against the player. A similar situation occurs in *Far Cry 5* where one of the cult leaders—Faith Seed—uses a hallucinogenic drug, Bliss, as a weapon of mind control over the Project at Eden's Gate (PEG) cult members.

Outside the *Far Cry* franchise, psychedelics are used in a plurality of ways, from an Alice in Wonderland-like growth—as in consuming certain magic mushrooms in *Super Mario Bros.* or in *King's Quest*—or one's drink being spiked with ketamine as in *Grand Theft Auto V* to the implication of psychedelics based on rave culture, like in the indie game *Sewer Rave*, or even games centred around psychedelic experiences, like the 1998 PlayStation exploration game *LSD: Dream Emulator*. At other times, psychedelic drugs feature as in-game items associated with

specific missions, like peyote in *Grand Theft Auto V*, or otherwise used as performance-enhancing consumables like the hallucinogenic drug Drop in *EVE Online*. What is interesting for the purposes of this study is precisely how little Indigenous, religious, ceremonial, political, and historic contexts of psychedelic drug use are provided in these games, including the importance of psychedelics in 1960s and 1970s countercultural, anti-war movements.

5. Conclusion: Towards a "turnt" theory of drugs in games

While a more thorough accounting of drugs in games is needed alongside more specific, thorough close readings, this essay hopefully serves as a primer for that work. As I have tried to emphasize throughout, changeful and flexible methodologies work best to understand the complex, dynamic relations of in-game drugs to games, histories, and lived realities outside the game. With Haraway's cyborg ontology providing the philosophical foundation, Conway's theory of ludicity serves the study of drugs in games well, especially since some drugs—unlike many in-game items—cause some mixture of hyper-, contra-, hypo-, and allo-ludic effects. Beyond these items' effects within the gameworld though, the formal study of virtual drugs in games—their representations, narratives, absences, haptics, and mechanics—remains a significant area for exploration by game studies scholars working across disciplinary lines. This essay scratches the surface of a mycelium of intertextual references, mechanics, images, and narratives that communicate important cultural and social realities related to the consumption of drugs, whether for medicinal, recreational, or ceremonial use. In the United States, where a cultural drug revolution is well underway—with MDMA, psilocybin, peyote, ayahuasca, and ketamine legalization and regulation for medicinal use at the forefront—the cultural histories of these laws, enforcement, regulation, and social discourses are deeply entwined with social justice activism.

With regard to American culture(s) specifically, where widespread intoxication abounds—illicit, legal, and physician-prescribed alike—social problems like racism, sexism, ableism, classism, and corporate greed penetrate discourses of drugs at every turn. Video games are a crucial site for investigating these social realities, crises, epidemics, and injustices if, that is, one is prepared to read and interpret, even playfully so, beyond the intention of the designer(s) or the ostensible unity of the game's ludic structure. Such readings—even queer readings of otherwise "straight"-forward ludic operation—are not as much about the "thing in itself" as they are about tracing the movement of meaning(s) players create within the larger systems and social contexts of their lives. Drugs in games communicate these complex cultural experiences and histories outside the vicissitudes of status quo production and consumption. Put another way, a high score can become a *high* score for player-readers who embrace contingency in their habits of play and

meaning-making. Such methods of play, interpretation, reading, and imaginative praxis, then, can take on an emancipatory character in their unstated commitment to dismantling totalizing, oppressive structures and discourses, even as they relate to prominent drug discourses inside and outside the gameworld.

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Focalization, Subjectivity, and Magic(al) Realism in *Night in the Woods*

Abstract: The main aim of our analysis is to consider the use and function of focalization in *Night in the Woods* (Infinite Fall, 2017) and the resulting magic(al) realism subjectivity of perception and fluidity of the gameworld in the framework of post-classical narratology. Our suggestion is that the specific ludonarrative features and functions of the game and its playable protagonist, Mae Borowski, pose questions pertaining to the ontological status of the gameworld, making it an in-between, undetermined magic(al) realism space. Taking into account the conventional formulas and themes utilized in the game, it has already been discussed as an American story following the tradition of the so-called Rust Belt Gothic. This approach, albeit highly accurate, fails to exhaust the possibility that the events presented in the game, specifically in the fourth act, are only subjectively perceived by the protagonist/focalizer, Mae Borowski. In our text, we discuss the potential markers of subjectivity present in the game, with a focus on the game music and soundscape.

Keywords: focalization, magical realism, subjectivity, ludonarrative coherence, Rust Belt Gothic, American Gothic, sound design, game music

1. Introduction

This article is concerned with *Night in the Woods* (*NITW*), often discussed as representative of numerous American tropes and conventions. We want to focus on an aspect that has not been thoroughly presented yet, namely the structure and function of focalization in the game as connected with the perceived subjectivity of the

protagonist's experience, and the resulting ambiguity of the storyworld's status. Our findings result from around twenty-six hours of individual and tandem gameplay (21 February 2017 edition via Steam, Windows 10 PC, Xbox One controller), supplemented with a selection of YouTube walkthrough videos.

Various aspects of *NITW* have already been comprehensively discussed by Elizabeth Caravella, Mia Consalvo and Andrew Phelps, Patrick Fiorilli (in his exhaustive Master's thesis written under the supervision of Ian Bogost), Stephanie Harkin, Juri Honkanen, Justin Keever, Andrew Phelps, Jocelyn Wagner and Andrew Moger, Kathrin Trattner, and Kevin Veale. We relate to their observations to cover such issues as the game's concept and production, game genre contexts, narrative premises and major themes, character and world creation, player's agency, and the game's connection with the Rust Belt Gothic and American Gothic. What our studies bring to the table is a discussion of specific narrative problems—the main character's (un)reliability and the uncertain and dubious nature of what she can see and what, as follows, the player can recognize as either hallucinatory, real, or magical. We suggest that due to its intrinsic use of focalization, achieved with the help of medium-specific techniques, such as, for example, the narrative-driven ludomusical harmony between the events unfolding and the soundtrack, *NITW* is able to instil in the player a feeling of uncertainty. It thus opens the possibility of multiple readings with regard to the ontological status of the storyworld, a perspective not to be found in previous works on this game.

Therefore, following the already existing publications, we start with a presentation of the crucial ludonarrative aspects of the game and then move into the topic of the Rust Belt Gothic features of its storyworld. After that, we suggest three categories of formulas as means to characterize the game's affinity with the above-mentioned tradition ("little lies", "soul-searching", and "staying dead"). We also propose that the game could be read as magic(al) realism—an observation that has not, apparently, been made clear in the existing literature yet, though as we are going to explain, situating *NITW* in this category matches the fairly straightforward and widely recognized notion of the game as politically charged.

As it has been stated before, though numerous features of the game have already been discussed fairly exhaustively, what seems to be omitted are the unreliability of the narrator and its narrative consequences. Having introduced the game and its crucial contexts, we therefore proceed to present our understanding of focalization in video games in general and in *NITW* specifically, and to provide our reading of the fourth act of the game as highly ambiguous when it comes to the ontological status of the events that the player is able to observe.

2. *Night in the Woods*: An American game

A more detailed presentation of the game can be found in the academic sources mentioned above; we also provide it in our case-study article discussing ludonarra-

tive coherence and ludomusical harmony in *NITW* (Mochacka and Walczak). That being said, in this section we will refer to a selection of ideas from these sources to ground the incoming considerations in their proper context.

NITW, released by Infinite Fall in 2017, is a "dialogue-heavy" (Trattner 131) ludonarrative game (Arjoranta 2; cf. Aarseth). It is a 2D side-scrolling game with elements of jumping and climbing and adventure/exploration, and a selection of assorted mini-games (Trattner 131). As a typical adventure game prioritizing "reading and story over active gameplay" (Caravella ch. 6), *NITW* "requires players to develop and reinforce habits in decision-making, exploration, and moral assessment—through hexis" (Caravella ch. 6). Its main theme—depression—is explored with the help of the round-the-clock mundane routine of the protagonist's activities (Phelps, Wagner, and Moger 127). As Caravella puts it, the game operates on "proceduralizing ethical decision-making"; it utilizes "repetition as a narrative mechanic" (Phelps, Wagner, and Moger 128) and subverts established patterns of game design: it is an adventure game that fails to provide the possibility to explore (Phelps, Wagner, and Moger 128).

NITW was created by a relatively small team with the help of a crowdfunding campaign, which—together with its aesthetics and "themes of rural marginalization under capitalism, mental illness, horror, desperation and hope" (Veale 2)—situates it in the elusive category of indie games. In recent years the reception of *NITW* has become influenced by a major controversy over accusations of sexual harassment and abuse levelled against Alec Holowka (lead designer and composer of the original soundtrack). The approach of scholars publishing on *NITW* to the allegations is reflected in the disclaimers provided in works analyzing the game (cf. Fiorilli; Consalvo and Phelps; Mochocka and Walczak). As we do not support any form of violence in the video game industry, we have extensively stated our opinion on this matter and condemned the alleged abuse perpetrated by Holowka in the introductory part of our article "Ludonarrative Coherence and Ludomusical Harmony: The Case of *Night in the Woods*".

Characteristically, *NITW* has been discussed as "a very specifically American" (Veale 7) story. It also belongs to the so-called Rust Belt Gothic genre, or more generally, the (New) American Gothic. These univocal assumptions stem from conventional (American culture-specific) Gothic formulas and themes utilized in the game. The other widely recognized aspect is the Americanness of the storyworld, established and recognized in *NITW*, a video game that features anthropomorphic characters (cat-, alligator-, fox-like creatures) and allows them to jump on electric lines safely, while managing to render the atmosphere of a Rust Belt town. The existing criticism of the game, including numerous non-scholarly sources, positions the game as belonging to the Rust Belt Gothic tradition by virtue of game world and character design, narrative, and mechanics. From our point of view, classifying the game as following selected American Gothic conventions could result in interpretative consequences as to the ontological status of the storyworld. Thus,

we introduce some of the existing discussion on the game's Gothic, American, and American Gothic aspects here.

The Rust Belt Gothic is a sub-genre of narratives that transform older forms of Gothic fiction formulas: the forever antebellum, aristocratic, Southern Gothic South becomes the post-industrial, working-class North, and racial tensions turn into class struggles. Originally, the "Rust Belt" was a socio-geographical term, coined by the *Time* magazine to denote the Great Lakes region ridden with recession when "in the 1970s and 1980s, the 'heavy' auto, rubber, and steel industries that supported America's international preeminence in manufacturing suffered waves of factory shut-downs" (Palmer 1). However, "exceeding its localized meaning, the term now registers a social condition: 'rusting out,' for which abandoned buildings are the quintessential sign" (Palmer 2).

Possum Springs seems to be fairly close to the primary world, though at the same time the isolated town where the *NITW* events unfold does not exist in the actual world (Keever 1). As Consalvo and Phelps report, "many fans discussed and debated … whether Possum Springs was representative of a specific town, or a sort of 'everytown' facing an economic downturn" (340). For numerous American players, the game showcases a synthetic Pennsylvanian town (Consalvo and Phelps 341). That being said, we would like to observe that the cartoonish 2D animation of the characters, who are creatures with human bodies and animal heads (and animal personality traits), adds to the game's "everytown" universality, triggering generification (Alber 49–50) and situating *NITW* in the ranks of animal fable or a similar allegorical narrative, with the animal features of the Possum Springs population treated as pseudo-fictional (Hogenbirk, van de Hoef, and Meyer 10). The anthropomorphic characters are contemporary Americans universalized, rather than representatives of some fantastic species. Whatever happens in Possum Springs, happens where the American Dream has gone awry, where "poverty and working, service-class jobs that are largely dead-end take center stage" (Consalvo and Phelps 349).[1]

The gameplay of *NITW* starts at the bus station, which, as we see it, appears to be the hero's journey threshold, which she has to cross. The only person to come into town, Mae has to walk past the maintenance man blocking the entrance; placating the man with a can of soda pop is her first task in the game. Mae Borowski needs to reach "her hometown, … which is situated to the left, signifying the past" (Honkanen 59). Contradicting the traditional left-to-right movement of side-scrolling games carries a symbolic meaning, as the game "sets out to deromanticise it [i.e., nostalgia] by emphasising its potentially destructive power" (Honkanen 59).

Most of the characters' problems oscillate around not being able to leave Possum Springs. For example, "Bea … feels anchored to her hometown due to the redistribution of her college funds toward her late mother's medical and post-mortem

[1] This fails to contradict the game's universality. We agree with Susan Buck-Morss that "the rust belts of the United States' Northeast cannot be [3] distinguished in a material sense from those that blot the landscape in Russia or Poland" (3).

bills" (Harkin 115). Mae was able to move out, but as the player slowly realizes (via environmental storytelling, dialogues, internal monologues, or written diary), she was forced to come back. She is very much entrapped in the gamespace and the place itself is isolated, as "no cell phone service provides a link to the outside world, and the continuous construction near one end of town provides another barrier to exiting" (Consalvo and Phelps 350). As Consalvo and Phelps note, the game visuals are aesthetically indebted to such art projects as John Kane's paintings or Pete Marovich's photography, but contribute to the feeling of entrapment in the player trying to explore the gamespace in a much more powerful way (351), by utilizing embodied experientiality resulting from their engagement with an interactive environment.

There is a divide between the town space that Mae, Bea, Gregg, and the others inhabit, and the woods, taken over by sinister elders (Consalvo and Phelps 353). The elders hate "taxation and governmental regulation" (Keever 4), which they accuse of ruining the town. Their way of addressing the issue is "sacrificing fringe members of society … to an unseen creature that lives in a hole in the abandoned mine" (Keever 4). Mae cannot cross the town's limits and states that she does not actually want to leave. As we see it, the entrapment can be explained in terms of medium specificity (e.g., the need to construct a specific narrative architecture for the critical story path). However, we follow the consensus that it also carries a symbolic meaning, even more so as the game is characterized by a significant degree of ludonarrative coherence and ludomusical harmony (cf. Mochocka and Walczak).

As we see it, one of the basic mechanics in the game, that is, jumping (on electric lines, from one rooftop to another, etc.), coincides with the "rooftopping" tradition of the so-called Urban Explorers (UrbEx) community: "their fascination with abandoned hotels, schools, churches, theaters, train stations, and amusement parks expands the taxonomy of 'industrial ruin'" (Palmer 5). According to Asynith Helen Palmer, the UrbEx culture is predominantly male, and so we would like to point out that in *NITW* urban exploration is a female activity as well. Harkin notices how Mae's (or Mae and Bea's) escapades represent the two common tropes pertaining to the female inhabitation of the public space, namely "nonthreatening 'sweet and fashionable' friendship groups that comply to normative feminine behavior, and unfeminine 'tough girls,' who 'take over' public space 'aiming to please themselves first and foremost, even if by ridiculing or aggravating others'" (126). However, it is always a feminist act for a woman to overtake public space; what is more, "the girls' rebellious actions do not foreshadow their downfall … but rather meaningfully strengthen their unions via their shared appropriation of these spaces" (Harkin 126).

Possum Springs is not what it used to be; "the visuals of the game rely on the kind of elements documented in these depictions of economic destruction: row houses, abandoned storefronts, steel bridges, and so on" (Consalvo and Phelps 351). As Keever puts it, the game's "visual aesthetic … is cartoonish, drawing on the art

of children's books like those of Richard Scarry" and showing the existents "reduced to geometric abstraction", as in the cases of the convenience store, Snack Falcon, or the interiors of Mae's home discussed by Keever (5). For Keever, this technique is reminiscent of Cubism and reflects both the decline of the town and Mae's mental state, as it "lays bare the constituent components of its [the game's] world" (5).

Such a depiction of the storyworld existents suggests a temporal dimension. The town used to be a flourishing hub of heavy-industry operations, with its distinguishable identity, represented, for example, by local restaurants, some of them now closed and replaced with fast-food chain joints. The dialogues inform the player that the historically strong trade unions are practically obsolete, yet, as we would like to stress, a significant amount of information comes from environmental storytelling via spatial objects—for example, the mural in the underground passage or the boarded-up windows of the shut-down businesses. Possum Springs is—metaphorically and literally—broken.

The temporal dimension is connected to the notably American theme of identity. There is a constant tension between Mae, living in "extended adolescence" (Fiorilli 38), and her friends, forced to enter the job market. *NITW* focuses on the "adolescent protagonists' complicated liminal status" (Harkin 116), placing the character in "a particularly troubled period of in-betweennes" (Harkin 120), also present in the form of the queer identities of several characters, which are "sometimes not obvious at first sight since the characters are often not visually gendered" (Trattner 134).

3. Won't you take me to Spookytown?

To categorize the salient themes and motifs that dominate in *NITW* and, at the same time, represent American Gothic formulas we suggest three labels: "soul-searching", "little lies", and "staying dead". The first one, "soul-searching", means both the motif of ongoing introspection and self-analysis and the placing of the torment that the characters endure internally. The second, "little lies", applies to all the storyworld existents that relate to the dirty secrets and shameful memories that the community wants to keep quiet. The last one, "staying dead", conveys the idea that in Possum Springs characters are—metaphorically or literally—dead.

Let us discuss the category of "staying dead". Brian Aldiss and David Wingrove observe that Edgar Allan Poe's half-dead characters can be read metaphorically, representing the modern entanglement (75–76). It might be suggested that a similar mechanism is present in *NITW*; while some of its characters are actually dead, most of them are alive, but deprived of agency and/or the will to live. The game makes a discrete reference to William Faulkner's "Rose for Emily" when Mae and Bea visit an elderly lady on a house call to repair the furnace in her basement: the woman mentions living with her dead husband's body for a couple of

days, as if it were perfectly natural. This is one of numerous examples. Following the death of Bea's mother, her father is unable to run his business, spending his days in a nearly catatonic state. Another time, Mae and her friends come across a human hand, lying just like that in the street; the police officer present at the scene tells them mildly not to poke it with a stick. What is more, a person has gone missing and only Mae and her friends take interest. "A gnawing sentiment—this town is dead, really dead—is expressed outright by various characters, but all the more effectively through the motions of play itself" (Fiorilli 35). In other words, the player exerts a highly limited influence on the game, but the restrained consequences of the limited choice that the player is given have a ludonarrative, symbolic function (Fiorilli 19). At one point in the game there are two dialogue options, one being "You always have a choice", and the other—"You can always choose" (Fiorilli 38). Despite being alive, the character—and the player—are as helpless as the dead. Both dialogue options are rendered useless and as Fiorilli discusses it, death is the main theme of the game (19).

The second category, "little lies", concerns secrets and mysteries—awkward, disturbing, humiliating, connected with taboos, covered up with fake wholesomeness. Seemingly, the secret to uncover is related to the cultists and their victims, which sets the expectation that *NITW* is a typical adventure/exploration game. Yet, it should be noted, following Caravella, that:

> as the game progresses, some of the townsfolks' disdain for Mae magnifies, with certain members of the Possum Springs community even referring to her as "Killer" should the player interact with them, albeit without telling the player why, and so while Mae herself clearly already knows, the player does not until the middle of the game. (Caravella ch. 6)

The category of "soul-searching" has its explicit representation in the form of Mae's diary, in which she keeps track of her peregrinations around the town. Story-world-wise, keeping a diary is meant to help Mae maintain her mental health, as the local doctor prescribes. The game as a whole concerns introspection and thorough analysis of the mind, "what the game is really about: the in-depth characterization of its cast" (Trattner 133). And yet, another issue remains, namely how *NITW* approaches the mental states of the characters—this is going to be discussed in the following sections, devoted to focalization and its implications for the *NITW* narrative.

4. Focalization and magic(al) realism

Most of the issues listed thus far indicate a state of uncertainty, fluidity, and transition. The characters are not fully certain of who they are, and neither is the player. Inferences may be made, but the flickering of meaning remains, with some issues signalled to the player, yet never fully addressed. Are those events and bizarre occurrences real? The ontological status of what we can see is highly uncertain, to be discussed in this section, centred on the use and functions of focalization in the

game and the resulting magic(al) realism (cf. Bowers) subjectivity of perception and fluidity of the gameworld.

The "mystery plot" of *NITW* revolves around the secret organization of "killers in the woods" (Consalvo and Phelps 353). The cultists are revealed in "the videogame's third act, which marks a shift away from the slow-paced realism and the introduction of a supernatural mystery story" (Consalvo and Phelps 353). *NITW* constructs a storyworld that can be read as endowed with some supernatural elements. However, if read in the tradition of American Gothic texts, such as Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find" or Joyce Carol Oates's "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?", the events taking place are plausibly explained as resulting from (criminal) human intervention. This still leaves the space for them to be either entirely objective yet magical, with Possum Springs as a secondary world in which magic can happen, or entirely hallucinatory and subjective, with no magic, only severe (and badly maintained) mental health problems. Both options are possible, which yet again follows the strategies utilized by great writers still within the ranks of the American Gothic, such as, for example, the above-mentioned Oates or Toni Morrison, and their use of subtle magic(al) realism.

Magic(al) realism, as we understand it following Maggie Ann Bowers, has been labelled "specifically Latin American" (16) due to the immense popularity of the appropriate literature from this region, but fails to be limited to Latin America only. Perception of magic is culture-dependent and usually influenced by the dominant religious system, be it Christianity or indigenous beliefs (Bowers 4), and definitions of magic may vary from culture to culture, as "magic can mean anything that defies empiricism, including religious beliefs, superstitions, myths, legends, voodoo, or simply what Todorov terms the 'uncanny' and 'marvellous' fantastic" (Ouyang 14). Bowers observes that in Latin America magical realism is both rooted in mythologies and the mythopoeic, whereas in Europe it "is chosen for the purposes of literary experimentation" (61). Since the 1980s magical realism has been used to denote a narrative mode that helps postcolonial and peripheral authors "to discuss alternative approaches to reality to that of Western philosophy" (Bowers 1), with the aim of "questioning the epistemological premises of European post-Enlightenment realism" (Ouyang 14). Consequently, magical realism has helped the disenfranchised to be vocal about "issues pertinent to cultural and identity politics termed as postcolonialism and postmodernism" (Ouyang 14) and to confront totalitarian regimes with the criticism of systems of values and modes of thinking that support them (Bowers 4). The postcolonial impulse of magical realism can also be understood in terms of environmental activism, with texts putting human and animal identities and relations under scrutiny unavailable under the post-Enlightenment ontology and epistemology (Holgate 3). The evolution of the mode continues, resulting in new forms and formulas (Bowers 61). While magical realism cannot be contained in specific locations, there are spaces—geographical territories, cultures—suggestive of the mode (Bowers 31). They would be postcolonial countries

and "rural areas away from influence over, or influence from, the political power centres" (Bowers 31). The way we see it, the game's agenda matches the above-mentioned impulse to give the disenfranchised back their voice. Although Possum Springs is not a town in what we would typically define as a postcolonial country, it is a peripheral place populated by a demographic that falls victim to exploitation by centralized laissez-faire capitalism and has no say as to its present, or its future.

As has already been mentioned above, Mae and all the other characters are anthropomorphic. Nevertheless, "while Mae is clearly not human, she behaves as such" and "engages the player in the human-like physicality of depression" (Phelps, Wagner, and Moger 127). She is able to perform actions that—at least seemingly—contribute to the progress of the narrative. The player can see Mae act/interact, has some access to her thoughts and feelings via monologues or the diary, sees the changes in her perception of the gameworld, as well as changes in her stamina, etc. However, as has been pointed out, the control that the player has over Mae is illusory (cf. Mochocka and Walczak) and her function as the focalizer brings up questions of her reliability and objectiveness.

Game narratives are interactive, which means that there are always fixed elements (prescribed narrative) and emergent elements (player-generated content), and focalization is consequently determined by the interaction of both (Ip 237). As Jonne Arjoranta puts it, presenting selected definitions of in-game focalization, "no strong narrating voice may be present in a game, but the perspective can still be clear and distinct" (4). According to Barry Ip, "in interactive games, narrative is depicted through a mixture of zero and internal focalization" (237). Zero focalization takes place when "a panoramic view of information is presented such as details about the game world, the nature of a hero's quest, and other prescriptive elements that cannot otherwise be known" (Ip 237). In internal focalization only the information that a particular character can access is provided (Ip 237). The specificity of the video-game medium creates an environment where,

> In most cases, narrative is told through the eyes of the protagonist in terms of the forces acting on him or her, but it is also "performed" by a human player, who determines how specific challenges in the form of levels, guardians, puzzles, and so on, are overcome during play, thus drawing attention to the role of the player as narrator. (Ip 237)

The immediate and limited interactivity of video games combined with their narrative architecture allows the player to be the one who tells and/or reconstructs the story, even though some of the characters might act as focalizers.

Unlike in literature, in the interactive, playable medium of video games "the character-internal perspective" (Arjoranta 6) allows for some access to the mental faculties of the character; still, Arjoranta makes a point that "this perspective is embodied in the physical perspective of the character being played, but does not allow access to their mental landscape in the manner of internal focalization" (6). In consequence, it is possible that the player can be purposely deceived (Arjoranta 6), but when the character is a so-called reflector-character, that is, a character that

experiences the narrative, but does not tell the tale, they "can be confused or misled or they may refuse to accept the truth, but they do not deceive the reader intentionally" (Arjoranta 9).

However, Monika Fludernik observes that we attribute certain feelings and emotions to characters even in cases when the narrative fails to provide us with the "magical ability of narrative discourse to grant us insight into characters' inner worlds" (78). Similarly, even though there is no narrating voice in the game that would explicitly comment on the mental landscape of the characters, the player is not only able to attribute the perspective to specific characters, but also gleans a considerable amount of information pertaining to this landscape.

Highlighting the spatial experientiality afforded by games, Yotam Shibolet points out that by combining the notions of focalization and environmental storytelling a category of "focalization through movement" could be reached (52), and discusses how it "urges us to consider the way in which whatever is brought to the fore of conscious perceptual experience at a given moment, is implicitly and explicitly interpreted by this intertwined framework" (59). In Allison Fraser's words, "video games in which a player directly controls a character have opportunities to convey the character's subjective experience and ways of thinking to the player" regardless of the convention of the audiovisual design (13).

One of the specific tools used "to illustrate a character's private experience, often in response to changes in the environment" is music, "considered an element of internal focalization when it communicates or emphasizes a character's emotional state" (Fraser 11). As we are interested in the game's protagonist/focalizer ability to perceive reality, we are going to present some instances of how music is utilized in *NITW* to reflect Mae's mental states. Peaceful, soothing music can signal safety and comfort. In *NITW* it is apparently Mae who perceives that safety when, for example, before she opens her eyes in the morning, the music is soft and relaxing. Mae sleeps deeply, with no dreams; then she wakes up, stretching and yawning, and there is silence. The music is also peaceful when Mae stays at home and in the town, and in the opening of the game in Sawmill Park.

There is no music when Mae is getting ready for a party in front of the mirror in her room, talking to herself. The verbal utterances highlight her anxiety and lack of confidence, and so is the lingering, heavy silence. Instead of music, there is the pulsating rhythm of the tick in her ear, as Mae's ear twitches uncontrollably *circa* every six seconds. During the party in the woods the fireplace is also pulsating, the flames moving in a captivating rhythm. The background music fades out to silence when Mae gets drunk and loses control, threatening people in a hectic monologue. Then, Mae's first dream shows her destroying a gigantic monument and the surrounding space with a baseball bat. The ambient/rave music in this scene is appropriately dark and aggressive, as Mae wants to crush everything, and methodically smashes whatever she can reach with her bat. Metaphorically, the scene reflects memories haunting Mae, as she wants to get rid of them.

In the "Crimes" part of the second act of the game, before the characters enter the building of the abandoned Food Donkey market, the sound design gives the impression of something sinister and threatening: other than the howling wind, there is silence, creating suspense. However, when Mae and Gregg go inside, the suspense is broken by the lively, albeit slightly mysterious, music, to return with silence a moment before they enter the underground. Then, there is a minigame consisting in carrying a heavy load up the stairs, with music as a ludonarrative device (cf. Mochocka and Walczak). In the "House Call" sequence, Mae and Bea walk across a meadow and when they talk, there is no music; crickets can be heard, creating suspense similar to the one presented above, yet with a much more mild, delicate feel. Then the widow's house is filled with bouncy and somehow suspicious music, and when the furnace is fixed, suspense is suggested with silence again. When Mae realizes that the widow has locked them in the basement and reaches for a baseball bat to make noise, her memories are triggered, and the music suggests that by becoming upbeat and set in heavy-metal aesthetic. After the two friends manage to leave the house, they spend some time close to the meadow, and the music is soft and soothing again, as when Mae feels at ease (the music is also calm when she watches the constellations with her old teacher, but disappears when she is tense, as when she is dressing up for the Harfest celebrations).

Thus, as we have presented, in *NITW* music and other intradiegetic and extradiegetic sounds serve as definite descriptors of the protagonist's mental states and emotions and a marker of the shifts between narrative levels. Harfest is accompanied by solemn music, as Possum Springs inhabitants walk the streets in the night on this exceptional occasion. The tune becomes decisively spooky when Mae chases a mysterious figure who has kidnapped a teenager. Then comes the confusing scene in the forest—unlike other dreams Mae has, there is no blue light/colour-coding, but a red glow instead. Mae was meant to join her aunt, who is a police officer (the aunt refuses to believe that someone has really kidnapped a youngster, ridicules Mae for describing the figure as a ghost, and offers her a ride). Mae seems to stay in the woods instead, where she comes across a well or a shaft and the soundscape consists of the rustling of dry leaves as she walks; some strange and threatening sounds are coming from the shaft. This sequence is ambiguous, as the player might find it difficult to decide if the events are happening in the gameworld, or are yet another nightmarish dream that Mae has. The way this fragment is constructed would suggest a conventional case of contextual content markers of subjectivity (dream) in the language of film (cf. Thon).

5. The hole in the centre of everything

Towards the end of the third act, Mae and her friends catch the cultists in the midst of human sacrifice; the scene ends in Mae trying to outrun the cultists chasing her

and falling into a ravine. At this point Mae is separated from the others, and the fourth act, called "The End of Everything", begins. "Hallucinatory sequences" are an instance of narrative subjectivity in video games mentioned by Fraser (13). Though "the mental health of Mae and her peers is largely left open to player interpretation" (Phelps, Wagner, and Moger 127), as has been stated before, there are numerous suggestions in the game as to what might obscure her perception. We are now going to discuss the relationship between the subjectivity of vision that may result from Mae's mental health and the ontological status of the *NITW* gameworld.

Mae's friends are at Gregg's place, playing a video game, chatting, and worrying about Mae. Then Mae is shown in the forest, as if waking up from a lapse of consciousness. Characteristically, for a couple of seconds her figure appears and disappears again, as if glitching. This is something the player is not accustomed to. What is more, glitches are typically recognized as possessing "emersive" function (cf. Kubiński) and may drive the player's attention to the fictionality of the gameworld. Mae stands up and walks to the right with unsteady, heavy steps. At times the image of the forest is blurry and out of focus, which apparently signifies Mae's dysfunctional sight, again in accordance with the above-mentioned contextual content markers of subjectivity. Then the player can see her in church, laid on a bench, her friends and other people discussing what should be done next; after that, she seems to be shown in a hospital or ambulatory bed (the transition between these images differs significantly from the usual change of scenery in the game). Finally, Mae is reunited with her friends as she walks to Gregg's place, still very weak and unstable, and after having a pizza and a chat with her friends, she falls asleep on the coach.

The presentation of Mae in this sequence via visual design and dialogues shows that she is in a bad state, bent with pain, disoriented, falling asleep fast. Previously in the game, falling asleep signalled entering the imaginary dreamworld (as opposed to the here-and-now reality of Possum Springs). Now, however, Mae leaves a sleeping friend behind and goes to the forest. And then, the subsequent events might be problematic in terms of their ontological status.

Mae is in a deep-blue forest; the colour-coding is reminiscent of the unreal dream sequences, though it is equally possible that at this time it is only signalling darkness. While Mae struggles to get to the cultists alone, her friends follow her and together they finally confront the cult; they almost escape to safety, but one cultist is determined to kill them. Following the accident in the mine (where it all happens), they find their way out to the surface. As they leave the forest, they discuss the moral implications of their encounter with the cultists (left in the mine for dead). Then, at her house, Mae messages her friends, sharing her thoughts and thanking them for saving her. One of her texts says: "All of you are what kept me from floating off tonight". Finally, they carry on living in a surprisingly mundane way, getting ready for band practice.

We suggest that Mae could be read as an unreliable narrator in the sense of intranarrational and intertextual unreliability. The latter occurs when "based on

manifest character types" and "on behalf of their former existence" (Hansen 242), the narrator falls into a category of characters that are conventionally deemed untrustworthy. In turn,

> Intranarrational unreliability designates the "classical" definition—that is unreliability established and supported by a large stock of discursive markers … "verbal tics"—small interjections and comments that hint at an uncertainty in the narrator's relating of the events—or unresolved self-contradictions, etc. (Hansen 241)

Similarly to, for example, the narrator of Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart", who denies his altered state of perception, Mae tries to either conceal her mental health problems or exaggerate them so they seem to be absurd, "but does so with reference to situations and behavioral patterns that most definitely expose insanity" (Hansen 241). Given her actions and the reactions of the other characters, the player could perceive Mae as mentally unstable and thus unreliable in her account of reality. That she is not as reliable as it could initially seem is suggested in numerous sequences.

NITW oscillates between different versions of reality: one strictly magical, with the cult killing people as bloody offerings for the Black Goat who really demands sacrifices and rewards for them; the other(s), highly plausible one, with the murders and/or their supernatural explanation being the product of Mae's mind. The second option is as plausible as the first one, if we accept Mae as the focalizer, an intermediary between the gameworld and the player as the co-creator of the storyworld. The revelation of the final act of the game does not rule out either possibility. In a game, just as in a literary text, there are gaps to be filled. The reader may interpret *NITW* as realist fiction or may follow the magical realism path. In magical realism, the same narrative voice narrates what is real and what is not, all in the same manner; "they are given the same serious treatment" (Bowers 63–64). The mundane version of what happens is contrasted with the magical explanation of the same (Bowers 64). The transgressive quality of the mode can be also found, as Bowers has it, in the fact that magical realism dismantles the boundaries between the magical and the real, thus creating a third—in-between—space (64).

One of the tenets of magical realism enumerated by Wendy B. Faris is that the text is able to "instil doubts in the reader" (7), who then hesitates between the rational explanation of the events/existents and the acceptance of the irreducible magical element. This is exactly what happens in *NITW*. As Faris puts it, "before categorizing the irreducible element as irreducible, the reader may hesitate between two contradictory understandings of events, and hence experience some unsettling doubts" (17). Faris goes on to say that "the contemporary Western reader's primary doubt is most often between understanding an event as a character's dream or hallucination and, alternatively, understanding it as a miracle" (17). Consequently, it is the "combination of acceptance and skepticism that characterizes the reader's experience in magical realism" (Faris 20). Here lies the problem of how we should understand Mae's unreliability in the light of one of the basic premises of magic(al) realism:

> the magical things must be accepted as a part of material reality, whether seen or unseen. They cannot be simply the imaginings of one mind, whether under the influence of drugs, or for the purpose of exploring the workings of the mind, imagining our futures, or for making a moral point. (Bowers 29)

The implied reader of a magical realist text should not openly question the truth of the storyworld, "accepting both realistic and magical perspectives of reality on the same level" (Bowers 3). In such a case, could the unreliability, crucial in the discussion of *NITW*, exclude the game from magic(al) realism?

Addressing the issue of the narrator in *The Tin Drum* by Günter Grass, Bowers raises the question of whether a character depicted as "playfully deceptive", staying in a mental asylum, can "provide the recognizable realistic elements of the narrative" (60). Bowers leaves that question open and goes on to discuss the narrator from *Das Parfum. Die Geschichte eines Mörders* by Patrick Süskind: although the narrator's and the reader's perceptions of reality are apparently different, the casual tone in which the horrific details of the story are narrated situates the novel in the genre of magical realism (Bowers 61). Faris considers texts in which "it is difficult to decide which events are irreducible elements and which are visions, either waking or sleeping" to be works of magical realism, singling them out as "a kind of hallucinatory magical realism" (100).

Situated in a small-town part of the United States, and presenting a selection of eccentric characters, Mae's story seems to serve as a commentary on the "reality's outrageousness", as expressed by Faris in the context of the functions of magical realism discussed before. It could be said that it is exactly by means of magical realism that *NITW* is able to scrutinize the human condition and speak up on behalf of the marginalized, disenfranchised beings. Mae's narrative serves the defamiliarization of the mundane and makes the reader doubt the ontic status of the events and existents presented.

The unreliable focalization achieved primarily with the help of visual and audio clues is used consistently and results in the oscillation between accepting the supernatural as a norm in the storyworld and rejecting it on the grounds of rational thinking. As a result, the player never knows for certain if Mae is really able to talk to god-like creatures, or if the cultists really kill the underdogs of Possum Springs, or if all this is just a disturbed millennial's tale. In the light of the discussion presented here, we would suggest that *NITW* achieves the defocalization typical of magical realism and leaves the player in the in-between space, where their doubts can never be dispelled. It is not an either–or issue—the game is neither only about the subjective vision of the world conjured up by mentally disturbed Mae, nor about the secondary world in which townspeople can engage in human sacrifice fairly unbothered, if they feel like doing so. For a player willing to decode the markers of subjectivity it can become both.

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"A Flight from History"? Nadine Gordimer's Congo Journey

Abstract: The aim of this article is to shed light on Nadine Gordimer's political convictions in the context of the decolonization processes in the Belgian Congo (later the Democratic Republic of the Congo) in the years 1960–61. The article begins with a brief overview of Gordimer's political views. It is argued that while Gordimer's stance in the early 1950s had been that of liberal humanism (an influence that came to her also from the reading of E. M. Forster), by the end of this decade she began to question its relevance in South Africa. As a result, she decided to redefine both her political and artistic views, trying to forge a vision that would be more attuned to her position as a white writer in postcolonial Africa. This attempt is visible in her essay "The Congo River" (1961), at whose centre lies an ambivalence: while Gordimer welcomes the political transformation in Congo with cautious optimism, she also demonstrates a tendency to de-emphasize the country's colonial history by focusing on the natural habitat and describing it as an ahistorical space. This notion of nature is, to a large extent, a repetition of the colonial vision of the natural environment, which Gordimer unwittingly perpetuated, creating her own example of the socioecological unconscious.

Keywords: Nadine Gordimer, travel writing, postcolonial ecocriticism, colonial depictions of nature, the Democratic Republic of the Congo

1. Gordimer's perception of Africa in the early 1960s

In February 1960 Nadine Gordimer visited two countries on the brink of independence: the Belgian Congo, which four months later would become the Republic of the Congo (Léopoldville), and the adjoining Republic of the Congo, at the time still part of French Equatorial Africa. Inspired by this trip, she wrote two manuscripts—"Towards the Heart of Darkness" and "Africa 1960: The Great Period"—which she later reworked into "The Congo River" and published in the American magazine *Holiday* in May 1961. In this long and fascinating essay, Gordimer de-

scribes her journey up the Congo River from West to East Africa, all the way to the Ruwenzori Mountains on the border between the Republic of the Congo (Léopoldville) and Uganda. Enraptured by the country's lush forests and fascinated with the customs of its native inhabitants, Gordimer—a political tourist,[1] if ever there was one—almost forgot that she was travelling through the country in the midst of a historic political transition: at the time of her visit, the Congolese delegation had just returned from a conference in Belgium, during which the Belgian government, under pressure from the leaders of Alliance des Bakongo (ABAKO), the Congolese National Movement (MNA), and eleven other political parties, scheduled the first democratic elections for 30 June 1960. While the country was not yet prepared for such a swift transition of power,[2] the political mood was at once defiant and celebratory: Gordimer recalls reading the inscription "Vive le Roi M. Kasavubu[3] et l'Indépendance" scribbled on one of the barges on which she travelled. "And whenever it caught my eye", writes Gordimer, "there was brought home to me the realisation that Africa, however troubled it may be, has never been more interesting than it is in this decade; it may never be so interesting again" ("The Congo River" 171).

Gordimer's interest in Africa was not confined to the late 1950s and early 1960s; as she explains in "The Congo River", two periods in the country's history fascinate her in particular:

> The Africa the nineteenth-century explorers found … and the Africa I had seen emergent in the city life of Stanley Pool are in living coexistence though centuries apart. These are the two great periods of the continent; the colonial Africa that came between them was the dullest, despite its achievements and historical necessity. (171)

A question worth asking is why Gordimer did not dwell on the colonial history of the Belgian Congo, concentrating instead on the recent (for her) postcolonial period and on the history of the 19th-century exploration of the country. Through this question we can seek to understand better her political development in the late 1950s and early 1960s—a time in which she redefined her views and reconsidered her role as a writer and public intellectual.

This article will continue with a brief overview of Gordimer's political convictions in the late 1950s. It was in this decade that she began to question her belief in liberal humanism and, at the same time, seek a different perspective—both

[1] Gordimer perfectly fits the description of the political tourist, as defined by Maureen Moynagh—"The political tourist belongs to a particular category of traveller, one who seeks to participate in or manifest solidarity with a political struggle taking place 'elsewhere' in the world" (3).

[2] As Martin Meredith writes, the Congolese had no experience at organizing local or general elections; they also had no trained cadres to run a newly formed state (101). Meredith notes that, faced with the strong independence movements in Congo, the Belgians decided to make a gamble: in the Belgian gamble—*le pari Congolais*—the Belgian authorities "would provide Congolese politicians with the trappings of power while purchasing enough goodwill to enable them to continue running the country much as before" (101).

[3] Joseph Kasavubu, the leader of ABAKO, was the first president of the country in the years 1960–65.

political and cultural—from which to look upon South Africa. An early attempt to form this perspective is visible in "The Congo River", which will be the main focus of this article. The analysis of "The Congo River" will concentrate both on Gordimer's treatment of the political situation in Congo and on her description of the natural environment—a topic that features prominently in the essay. It will be argued that the descriptions of the Congo River and the Ituri Rainforest show Gordimer's attempts to reach beyond the colonial standpoint by demonstrating her support for the political emancipation of the postcolonial Congo. This attempt is, nevertheless, to some extent flawed insofar as her vision of the country relies heavily on colonial views of nature.

2. Gordimer's political stance in the late 1950s

To begin with, it should be understood that Gordimer's outspoken interest in Africa was not merely that of a tourist. She was born in South Africa—a descendant of Jewish émigrés from England and Lithuania—and lived in her native town of Springs before moving to Johannesburg in her early twenties. By the late 1950s, she was already an acclaimed novelist and short-story writer, whose works gave many international readers insight into the functioning of apartheid. As Dorothy Driver notes, Gordimer, similarly to Dan Jacobson and Jack Cope, was one of the leading English-language short-story writers in South Africa in the 1950s, a representant of African modernism, with its emphasis on self-reflexivity, irony, and ambiguity. While this tradition was "short-lived" (Driver 389), as in the 1960s writers increasingly turned to social realism and naturalism, it shaped the careers of Gordimer, Jacobson, and Cope. In the early 1950s, Gordimer saw herself chiefly as a short-story writer, influenced by the modernist tradition: as Driver rightly notes, her aim was "not to define herself as a specifically South African writer but rather to set herself on a modernist world stage" (391). Emphasizing that she was "a natural writer" (Bazin and Seymour 9), not one created by political and economic circumstances (the international demand for South African literature, which was generated by the publication of Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* in 1948), Gordimer positioned herself as an author inspired by the English modernist tradition, especially E. M. Forster, who, as she noted in a 1965 interview, "influenced my handling of human relationships and, indeed, my conception of them" (Bazin and Seymour 37). While Forster's influence was formative and clearly visible in her early works, it became problematic in the late 1950s, when the doctrine of liberal humanism began to be questioned by both white and black writers. Peter Blair notes that Gordimer's novel *A World of Strangers* (1958), while rooted in Forster's liberal humanist principles, also ironized the main protagonist's fascination with shebeen jazz culture, which Blair compares to a "voyeuristic urban safari" (484). Clearly, by the end of the 1950s, Gordimer began to have doubts about the social

and political relevance of Forster's principle of "only connect"[4] and the liberal notion of multiculturalism, as it dominated in the late 1940s and the early 1950s.

By the late 1950s, Gordimer's belief in liberalism and multiracialism was gradually being undermined by the intransigent policy of the apartheid government on the one hand, and, on the other, the influence of African nationalism, which was increasingly prominent across the continent. Gordimer reacted by distancing herself from her white, middle-class upbringing and by questioning the racist and supremacist values characteristic of her social milieu. In an interview with John Barkham in 1962, she described her political development in the following words: "First, you know, you leave your mother's house, and later you leave the house of the white race" (Bazin and Seymour 9). This gesture of political emancipation was, to some extent, a preparation for what Gordimer saw as both desirable and inevitable: the end of white supremacy and the beginning of a black-majority rule. In this situation, Gordimer predicted, the country's white population would be given a choice: either to leave or to play a secondary role in the country's social and political life. Mentioning Ghana, which gained its independence in 1957, Gordimer noted that the only white citizens who found their place in the country were those who became "foreign experts": "They are living as equals among the Africans, they have no say in the affairs of the country for the Africans to resent and they are contributing something useful and welcome to the development of Africa" ("Where Do Whites Fit In?" 35).

Gordimer felt that if she was one day to assume the role that she imagined for herself and other white South Africans, she would have to redefine herself as a writer and public intellectual by abandoning her cultural Anglocentrism, with its modernism and liberal humanism, and by seeking a mode of writing more attuned to her political situation as a writer doubly marginalized in the sense of belonging to a white minority that remains critical of white supremacist rule. That she did undertake this task is clear from her volume of literary criticism *The Black Interpreters*, in which she argued that to be an African writer, one does not have to meet the criterion of colour, but rather to "look at the world *from Africa*" (Gordimer, *The Black Interpreters* 5) (as opposed to "look[ing] *upon Africa* from the world"). The adoption of this Afrocentric vision was a gradual process that began in the late 1950s and was facilitated by her African travels. "The Congo River", discussed below, is a convincing testimony of Gordimer's determined attempts to transcend the colonial and imperialist modes of perception.

[4] I am referring to ch. 22 of Forster's novel *Howards End* (1910).

3. Exploring "the new past"

Clearly evident in "The Congo River" is Gordimer's continual emphasis on change seen from the political, social, and historical perspectives. Adopting a stance of detachment, Gordimer becomes a figure that Stacy Burton pertinently describes as "the [travel writing] genre's quintessential figure—a solitary observer" (112), who "takes the vexed temporality of modernity as its subject, seeking to witness the present as it becomes past and read signs of possible futures" (89). That the present was rapidly becoming the past was evident to Gordimer both during her journey to Congo and in the process of writing her account; on the second page of her narrative, she makes the following comment: "Perhaps, while I am writing, the new past, so recent that it is almost the present is disappearing without trace as the older one did" ("The Congo River" 158). The Belgian occupation of Congo—"the old past"—was superseded by the turbulent years of 1959 and 1960—"the new past"—only to give way to an equally dynamic and unpredictable present. In July 1960, the country was riven by internal conflict, as the Katanga province, led by Moise Tshombe, declared its independence. The country's Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba, struggled to retain power, seeking to obtain support first from the United Nations and then the Soviet Union. Lumumba would be executed in January 1961, but this act, supported by the United Nations and the United States, did not bring stability to the country. From 1961, the country was led by Colonel Joseph Mobutu, who became the country's president in 1965 and remained in office until 1997.

When writing about politics, Gordimer's main task was to convey the attitude of hope connected with the postcolonial processes in Congo (and across Africa) without losing the quality of political good judgment, characteristic of her essays. Striking a balance between hopefulness and realism is her aim throughout "The Congo River", but nowhere is this visible more clearly than on the last pages of the essay, which concentrate on the triumphant arrival of Moise Tshombe, the president of the secessionist state of Katanga (Tshombe would later become the prime minister of the country in the years 1964–65). Tshombe, recently returned from a conference in Brussels (in January 1960) during which the country was granted its independence, is described as "a beamish, very young-looking man" (Gordimer, "The Congo River" 185) who exudes authority and courage, embodying the hopes and aspirations of his jubilant countrymen. Gordimer sounds a note of caution when she mentions Tshombe's companions: "[T]he faces of [unknown] white men", representing the imminent danger of neocolonialism and "a mountainously fat chief, holding a fly whisk with the authority of a sceptre" ("The Congo River" 185), who embodies the dangers of internal conflicts and tribal warfare. Gordimer leaves her readers with this image, conveying her attitude of ambivalence towards the newly independent country. An astute political commentator, she also iden-

tifies other challenges faced by the country, such as the scarcity of qualified personnel and the lack of political experience in the running of a democratic country.

While Gordimer emphasizes political change and supports the independence claims of the Congolese, she seems uninterested in the colonial history of the country. As a result, her writing about the Belgian occupation of Congo often proves perfunctory. This tendency is at its clearest in the references to two figures: Henry Morton Stanley and Joseph Conrad.

4. Exploring "the old past"

If, as Steve Clark writes, "[t]he chief fascination of the contemporary travel genre lies in [the] project of formulating an acceptable, or perhaps less culpable, post-imperial voice" (10), part of this immense project includes confronting the imperial voices that have shaped a given region. In the case of Gordimer's essay, the two primary imperialist voices that emerge in her vision of Congo are those of Henry Morton Stanley and Joseph Conrad. As Mary Louise Pratt notes, the two men, with their experience of "Euro-expansionism, white supremacy, class domination, and heterosexism" became "principal architects of the often imperialist internal critique of empire" (206). What may be surprising is that despite Gordimer's anti-imperialist stance, she looks upon Stanley not as a colonizer and exploiter but as an explorer, whose "genius of adventurousness" ("The Congo River" 166) was nevertheless tainted by his mercantile attitude to the continent and its inhabitants. Stanley is mentioned in the context of his famous 1886–89 mission to rescue Emin Pasha, the Governor of Equatoria in the Sudan—an expedition that Joseph Conrad condemned as "the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience" (qtd. in Meyers 79). What Gordimer neglects to mention is the death and destruction that Stanley's expedition left in its wake,[5] choosing instead to view him as an adventurer.[6]

The references to Conrad are less ahistorical than those to Stanley: after mentioning what Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin describe as "the orthodox modernist reading of Conrad's novella [*Heart of Darkness*]" (160),[7] Gordimer goes on to

[5] As Jeffrey Meyers writes, "Stanley burned villages, killed unarmed Africans, inflicted severe lashings, beat some porters to death, executed deserters, captured Africans, sold them as slaves, and served them as human sacrifice to starving cannibals" (78). Tim Youngs writes about the imperialist aspect of Stanley's expedition, noting that by coming to the rescue of Emin Pasha, Stanley was "secretly acting for Leopold [II], who wished to annex Equatoria to the Congo Free State" (162).

[6] It should be added, nevertheless, that Gordimer makes a more general, ironic comment about the agents of Leopold II, who "brought 'civilization' to the river in the 1880s" ("The Congo River" 166).

[7] Referring to the Congo River, Gordimer writes, "It leads to what Joseph Conrad called the heart of darkness; the least-known, most subjectively described depths of the continent where men have always feared to meet the dark places of their own souls" ("The Congo River" 163).

add that Conrad's description of the Congo and of the forest is a projection of his "horror" at the cruel exploitation of the country by the agents of Leopold II: "The inviolate privacy of the primeval forest became a brooding symbol of the ugly deeds that were done there" ("The Congo River" 166). By contrast to her interpretation of Conrad's novella, the forest in "The Congo River" does not function as a reflection of the corruption of the white man but rather as an Edenic ahistorical and pre-political space. This is evident already at the beginning of the essay, when having described the abandoned colonial town of Banana, a slave port founded in the 19th century, she first comments on the rapid nature of political change in the country (the comment about "the new past" and "the old past" discussed above), before going on to describe a nearby fishing village. The inhabitants of this village, writes Gordimer, are "unaware not only of the past but even of the passing present" ("The Congo River" 158), as they go about their days making fishing nets, in the awesome vicinity of "the squat monsters of baobab trees" ("The Congo River" 159). Living a modest but self-sufficient existence which, as Gordimer emphasizes, cannot be described as poor, the villagers live in a place safe from the tides of history: "They were living in a place so guileless and clear that it was like a state of grace" ("The Congo River" 159). In Gordimer's eyes, the villagers inhabit a space of ahistorical purity; they are as clean of history as if they were free of the taint of sin. Gordimer emphasizes that while those native inhabitants of Congo live their lives outside of the course of history, they nevertheless should not be considered technically and culturally inferior. Commenting on her journey down the Congo River, she notes that she "stopped thinking of the people around me as primitive, in terms of skills and aesthetics" (Gordimer, "The Congo River" 166). Gordimer's aim here is to create the image of a world apart from both Western conceptions of Congo (as backward and primitive) and the recent political developments in the country.

5. Nature as an ahistorical and apolitical space

To cast more light on Gordimer's treatment of nature as a de-historicized space it is worth considering it against the background of Western views of nature, specifically wilderness. As J. M. Coetzee observes, the concept of wilderness is deeply rooted in the tradition of Judaism and Christianity: "In one sense, the wilderness is a world where the law of nature reigns, a world over which the first act of culture, Adam's act of naming, has not been performed" (51). As it evolved in Judaism and Christianity, wilderness came to signify "a place of safe retreat into contemplation and purification, a place where the true ground of one's being could be rediscovered, even as a place as yet incorrupt in a fallen world" (Coetzee 51). Greg Garrard also writes about wilderness in terms of purification: in his view, wilderness is connected with the promise of a more authentic relationship between man

and nature: "a post-Christian covenant, found in a space of purity, founded in an attitude of reverence and humility" (59).

The creation of wilderness as a space in which to seek sanctity (in the Judeo-Christian tradition), or harmony and authenticity (in its secular version) comes at the cost of erasing history from this image of nature. As William Cronon has famously argued, the concept of wilderness is "a product of the very history it seeks to deny" (109). "In virtually all of its manifestations", writes Cronon, "wilderness represents a flight from history" (109). Cronon's argument about nature and history has inspired Garrard, who describes wilderness as "ideological in the sense that it erases the social and political history that gives rise to it" (71). The ideological dimension of nature is also emphasized by Timothy Clark, who argues that "'nature' functions deceptively as the essentially political notion of a condition supposedly prior to human politics" (32).[8]

Gordimer's de-historicized treatment of nature is at its clearest in her descriptions of the Congo River and the Ituri Rainforest. The Congo is described by Gordimer as "a vast environment", which, on reaching the Livingstone Falls, becomes "all muscle" ("The Congo River" 157, 159). Deeper into the continent, at the Pool Malebo (Stanley Pool) Gordimer describes "the vast and lazy confidence of the great river" ("The Congo River" 161). As Gordimer travels over 2,000 miles into the country and reaches Kisangani (Stanleyville), she is taken by the Wagenia fishermen to their fishing grounds in the Boyoma (Stanley) Falls. Seated in a large pirogue, she is scared by "very fast and evil-looking rapids" ("The Congo River" 170), admires the fishing skills of her navigators, and, returning downstream to Kisangani, observes the bustling life of "a modern port preoccupied with political fervour" ("The Congo River" 171). Feeling the disjunction between the country's rapidly (and turbulently) unfolding present and the ancient fishing customs of the Wagenia people in which she herself participated (if only by virtue of travelling with them on their pirogue), she makes a comment that gives the fullest insight into her treatment of the natural environment:

> The Congo, like that other stream, of time, is neither past nor present, and carries both in an immense indifference that takes them to be one. There is no old and no new Africa to the great river; it simply bears a majestic burden of life, as it has always done. (Gordimer, "The Congo River" 171)

Gordimer's perception of the Congo is that of an immense and formidable river that enables history to unfold but refuses to be historicized. Africa, as perceived from the perspective of the river, is outside of historical time and the same can be said of the people who depend for their existence on the river—here I mean not only the Wagenia fishermen but also the African traders, who, balancing ex-

[8] This pre-political and pre-historical colonial view of nature is clearly reflected in Stanley's account of his expedition in Congo. In ch. VII of *In Darkest Africa*, he describes the forest surrounding the Congo as "waiting the long expected trumpet-call of civilization—that appointed time when she shall awake to her duties, as in other portions of the earth".

pertly on small boats, sell their wares to the white people travelling on a ship up the Congo. Such people are, for Gordimer, part of the wilderness surrounding the river, visible only if they choose to emerge from the forest: as Gordimer travels on the boat to Kisangani, she observes the banks of the river, noting that "the wilderness was inhabited everywhere, though it often seemed empty to our eyes" ("The Congo River" 164).

Gordimer's tendency to de-emphasize the colonial history of the country is visible in her treatment of all native inhabitants of Congo, including animals. Later in the essay she relates a visit to the town of Gangala-na-Bodio (in north-eastern Congo), which in colonial times was an elephant-training station. By the time Gordimer visited the station in 1960, most of its white personnel had fled to Sudan, leading her to predict (quite rightly) that she would be "one of the last visitors to go there" ("The Congo River" 176). The visit makes for a welcome interlude in her journey through the Ituri Rainforest, giving the travellers both a thrill of excitement (in an amusing episode Gordimer describes her terror at being charged by an infant elephant) and a rare chance to observe the life of the captive animals. Gordimer, enthralled by "the majestic charm of elephants", takes this opportunity to ride one of the animals, noting that they were so tame that they "showed no remembrance of the freedom from which they once came" ("The Congo River" 176, 178). Gordimer reports her satisfaction at being "accepted" by the elephants: "[T]hey accepted me as one of themselves; it was a kind of release from the natural pariahdom of man in the world of beasts" ("The Congo River" 178). In reporting this episode, Gordimer glides over the colonial history of animal exploitation first in the Congo Free State and later in the Belgian Congo. What she omits to mention is not only the domestication of animals for work, but, more importantly, the mass killing of elephants for ivory, which continued uninhibited into the 1920s.[9]

While Gordimer chooses history to provide the framework for her essay, she does not dwell on the 19th-century explorations up the Congo in any detail, mentioning Stanley's expeditions only to provide an undemanding and anecdotal context for her journey. This is evident in her description of the Ituri Rainforest, in which she mentions Stanley's journey through the jungle, during which he "walked for 160 days, almost without seeing the light" (a clear reference to Stanley's 1886–89 expedition; "The Congo River" 178). This lack of even the most basic contact with the outside world appeals to Gordimer, in whose eyes the forest, with its "internecine existence", is outside of time ("[E]ach minute sealed off from the next" ["The Congo River" 178]), constituting an existence wholly self-enclosed with a life of its own (in the same passage she compares the forest to "an enormous house", noting that it is "as noisy as a city" ["The Congo River" 178]). The impact of nature on history is, both literally and symbolically, corrosive: concluding her descrip-

[9] As Huggan and Tiffin write, "[T]he Congo continued to offer more or less open season for ivory hunters well into the 1920s" (165).

tion of the rainforest, Gordimer describes the sight of abandoned cars ("[R]ecent American and Continental models" ["The Congo River" 180]) that are rapidly being grown over by plant life, soon to disappear under the foliage.

It is worth adding that a similar corrosive relation between nature and history is described in Gordimer's short story "The African Magician",[10] inspired by Gordimer's journey to Congo. The story is narrated by a woman, who, together with her husband and other passengers, mostly from Europe (specifically France and Belgium), travel up the Congo River from Banana to Stanleyville (Kisangani). As is the case in "The Congo River", a considerable part of "The African Magician" is devoted to the description of the Congo and the surrounding forest: at the beginning of the story the woman writes about "the towering, *indifferent* fecundity of the wilderness that the river cleaved from height to depth" (Gordimer, "The African Magician" 129, my emphasis). "Indifferent" is a word that recurs in Gordimer's account of nature in Congo: in a description of the Congo, quoted above, the river is presented as outside of time, defined by its "immense indifference" (Gordimer, "The Congo River" 171) to the human categories of the past and the present. In the story, the indifference of the Congo and nature in general is emphasized especially in the description of the traces of the past: "a weathered red brick cathedral" and "a crumbling white fort" (Gordimer, "The African Magician" 136), both evidence of the rapidly fading colonial legacy of the country. As we learn, the fort, erected by Arab slave traders, was built on the site of a village demolished to make way for the building. In the description of both the cathedral and the fort, the focus is on nature as symbolizing life: the past is "dead under the rotting, green, teeming culture of life" (Gordimer, "The African Magician" 136). Once again, the description is reminiscent of "The Congo River", especially of the indifferent river, "bear[ing] a majestic burden of life" (Gordimer, "The Congo River" 171). Clearly, Gordimer is juxtaposing culture with nature, history with life, completion with continuity. In this view, nature represents life, which may bear the traces of the past, but at the same time transcends history. By the same token, the Congo is the site of the political—the narrator of the story describes children emerging from the forest and yelling "depenDANCE!" (Gordimer, "The African Magician" 134) to the passing cars.

6. Gordimer's socioecological unconscious

What Barbara Korte argued in the wider context of travel writing—the fact that "accounts of travel are never objective; they inevitably reveal the culture-specific and individual patterns of perception and knowledge" (6)—is also true in Gordimer's context. Her perspective was that of a white writer seeking to reach beyond her ra-

[10] The story was published first in *The New Yorker* (15 July 1961), and later in the collection *Not for Publication* (1965).

cial and social identity in an attempt to create an anti-imperialist and anti-colonial vision of Africa. In the attempt to forge this vision she alluded to pre-colonial times by describing nature as a space untainted by colonization, and, to some extent, outside of history ("indifferent" to it). Gordimer's political agenda in the essay is two-pronged: she describes political changes in a mood of cautious optimism, signalling her hope for the country's independent and peaceful future; at the same time, she views the natural environment as a space free from the burden of history (uncorrupted by colonization), whose inhabitants live in a self-enclosed world, though not unreceptive to the political changes in the country. Gordimer's aim was to describe a country facing a challenging but promising future; nevertheless, by describing the natural environment as inhabited by tribes untouched by history ("innocent" of it) she reached towards the past, perpetuating the colonial stereotype of nature as an ahistorical space. This colonial vision of nature, reproduced unwittingly by Gordimer, can be seen as an example of the socioecological unconscious:[11] an ideologically conditioned failure of vision with respect to her surroundings. This ambivalent and problematic attitude is proof of the fact that, while Gordimer did undertake the "valuable change of attitude" (36), which she wrote about in her article "Where Do Whites Fit In?", she was not immune to the colonial modes of perception, which she sought to challenge.

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[11] I am referring to Byron Caminero-Santangelo's notion of socioecological unconscious, as defined in his study *Different Shades of Green: African Literature, Environmental Justice and Political Ecology* (2014). Caminero-Santangelo coined the term on the basis of Lawrence Buell's environmental unconscious, defined as "habitually foreshortened environmental perception" (qtd. in Caminero-Santangelo 112–13). Caminero-Santangelo's contribution to Buell's ecocritical approach is to point to the close connection between ideology and the environment: "There is no nature and no concept of it that can be separated from the shaping influence of ideology" (114).

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