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Between Real and Realistic

First loose assemblage of chapter drafts

Table of Content

Introduction

Chapter 01: In Theory

History of Labor and Trade Unions in Media
Game Studies and Social Theory
Blurred Boundaries

Chapter 02: Realistic

Methodology
Narrativity, Visuality and Ludic Elements
Observing, Analysing, Contextualising
Patterns and Themes

Chapter 03: Real

Crunch Culture
Unionisation in Game Development
Tensions Between Narrative and Practice

Conclusion: Between

References & Bibliography

Image References

Introduction

I don't recall the first game I ever played, but I'll never forget the many games that drew me into captivating worlds. I also remember the many moments I felt scared, running from one light spot to the other in the dark streets of Bright Falls in *Alan Wake* (2010), diving through underwater caves on Rook Islands scared to be attacked by a shark in *Far Cry 3* (2012), and jamming a massive needle into my ocular cavity to access the NoonTech Diagnostic Machine for life-saving information as Isaac in *Dead Space* (2008). Despite the fact that the graphical performance of these games is no longer on par with that of contemporary productions, they nevertheless appeared highly realistic at the time of their release.

»Videogames are perhaps the most significant development in the modern popular arts, and they provide a fertile field of study for philosophers of the arts (and philosophers more generally).« (Robson, Grant, 2018)

Video games are a growing medium that is increasingly used as a platform for social and political discourse. The representation of labour and trade unions in games not only reflects historical and contemporary conflicts, but also provides a framework to address system criticism, solidarity and collective action.

Since Role-playing Games (RPG) are becoming more realistic, trying to imitate reality not only by its graphics but also by its in-game narratives and (historical) game spaces, the game is becoming an immersive experience, blurring the boundaries of reality and fiction.

No matter if you're riding as Arthur Morgan and the infamous Van der Linde gang across America at the dawn of the modern age in *Red Dead Redemption 2* (RDR2), rescuing the mysterious imprisoned girl Elizabeth as the U.S. Cavalry veteran Booker DeWitt in *Bioshock Infinite* or defeat revival gangs to bring freedom to the oppressed masses during The Industrial Revolution in London 1868 as Jacob Frye in *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, players are travelling from the physical reality into the virtual universe of the game through the screen.

The thesis deals with the analysis of the representation of trade unions and labour movements in video games of AAA publishers. This includes the examination of narrative threads, game mechanics and aesthetic elements that focus on labour struggles and collective organisations in games such as *Red Dead Redemption 2* and *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*. It also addresses the issue of trade unionism in the game industry itself, particularly in relation to the working conditions of developers.

While non-player characters (NPC) are programmed with little autonomy working in endless loops to support the realism of the gamespace, artists, engineers, programmers and designers face periods of unpaid overtime to speed up lagging video game productions – called »Crunch«. The real and realistic crunch of NPC and video game developers can be observed as separate topics, yet similarities appear between those two – artists, engineers, programmers and designers crunching to finish games that tell stories of exploited workers.

The research builds on existing work in games studies, social theory and art studies that examine video games as a medium of social reflection as well as on previous work on collective movements and their representation in digital media and extends the discourse to consider how labour and trade unions are visually and narratively represented in games. At the same time, by

looking at current working conditions (e.g. crunch culture) in the games industry itself, an additional, practice-relevant dimension is introduced into the work.

»There is a lot of history in the game industry as rooted in nerds in garages and doing it for the love of it. That has just filtered down into places expecting employees to just go above and beyond without question, all the time.» (Cote, Harris, 2021)

How does the visual and narrative design of games affect the perception of social realities and to what extent can these representations stimulate reflection on labour, trade unions and historical events? Who has the agency for the visual and narrative concepts? What happens when the lines between real and realistic blur?

The thesis is divided into three main chapters, which focus on theoretical research, game analysis and current game developments.

The first chapter is approaching the topic from a wide angle, exploring how labour and trade unions have historically been represented in art, film and literature and how these informed video games. A critical perspective on the socio-political potential of video games in fostering awareness of labour movements will be drawn by diving into key concepts from social and game theory.

Explicit insights into the representation can be gained from a selection of relevant games that deal with trade unions and labour disputes. The investigation of the narrative and mechanical implementation of trade union themes in these games as well as the analysis of the visual aesthetics and design of these games in relation to the labour movement are part of the second part of the thesis. The qualitative focus will be on a selection of games that provide exemplary insights into different narratives and game spaces, discussing how games as a medium reflect social realities and which narrative and aesthetic decisions lead to a critical examination of labour disputes.

Investigating the real-world working conditions within the game industry, the third chapter focuses on crunch culture and recent trade union movements. Parallels will be drawn between the thematic content of video games and the realities of their production. The question of agency will be proposed, asking who writes the stories and makes the primary choices? Who is joining the trade unions and what are the prospects of it?

In the last part the findings will be summarised, reflecting on the broader implications of video games as cultural artifacts, questioning how these representations shape player's understanding of historical and contemporary labour struggles.

Chapter 01: In Theory

An (in)complete History of Labor and Trade Unions in Media

»Amusement under late capitalism is the prolongation of work«
(Theodor W. Adorno)

[Eine Reihe an Beispielen für die Darstellung]

Game Studies and Social Theory

In the 1990s, the field of game studies emerged, underscoring the necessity to examine video games from a theoretical vantage point. In the present era, the industry has expanded considerably, encompassing a vast array of entertainment products that are consumed by millions. They occupy a unique position within the cultural landscape, making them a crucial area of study for those engaged in popular culture and visual studies (cf. Schubert, 2018).

Games as medium can be defined as software designed for entertainment purposes that presents players with primarily visual information and allows for input during runtime, thereby updating the available information (cf. Birken, 2022).

The pseudo-Marxist media guerrilla Total Refusal, which focuses on artistic interventions and appropriations of mainstream video games, for example, describes the language of the gaming community—including terms such as looting, farming, and grinding—as the process of in-game accumulation in which work-like activity is translated into playful action. Video games represent a pastiche of late capitalism, and one can discern the impact of its unleashed dynamics (cf. Total Refusal, 2022a).

»Video games are a form of world representation that surpasses the imageries of ours. In this world a mass-media consensus corresponds with the current social and moral concepts of our society. Video game culture represents society's understanding of labor, transforms it into gameplay and thereby legitimizes it on an ideological level« (Total Refusal, 2022a).

Blurred Boundaries

The term »ludic« is derived from the Latin word »ludus«, meaning »game« or »play«, and was first proposed by Johan Huizinga in his 1950 concept »Homo Ludens«. Play is defined as »a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is ›different‹ from ›ordinary life« (pp. 28).

Chapter 02 — Realistic

Contemporary Video games and games as a medium in general go beyond entertainment. Rather, games and gaming have become anchored in most fields of our society and are increasingly used as a platform for social and political discourse.

»They represent how real and imagined systems work. They invite players to interact with those systems and form judgments about them. As part of the ongoing process of understanding this medium and pushing it further as players, developers, and critics, we must strive to understand how to construct and critique the representations of our world in videogame form.« (Bogost, 2007, pp. 1)

Since Role-playing Games (RPG) are becoming more realistic, trying to imitate reality not only by its graphics but also by its in-game narratives and (historical) game spaces, the game is becoming an immersive experience, blurring the boundaries of reality and fiction.

No matter if you're riding as Arthur Morgan and the infamous Van der Linde gang across America at the dawn of the modern age in Red Dead Redemption 2, rescuing the mysterious imprisoned girl Elizabeth as the U.S. Cavalry veteran Booker DeWitt in Bioshock Infinite or defeat revival gangs to bring freedom to the oppressed masses during The Industrial Revolution in London 1868 as Jacob Frye in Assassin's Creed Syndicate, players are travelling from the physical reality into the virtual universe of the game through the screen.

Methodology

To gain an understanding of how these Role-playing Games are constructed, Red Dead Redemption 2, Assassin's Creed Syndicate and Bioshock Infinite will be examined based on their narrative threads, game mechanics and aesthetic elements that focus on labour struggles and collective organisations. The aim is to observe if the narratives engage with historical labour struggles and in what ways the game mechanics and player interactions reinforce or challenge representations of collective movements. The aesthetic choices (i.e. character design, environmental storytelling) are analysed on how they reflect or distort historical realities of labour movements and how NPCs embody the tension between realism and fictionalised exploitation in games. What limitations do these games exhibit in addressing the complexities of historical labour struggles and what are notable examples of games that use educational elements to inform or immerse players in complex topics?

The primary focus lies on the AAA (Triple-A) video game industry and their Role-playing Game productions. Companies like Rockstar Games, Ubisoft or Electronic Arts are predominant game publishers due to their high marketing budgets and elaborate development, which makes them an ideological foundation of the video game industry. By playing the games myself, a different mode of gaming can be conducted. Displayed as side stories to the main plot or sometimes just by actively interacting with or through observing non-player characters (NPCs), the photography mode and screen recordings of the game helps to examine specific scenes and spaces. Thereby the perspective shifts from a player to an observer.

Each game will be analysed by its narrative, visuals, and ludic elements in relation to its depiction of labour and trade unions. This also touches the topics of race and class. By precisely

examining game elements as they are represented and how they work, allows to contextualise labour and trade unions as well as their historic backgrounds.

»When graphic fidelity is increased in video games and the narrative calls attention to the players' actions, morality will likely become much more salient.« (Rogers, 2016)

Narrativity, Visuality and Ludic Elements

Narrative elements are defined here as the aspects that contextualise the actions in the game world in addition to the dramaturgy of the gameplay. The overarching plot, character development, dialogues, game texts and the environmental narrative, which unfolds through active interaction and exploration, are examined. The narrative provides a framework for games and serves as the basis for immersion in the game world. This connects players with the fictional game world and puts their experiences into a comprehensible context. Narrative authenticity and depth shows how faithfully historical events, movements and ideologies are portrayed and whether they offer nuanced perspectives.

Visuality focuses on aesthetic components that determine the graphical style of the game. The character design, the environment or game world, lighting, animations and the design of the user interface all make statements about conscious design decisions. As Stefan Schubert (2018) argues in *»Dystopia in the Skies: Negotiating Justice and Morality on Screen in the Video Game BioShock Infinite«*, it is *»via its (often optional) visual aspects, the way it presents [itself] to players«* (pp. 1). Role-playing games in particular and the increasingly sophisticated 3D graphics emphasise the creation of captivating atmospheres. When analysing the depiction of industrial action and examining the historical accuracy of these game worlds, visual elements provide insight into how carefully environments are recreated. The extent to which graphical fidelity and design decisions immerse players in the game world and contribute to an understanding of complex social dynamics shows how consciously authenticity is used or whether this leads to distortion of context.

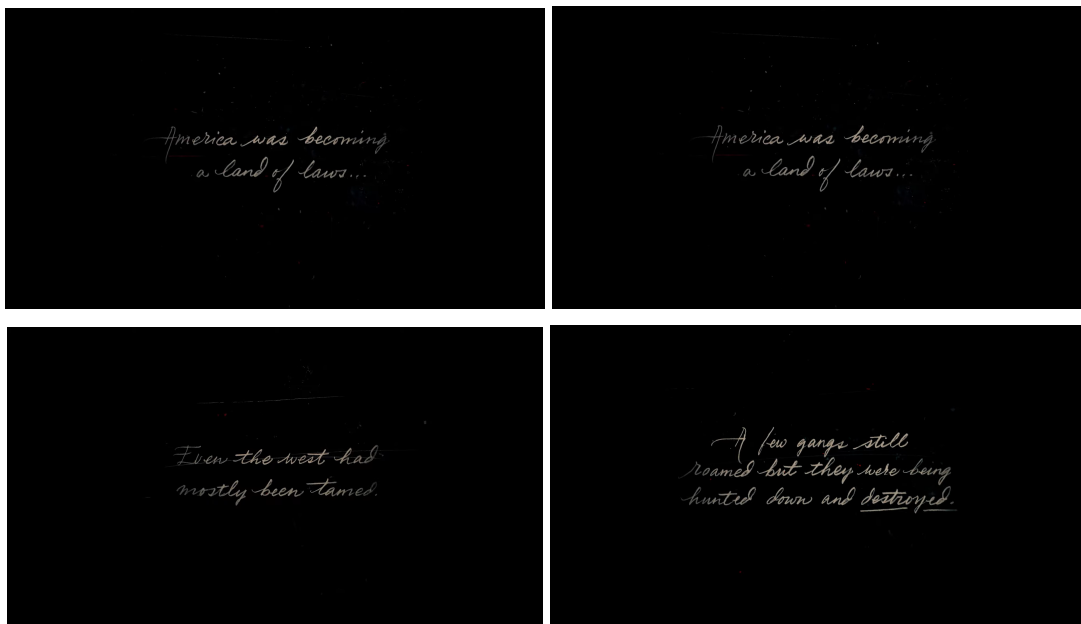
The game mechanics and interactive functions of a game are understood here as ludic elements and include the rules, objectives, rewards, challenges and game interactions that determine the gaming experience. Combat mechanisms, resource management and decision-making systems also belong to this category. The range of possible actions and functions contributes to the complexity of a game and influences the player's self-sufficiency, thereby also influencing the perception of the moral significance of one's own actions by allowing a conscious decision to be made in favour of or against something. The interaction of the player's decisions and the representation of labour and labour movements can either reinforce historical authenticity or reduce this complexity to simplified tasks or moral dichotomies.

By analysing the narrative, visual and ludic elements, the potential of video games as a means of education, critical reflection and social commentary becomes clear, but also potential limitations in dealing with differentiated topics. Understanding this triad helps to critically consider how games balance their roles as entertainment products and cultural artefacts.

Observing, Analysing, Contextualising

Red Dead Redemption 2

Red Dead Redemption 2 was released in 2018 by Rockstar Games and is the third part of the Red-Dead series after Red Dead Revolver and Red Dead Redemption. Settled in the open game world in 1899 when the Wild West era of America is about to come to an end, players take on the role of Arthur Morgan. The game starts after a robbery went wrong in the western town of Blackwater forcing the Van der Linde gang, of which Arthur is part, to flee. A journey of robbery and fighting leads to internal conflicts that challenges Arthur's ideals being loyal to the gang that raised him (cf. Rockstar Games, 2018).



Screenshots from the introduction sequence

Red Dead Redemption 2 has received over 175 Game of the Year awards and more than 250 perfect scores (cf. Steam 2024), with the game particularly impressing with its complexity and richness of detail. Writers from various major magazines such as The Guardian and CNET have labelled it an authoritative development of modern video games.

»This is a story – a collection of stories, really – about the decline of a way of life, as a small gang of outlaws tries ever harder to outrun the inexorable advance of American modernity, as well as the enemies and lawmen they have antagonised along the way...There can be no doubt that this is a landmark game. It is a new high water-mark for lifelike video game worlds.« (The Guardian, MacDonald, 2018)

"Red Dead Redemption 2 has undoubtedly raised the bar for narrative open-world games and will likely have a lasting impact on how they are made in the future. It pushes the envelope of what we understand is possible in a video game. It seems that every time we get something new from Rockstar, things inevitably change." (CNET, Bakalar, 2018)

After analysing the overarching game world, I will focus on two locations that are visited along the main narrative in the game. I will begin by observing the Central Union Railroad Camp, and then move on to examine the miners in Annesburg.

The Game Space



The vastness of the map already gives a first impression of the size of the game world and the seemingly endless possibilities.

In »Ludotopia: Spaces, Places and Territories in Computer Games« Espen Aarseth and Stephan Günzel (2019), Aarseth talks about *ludoforming*, explaining how »contemporary, historical or fictional landscape [is turned] into gameworlds« (pp. 127). As one example of his analysis he describes the ludo-compression in Red Dead Redemption 2 and the mismatch of large-scale open game worlds. Based on the American Southwest which in reality stretches over thousands of miles, the map can be crossed within minutes instead of days or weeks.

[in-game time, game interface, ...]

Central Union Railroad Camp

Positioned halfway between Van Horn and Annesburg lies the Central Union Railroad Camp. The camp is traversed by the player in three distinct missions, with the location changing as the game progresses and the train line undergoing further expansion. It is important to note that the missions are not a prerequisite for progression through the game. Consequently, it is possible that the initial mission may become inaccessible and unplayable.

Historically, the Central Union Railroad Camp is based on the history of the first transcontinental railroad in the USA which was built between 1863 and 1869.



As I walk through the camp, it is evident that there is a stark contrast between the white men in leadership roles and the Cantonese workers, who are meticulously laying the train track.

[role allocation, camp structure, accuracy of details, clothes, tools, conversations...]





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