

Playing Brexit: Borders and nationalism in the times of inhospitality

Beatriz Pérez Zapata

TecnoCampus (Universitat Pompeu Fabra)
Carrer d'Ernest Lluch 32
08302, Mataró (Spain)
aperezz@tecnocampus.cat

Víctor Navarro-Remesal

TecnoCampus (Universitat Pompeu Fabra)
Carrer d'Ernest Lluch 32
08302, Mataró (Spain)
vnavarro@tecnocampus.cat

Limits and margins define contemporary geographical, political, and cultural divisions. Borders have become a naturalised part of our world, a mythical element in the Barthesian sense (1957). They act as a pillar of ideology, or “the ways in which what we say and believe connects with the power-structure and power-relations of the society we live in” (Eagleton 1983, 14). The geopolitical desires to create tighter border controls and limit the number of immigrants arriving and settling in the nation-state territory have grown exponentially in many countries in the last decades. A key result of these movements is Brexit. This presentation focuses on the ludofictional representation and criticism of it in video games. For this purpose, the analysis will first pay attention to the social and political context of Brexit to then focus on the cases of *Not Tonight* (Panic Barn 2018) and *Watch Dogs: Legion* (Ubisoft 2020).

Brexit is considered here not as a single event but as the conflation of many undercurrents and thought structures in its country. It exemplifies how hate discourses and discriminatory policies shape the idea of borders and affect the contemporary flows of migrants: from strict border control to the Windrush scandal and the illegal deportation of citizens, the UK has moved from the discourses of multiculturalism and acceptance to the xenophobic attitudes promoted from the government, other radicalised political parties, and pro-Brexit media. With nationalism on the rise, we should also consider how Brexit alluded to the myths of self-determination and empire. Fredric Jameson understood ideology as “the representation of the subject's Imaginary relationship to his or her Real conditions of existence” (1989, 21), and Roland Barthes argued that political and cultural narratives take the shape of myths, or a system of mutually reinforcing signs, or mythemes, that are reproduced in various locations until they gain the appearance of “naturalness” (1957). In this sense, myths of the present such as Brexit define structures of thought and understanding and shape our world view and relationship to others.

Video games are some of the locations where these myths are reproduced, as Pfister (2020) has shown with zombie games and the myth of political collapse. They can also offer critical readings, or “demythologising”, of existing mythical structures. Games have quickly responded to Brexit with different formats and genres that reflect the

Proceedings of DiGRA 2023

© 2023 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

current situation and/or directly criticise it, with examples such as *Brexit: The Board Game of Second Chances* (Bad Hipster Games 2018), *Pick your own Brexit* (Bloomberg 2018), and *Border Force* (Spire Interactive 2019), which introduce ludofictional systems that bring to the surface the inner workings of the Brexit ideology.

In this presentation, we explore two cases of commercial games, *Not Tonight* (Panic Barn 2018) and *Watch Dogs: Legion* (Ubisoft 2020), that use Brexit as a setting and a theme to pose individuals against a totalitarian state shaped around nationalism and the idea of an ethnostate. We do so by identifying central mythemes or mythical units in their themes, narratives, and mechanics, and focusing on the counter-discourses they propose. *Not Tonight*, a self-defined “anti-Brexit” RPG or “post-Brexit management game”, focuses on the effects of nationalism and the efforts to revoke citizenship and politics of relocation. *Watch Dogs: Legion* imagines a dystopian post-Brexit London that has succumbed to nationalism and plays with the mechanics of recruitment to provide the player with different characters to fight against the system. *Not Tonight* includes mentions to “Albion First” and “Britain Alone”, while the main antagonist in *Watch Dogs: Legion* is a private military company hired by the state called Albion. With their narrative and mechanic elements, these two games highlight the foundational myths of borders, nation, and community that have shaped Brexit.

The counter-argument posed by these two games is built on their own systems of mythemes. *Watch Dogs: Legion* stars DeadSec, a secret hacker organisation, fighting both Albion and another hacker group, Zero-Day. Mythemes of evil CEOs, good and bad hackers, immoral anarchists, conspiracies, and accelerationism are vital to the game’s plot. The game ends with London terminating its contract with Albion, so the city was never the true evil of the story. *Watch Dogs: Legion* offers a traditionally heroic narrative with a contemporary thriller coating. *Not Tonight* focuses on the survival of the player character, a “person of European heritage”, navigating work and bureaucracy, and collaborating with the resistance. It is possible to achieve a “good ending” where Albion First is finished, but the DLC *One Love*, set chronologically after the main game, shows the party still in power, rendering that ending non canonical. Pessimism, terrorism, and totalitarian systems of justice are central mythemes in it.

Our analysis reveals an understanding of Brexit as a triangulation of the mythemes of identity, (in)hospitality, and (un)belonging. This is more marked in *Not Tonight*, which uses indie themes and stylemes, than in *Watch Dogs: Legion*, which follows AAA patterns. Anthony Good (2019, 103-104) argues that we are witnessing a constant contradiction, or tension rather, between hospitality and inhospitality, between the open embracing of asylum and the “moral panic” around otherness in general and refugees in particular. These tensions reveal the impossibility of conceiving a nation that could be based on conviviality and openness. This line of thought connects with how different groups construct identity and belonging and how nations can be defined as “imagined communities”, following Benedict Anderson (1991). If we focus on video games, Martin Roth, for example, is concerned with the threats to the imagination posed by nationalism and the precariat, among others, and with the possibilities that video games, as spaces of “alternative imagination”, offer to think about potential change in the future (2017, 1-33).

Thus, we could wonder whether a phenomenon such as Brexit, which aimed to separate a country from a larger community and isolate otherness, could be conceived as a failure of the imagination. The games analysed here offer mythemes of resistance and collectivism to oppose Brexit, but no real political alternatives. The forces in power may be defeated, but not their myths.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Barthes, Roland. 1957. *Mythologies*. London: Vintage.
- Eagleton, Terry. 1983. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.
- Good, Anthony. 2019. "Morality and Law in the Context of Asylum Claims." *Refugee Imaginaries: Research across the Humanities*, edited by Emma Cox, Sam Durrant, David Farrier, Lyndsey Stonebridge, and Agnes Wolley, 103-122. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Jameson, Fredric. 1989. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London: Verso.
- Pfister, Eugen. 2020. "Zombies Ate Democracy: The myth of a systemic political failure in video games." In *The Playful Undead and Video Games: Critical Analyses of Zombies and Gameplay*, edited by Stephen J. Webley and Peter Zackariasson, 216-231. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
- Roth, Martin. 2017. *Thought Provoking Play: Political Philosophies in Science Fictional Videogame Spaces from Japan*. Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon University: ETC Press.