Digital games, cultural memory, & hegemony

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ABSTRACT

This research project brings game studies into dialogue with cultural memory studies with a special emphasis on intersecting marginalized identities. By analyzing specific cases of digital games that mediate the past, I explore and uncover their meaning-making potentials of how we are invited to remember the past through their narrative and procedural design (Chapman 2016). I complement this analysis with qualitative interviews with developers, critics, and players. These findings are then contrasted with each other to explore the encoding contexts of production and decoding contexts of play. In its future stages, the research project will consider the implications of these findings through an ethical-philosophical perspective. Thereby the research project contributes to the development of an apparatus for both the conceptual design and the critical analysis and understanding of historical digital games. As such, the current research trajectory centers on the intersection of production studies, cultural memory politics, ethics, minority rights, and practices of play.

In order to identify how different cultures create understandings of history, we need to look beyond conventional historical practices and documents (White 1984; Rosenstone 1995; Erll 2011; Assmann 2011). Due to their prominent cultural and economic position in contemporary globalized society, it is therefore important to investigate how digital games contribute to the formation, negotiation, and possible subversion of cultural forms of memory (Chapman 2012). For this topic, my research project develops a theoretical and practical design framework that highlights implications of digital games for processes and practices of cultural memory with a special emphasis on marginalized and dominant intersecting identities. I seek to uncover (1) the ethical aspects of the mediated political and cultural mnemonic conflict and (2) the intersectional involvement of marginalized groups demarcated by ethnicity, nationality, gender, class, sexuality, and race in relation to the dominant group by the same signifiers (Shaw 2015b). The key issue is not so much one specific group, but an interventionist focus on the power hierarchies that makes one perspective or identity dominant over others (Fron et al. 2007) based on social, material, and symbolic power. I do so by applying research in the fields of game studies, memory studies, cultural studies, and political philosophy in order to understand how digital games as designed digital objects enacted by player agency mediate mnemonic understandings of past events with emphasis on marginalized groups. In turn, this allows me to draw out ethical aspects in relation to the research area.

My preliminary findings (Hammar 2017) have centered on the meaning-making potentials of the large mainstream production *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry* (Ubisoft Québec 2013) in relation to the 18th century transatlantic slave trade and contemporary White supremacy. By contrasting my own personal experiences of play with those more affected by the historical trauma and current marginalization, I established how the game design and narrative of Freedom Cry allows for a certain type of performance that gives rise to certain memory-making potentials. Subsequently, I highlighted some of the critical aspects of the context of commodity racism and the inherent paradox of playing a digital game about past oppression on a technological device made possible by contemporary oppression. My subsequent research focused on a critical discussion of the concept of identity tourism (Nakamura 1995; Leonard 2004; Mukherjee 2016) in relation to prosthetic memory (Landsberg 2015) by looking at the mainstream game *Mafia 3* (Hangar 13 2016) and its production, application, and reception.

Besides analyzing specific games, I have so far conducted several semi-structured interviews with developers of historical digital games, as well as critics and players in order to understand both contexts of production and practices of play. The interview data reveal esoteric knowledge related to digital games and cultural memory that inform my research trajectory. These findings are combined with documentary research of online articles, videos, and audio.

In sum, my research project seeks to explore and test the hypothesis that digital games operate as designed objects that factor into memory politics and processes of commemoration with an emphasis on marginalized intersecting identities. I anticipate that this hypothesis is challenged by player agency through their interpretation, negotiation, and enactment within the afforded space of play (Shaw 2015a). I believe that my project and research trajectory will benefit significantly from the doctoral consortium

Keywords
Cultural memory, marginalization, remembering, discrimination, qualitative methods, history, ethics, critical race theory, prosthetic memory, hegemony

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