



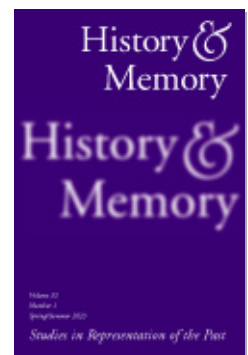
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Gaming

Pieter Van den Heede

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“Press Escape to Skip Concentration Camp”?

Player Reflections on Engagement with the Holocaust through Digital Gaming

PIETER VAN DEN HEEDE

Digital entertainment games about World War II have long omitted references to the Holocaust. This article presents a focus group study on how players discuss their experiences of playing two games that do offer a representation of the Holocaust, *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Call of Duty: WWII*. It explores questions of digital memory by examining how players reflect on these games as historical representations and, in particular, how they reflect on engaging with the Holocaust through gameplay. To analyze players' reactions to engaging with sensitive and contentious pasts through gaming, I develop the concept “gaming fever.”

Keywords: digital entertainment games; World War II; Holocaust; gaming fever; player reception

Since the 1970s a significant number of digital entertainment games have been made that allow people to engage with the history of World War II through gameplay. These games have received some scholarly attention, but little research has been done on how players give meaning to playing these games.¹ In addition, in recent years, a significant shift has occurred in how digital entertainment games represent World War II. Whereas a decade ago, most of these games tended to avoid explicit references to the Holocaust because of the perceived triviality of the medium and other profit-centered considerations, several games have been made recently that offer more explicit depictions of the topic.² Two prominent examples are the first-person shooter (FPS) games *Wolfenstein: The New*

Order (MachineGames, 2014), created by a Swedish and American game company, and *Call of Duty: WWII* (Sledgehammer Games, 2017), created by several American game companies. In the first game, players take on the role of a heroic resistance fighter who fights the Nazis in an alternate history where Nazi Germany has won World War II, a scenario reminiscent of other popular counterfactual histories of the Third Reich such as Philip K. Dick’s novel *The Man in the High Castle*. In the second game, players take on the role of an American soldier who partakes in the liberation of Europe from June 6, 1944, onwards.

Historical games are emblematic for memory practices in the digital age since their interactivity recalibrates older forms of meaning-making. In contrast to cultural carriers such as film or novels, historical games not only represent the past but also invite players to become directly involved as actors in historical events that are “made available as interactive experiences.”³ As Wulf Kansteiner argues, games therefore challenge the ability of creators to shape social memory, especially concerning sensitive and contentious historical topics such as the Holocaust, whose memories reside within fairly narrow boundaries of what is considered to be politically and aesthetically acceptable.⁴ This raises several questions from the perspective of memory studies. How does the activity of playing games that include depictions of the Holocaust, such as *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Call of Duty: WWII*, resonate with the historical awareness of players and how do the latter construe meanings about their experiences of playing these games? To what extent does this result in meaning-making that reinforces or subverts dominant memory discourses about the Holocaust?

This article seeks to shed light on how players construe meanings about playing digital entertainment games about World War II and the Holocaust in light of the study of digitized memory making. It does so by presenting an exploratory focus group study on how players reflect on playing *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Call of Duty: WWII*. Since only few empirical studies on player reflections about historical games, in particular about World War II, are available, I first analyze how the participants in the study reflected on playing these two games from the perspective of historical memory in general.⁵ I then analyze how the participants reflected on their engagement with the Holocaust through interactive gameplay. For this purpose I draw inspiration from the field of game studies to develop a new analytical concept, “gaming fever,”



Fig. 1. Promotional image for “The Reality,” one of the gaming events in the Netherlands attended for this study. © 2005–2023 Stichting The Reality.

thereby aiming to contribute to ongoing efforts to create new tools to study memory making in the digital age.⁶

After discussing previous studies on player experiences and reflections on digital entertainment games about World War II, I introduce the notion “gaming fever” and show how it relates to the set-up of this study. I then describe my research methodology, which is based on focus group discussions held during gaming events in the Netherlands (figure 1), and present my findings, where I discuss how the players reflected on playing *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Call of Duty: WWII* as an interactive form of engagement with the history of World War II and the Holocaust.

STUDIES ON PLAYER ENGAGEMENTS WITH WORLD WAR II THROUGH GAMING

Little research has been carried out on how players reflect on playing historical digital entertainment games. Most of the available studies assess the use of games in formal history education, without paying much attention to meaning-making practices outside the classroom. This also applies to playing games about World War II, although in this case some research is available from the perspective of media studies, cultural studies and educational science. These studies offer insights into how players reflect on playing the games from the *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty* series about

the war that were published between 1999 and 2008. From the perspective of historical memory, these games have been characterized by media scholars Andrew Salvati and Jonathan Bullinger as remediations of the US cultural memory of World War II that became dominant during the 1990s, which depicts this war as a fundamentally “good war,” fought by the “greatest generation” of US “citizen soldiers.”⁷ The aforementioned studies point to a number of key shared observations.

Based on a survey study, Joel Penney analyzed how players, in particular from the United States, Canada, the UK and Australia, negotiated the ideological meanings that are embedded in the historical narratives of *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty*. Referring to Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model, Penney shows how the studied players interpreted the ideological layer of these games, centered on militaristic and patriotic values, in divergent ways: while for some players, playing the games reinforced their pro-military and patriotic attitudes, others actively rejected such a reading. This led Penney to conclude that *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty* should not be characterized as “agents of propaganda,” but rather as “instruments of ‘soft power’—small pieces of a larger cultural system which promotes hegemonic western ideology around the world in a persuasively credible but decidedly non-coercive fashion.”⁸

Second, Penney emphasizes that players tend to appreciate the perceived authenticity of these games, indicating that playing the games allowed them to experience the violence of wartime combat more directly than other media representations and helped them to reflect on what it must have been like to participate in World War II.⁹ This characterization is reminiscent of what Alison Landsberg has defined as “prosthetic memory,” i.e., the formation of personal memories that do not stem from one’s lived experience in a strict sense but from an experiential engagement with a media representation of the past.¹⁰ Whereas Landsberg originally introduced this concept to refer to the significance of film for memory making, it can also be used productively to characterize gaming as a more directly embodied form of historical engagement. I therefore identify the authenticity perceived by the players as an expression of a broader appreciation for the interactive “prosthetic potential” of historical FPS-games, which in the case of *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty* takes the form of a perceived ability to reenact historical battles.¹¹

A final observation on how players reflect on engaging with World War II through *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty* is made by Stephanie Fisher, who studied how players adopt these games for learning. Fisher shows how playing the games from both series not only shaped the prior expectations with which players entered the history classroom but also facilitated forms of “tangential learning,” whereby players, through their engagement with the game, are introduced to a new body of knowledge, which motivates them to engage in further inquiry. This especially applies to the many military technologies and battles that are depicted in both game series, as Fisher and Penney equally demonstrate how players were keen to learn more about these elements of the *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty* games.¹²

These studies shed significant light on how players reflect on playing FPS-games about World War II, and *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty* in particular. The latter constitute an extension of a broader tradition of transnationally circulated US media representations of World War II, which serve as a dominant point of reference from the perspective of cultural memory. *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty* complement this cultural memory by adding a more directly embodied mode of engagement, which in the perception of players allows for prosthetic memory making through interactivity. However, the available literature also reveals several gaps. First, it overlooks games such as *Wolfenstein*, which provide more explicitly fictional depictions of World War II, rooted in a longer tradition of popular counterfactual histories of Nazi Germany, such as those studied by Gavriel Rosenfeld.¹³ Second, as the older *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty* games do not include depictions of the Holocaust, exploring how players reflect on *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Call of Duty: WWII* illuminates this particular aspect of their experience. Third, the aforementioned studies primarily highlight the perspectives of players in the United States and other English-speaking countries, whereas this study focuses on the Netherlands. And fourth, even though these studies point to the prosthetic potential of digital games, they provide little information on how these experiences, and the meaning-making related to them, can be conceptualized in light of the analysis of digitized memory making. To achieve the latter, I develop “gaming fever” as a new analytical concept.

GAMING FEVER AND SENSITIVE OR CONTENTIOUS PASTS

Ian Bogost introduced the notion “simulation fever” to conceptualize how players give meaning to engaging with digital games as distinctly rule-based, or procedural, representations. According to Bogost, simulation fever refers to a sense of unease that players can experience when playing a game, which can be attributed to a referential disconnect between the rule-based core of (a section of) a game as a selective modeling of real processes and behaviors, and the conceptions that players have of these processes and behaviors prior to playing the game, for example, when players have a different understanding of how frontline combat unfolds in reality in comparison to how it is simulated in a game. According to Bogost, this disconnect can lead to two possible meaning-making outcomes: “simulation resignation,” whereby a player accepts (an aspect of) a game’s simulation as an adequate modeling of reality without interrogation of its underlying premises, or “simulation denial,” whereby a player actively rejects (an aspect of) a game’s simulation of reality. Bogost states that, to arrive at either one of these outcomes, players “work through” a sense of discomfort or “simulation fever” when subjectively experiencing the simulation.¹⁴

My notion of “gaming fever” expands on Bogost’s conceptual framework in two ways. First, it integrates a critique of Bogost’s framework from the field of semiotics. As argued by Miguel Sicart, the notion of simulation fever downplays the fact that a game’s simulation is inherently embedded in a non-interactive layer of sounds, images and narrative building blocks, which can fundamentally influence a game’s meaning-making potential.¹⁵ This can be demonstrated by looking at the difference between an FPS-game set during World War II and one adopting a science fiction setting such as *Titanfall* (Respawn, 2014). Whereas both FPS games adopt simulation models centered on fast-paced combat, the meanings attributed to them can differ significantly due to the adopted setting. This means that, as the rule-based simulation of a game can only be communicated through the latter’s layer of sounds, images and narrative building blocks, a sense of “fever” when playing a game will always result from the subjective experience of simultaneously engaging with a game’s intertwined simulational and semiotic layers.

Second, I adopt the notion “gaming fever” to specifically highlight the potentially discomfoting nature of playing games that include depictions of sensitive and contentious pasts in light of other dominant memory discourses. Here, I build on the work of Adam Chapman and Jonas Linderoth, who show how games are often perceived to inherently trivialize sensitive and contentious topics because they recontextualize serious themes as functional elements within a game’s ruleset and playful context.¹⁶ I argue that a sense of gaming fever results not only from “working through” referential gaps between a game’s simulation of reality and a player’s conceptions of this reality but also from engagements through gaming with topics that are considered to be taboo or controversial in a given historical culture.¹⁷ This is especially the case from the perspective of digital memory, since games cast players as active agents in an unfolding narration of events, which can lead players to experience responsibility or even complicity in how the narration unfolds based on their in-game actions.¹⁸ In what follows, I analyze whether or not, and how, players identify experiences of gaming fever that relate to their engagement with the Holocaust when playing *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Call of Duty: WWII*.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To study meaning-making in relation to playing historical games, in particular ones that depict sensitive and contentious topics such as the Holocaust, I attended a number of gaming events in the Netherlands, where I set up focus groups based on an on-site opportunity sample of players who had played *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, *Call of Duty: WWII* or other games about World War II in the *Wolfenstein* and *Call of Duty* series. I adopted this method because it allows for an in-depth exploration of relatively unknown topics. Focus group discussions are very well suited to study how people construe meanings through group interaction, since the discussions can be characterized as contexts in which everyday forms of communication are simulated.¹⁹

The study was carried out in the Netherlands, a country whose national historical culture is strongly influenced by World War II, as demonstrated by a national survey carried out in 2015, which showed that almost 40 percent of the Dutch population had an active interest in the war, and 85

percent considered the war to be relevant, also in particular for postwar generations.²⁰ The same study showed that Dutch people primarily associate World War II with the Holocaust, a topic that has come to occupy a central position in how the war is remembered in the Netherlands since the 1960s.²¹ A third key observation relates to sources of knowledge about World War II. Whereas several studies show that people in the Netherlands primarily identify documentaries, films and school history classes as being the most reliable sources, a study from 2018 showed that approximately 10 percent of Dutch adolescents identify games as the most relevant information source.²² This highlights the significance of studying games and the meanings players draw from them.

I held focus group discussions with twenty-nine players in total (four to five participants per focus group). This group of players was relatively homogeneous in terms of nationality, ethnicity and gender (in the analysis below, each of the participants is identified with a pseudonym). All participants were born in the Netherlands, except one who was born in Belgium, and all of them were white. All but two participants were male, which reflects existing gender disparities in terms of game genres.²³ Most of the participants were in their twenties or thirties and had completed or were pursuing secondary or higher education. When asked to rate their overall interest in history on a scale of one to five, a majority of the participants (twenty-four of the twenty-nine) gave scores of three or more, indicating an above-average to high interest in history. When asked about the historical topics that interested them the most, twenty-two of the participants explicitly referred to World War II. Finally, most participants expressed an active interest in gaming, as exemplified by their attendance of gaming events, and self-identified as “gamers.” This gamer identity can be characterized as a distinct type of socially constructed identity that is strongly tied to particular forms of cultural capital and patterns of consumption.²⁴

During each focus group session, participants were first asked to reflect on their experiences of playing *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Call of Duty: WWII*, and other games from these series, in general. In a second phase, the participants were shown and asked to reflect on three YouTube videos of scenes in *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Call of Duty: WWII* that explicitly depict the Holocaust (see below). To structure the focus groups, I used a set of guiding questions.



Fig. 2. Screenshot taken from the level “Chapter 8: Camp Belica,” in *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcC5vP8VpPc> (2:27); YouTube channel: JamesInDigital

The focus group participants reflected on three scenes in *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Call of Duty: WWII* that allowed them to interactively engage with the Holocaust.²⁵ To contextualize how players reflected on the scenes, it is important to briefly discuss their gameplay “affordances,” i.e., the distinct ways in which they allow for player engagement.²⁶ For *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, the participants reflected on two scenes from “Chapter 8: Camp Belica,” a section in the game during which the protagonist, and with him the player, infiltrates a fictional concentration camp. The participants were first shown a section during which the protagonist/player is forced down a corridor inside the camp to undergo a selection, in reference to the selections carried out at the unloading ramps near the Auschwitz-Birkenau killing center (figure 2). The participants were then shown a scene in which the protagonist/player is virtually tortured by a Nazi “doctor” and nearly burnt alive in an incinerator together with the dead bodies of other victims (figures 3a and 3b).

In terms of gameplay affordances, the two scenes deliberately restrict the agency of players by casting the latter as disempowered first-person observers of what media scholar Holger Pötzsch identifies as “evil deeds”: atrocities committed by antagonists in a media text in front of the protagonist, as a means to legitimize violence against these antagonists.²⁷ In the case of *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, not only are these evil deeds



Fig. 3a. Screenshot taken from the level “Chapter 8: Camp Belica,” in *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcC5vP8VpPc> (10:55); YouTube channel: JamesInDigital



Fig. 3b. Screenshot taken from the level “Chapter 8: Camp Belica” in *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcC5vP8VpPc> (11:22); YouTube channel: JamesInDigital

committed in front of the protagonist, but also in front of the player as an active participant, who is subsequently encouraged to engage in virtual violence against fictionalized Nazi guards. *Wolfenstein: The New Order* can therefore be seen as fitting in the broader tradition of popular transnational representations of revenge fantasies against Nazism that

became increasingly popular from the 1970s onwards.²⁸ A final element relates to the context of these scenes in the game, which unfold against the backdrop of a wider narrative in which the protagonist/player is made aware of the atrocities inside the camp in advance and given a task that is central to the progression of the narrative. This results in a protagonist/player who is more likely to be a “prepared and distracted observer” of atrocities rather than a “shocked” one, and who engages in a narratively contextualized form of virtual “dark tourism.”²⁹

With regard to *Call of Duty: WWII*, the participants were asked to reflect on the final scene from the game, during which the protagonist (a US infantry soldier), and with him the player, enters Berga, a subcamp of Buchenwald, to search for a missing Jewish US soldier. In terms of affordances, this scene equally restricts most forms of player agency, to transform both the protagonist and player into a “shocked discoverer of atrocities,” who investigates the genocidal violence committed by the Nazi regime inside Berga to testify about it. During the scene, the protagonist/player can walk around in the camp, together with a squad mate who takes photographs as evidence of the atrocities (figure 4a). When the protagonist/player approaches certain parts of the camp, a (nonauthentic) black-and-white photograph appears, accompanied by commentary given by the protagonist (figure 4b). Overall, this scene is reminiscent of a similar one in the ninth episode of the 2001 TV miniseries *Band of Brothers* (entitled “Why We Fight”) and as such aims to express a message about the involvement of US soldiers during World War II that is similar to the patriotic US cultural memory expressed in the older *Call of Duty* games discussed above. At the same time, the scene’s reference to the Holocaust is also indirect, since it revolves not only around Jewish victims but also around the suffering of American POWs.

PLAYER REFLECTIONS ON *WOLFENSTEIN* AND *CALL OF DUTY* AS HISTORICAL REPRESENTATIONS

When reflecting on playing the games from the *Wolfenstein* and *Call of Duty* series, participants expressed appreciation for certain elements that were not or only indirectly related to the historical dimension of the two games. Several participants mentioned that they appreciated the high qual-



Fig. 4a. Screenshot from the level “Epilogue” in *Call of Duty: WWII*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GLgWLAWvc4o> (20:41); YouTube channel: LeedStrife



Fig. 4b. Screenshot from the level “Epilogue” in *Call of Duty: WWII*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GLgWLAWvc4o> (21:59); YouTube channel: LeedStrife

ity and fidelity of the graphics and the fast pace, intensity and absorbing nature of the gameplay of both series. Some participants explicitly referred to feelings of nostalgia as an important reason for playing *Wolfenstein* in particular, since they had been playing games from the series since they were young.³⁰ These feelings of nostalgia can be attributed to the fact that, as noted above, most participants self-identified as “gamers,” and therefore

drew on a longer personal familiarity with specific game series. In addition, many participants also explicitly reflected on elements in *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Call of Duty: WWII* that made them appreciate these games as representations of World War II. I discuss these elements below for each game (series) separately.

Wolfenstein: The New Order

When reflecting on what *Wolfenstein: The New Order* meant for them, a majority of the participants first referred to a historically informed sense of narrative enjoyment. They expressed their appreciation for how the game reinterpreted various eccentric and lugubrious aspects of the history of the Nazi regime within the context of a humorous and transgressive fictional alternate history. In one of the focus groups, Keanu (male, 26), for example, stated:

I think I mostly like the “alternate history” part of it. Because ... there were situations during the real war where Nazis were doing things, abject things. And I like how they carried this all the way forward to a complete sort of “Steampunk”/”Electropunk”-style thing.³¹

Second, several participants mentioned that they liked how *Wolfenstein*-games, including *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, straightforwardly represented the Nazis as “bad guys” and allowed players to engage in satisfying and justified virtual violence against an “evil” opponent. As Sebastiaan (male, 31), a participant in the same focus group referenced above, explained,

I also think it is nice that, emotionally, they beat it down a whole lot, because... Often, when I read about the Germans, they will say that there were many of them who had no choice. But this game pushes this... In general, it makes it very flat. Like, the Germans are the enemy, and we’re just going to kill Nazis.³²

Third, when asked whether they considered *Wolfenstein: The New Order* to be a historical game, most participants acknowledged that the game presented an exaggerated and fantastical interpretation of the past. However, when asked whether this fiction was rooted in history, the participants emphasized different elements. On the one hand, some were very critical of *Wolfenstein: The New Order*’s historical representation. They inter-

preted it as a reflection of how Nazism is perceived today as the ultimate incarnation of evil. On the other hand, several participants stated that the game was “mixed” from a historical perspective, in that it exaggerated history but also referred to historical ideas, actions and events. Here, the participants mentioned elements such as the attempts of the Nazi regime to create “wonder weapons” during the war, the Nazi ideology of racial superiority, the Holocaust, and a number of eccentric aspects of Nazism and Adolf Hitler in particular. Some of these elements are of limited historical significance, but they are used in the *Wolfenstein*-games to show the “craziness” of the Nazi regime. Overall, this twofold characterization can be seen as an awareness of historical ambiguity, which is illustrated below:

Van den Heede: Would you view [*Wolfenstein: The New Order*] as a historical game, or a game that says something about history?

Kamiel (male, 29): I don’t think so. Certainly because... it actually takes place in the sixties, after the Nazis have taken over the entire world. So then it’s actually more of a fantasy-game or alternate history-game with only very little history behind it. Certainly, because the caricature that [the creators] set up is super and super evil, a parody of a parody of a parody, [the game] only has very little actual historical value, in my opinion.³³

Van den Heede: What points of truth does [*Wolfenstein: The New Order*] contain, in your opinion?

Xander (male, 22): In particular, [the game] also shows you the concentration camps, and the kinds of horror you could expect in those camps.... They also brought back what Mengele did in Auschwitz in [*The New Order*].... They put that in the game very well.

Tim (male, 31): Yes, they did change it a bit. You don’t really have gas chambers and those things for example, and it’s not directly about Jews. But it is about a sort of sick prison where humans are treated like garbage.... [The game] is alternate history of course, but the cool thing is that it does build very much on what it was. And now with advanced technology, and so on.³⁴

These excerpts indicate that the participants primarily liked how *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and other games in the series fictionally reconfigured the history of Nazism and offered players a context in which

to engage in pleasurable virtual violence against an “evil” opponent. However, they were also aware that *Wolfenstein: The New Order* was not an authentic representation of that history, which shows how players critically appropriate game content. At the same time, there was a certain ambiguity in participants’ perceptions of the historical representation in the game, as several participants noted that it indeed builds on aspects of the history of Nazism. In other words, from the perspective of historical memory, the participants mostly embraced *Wolfenstein*, thus reaffirming a broader tradition of transnationally circulated and entertainment-oriented “low-brow” media productions as a dominant point of reference in the popular cultural memory of World War II and Nazi Germany. This means that these “low-brow” productions, with roots in the United States and various other Western countries, have also gained a firm footing in the historical culture of the Netherlands. In terms of “prosthetic potential” through interactivity, the element most specific to gaming and digital memory, *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and the other *Wolfenstein* games were perceived not so much as enabling an experiential engagement with the “true” history of World War II as allowing for virtual revenge against an exaggerated version of one of the key ideologies and regimes that caused it.

Call of Duty: WWII

Multiple direct parallels could be identified between the participants’ reflections on *Call of Duty: WWII*, and those of players in the United States and other English-speaking countries with regard to the older *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty* games, as discussed above. Moreover, several participants in this study stated that they liked how *Call of Duty* games allowed them to experience the atmosphere of being involved in a war as a (US) soldier in an active, direct manner. Participants regularly referred to sections such as one of the first scenes in *Call of Duty: WWII*, during which the player must virtually land on the beaches of Normandy on D-Day. When discussing this scene, the participants emphasized how they were impressed by the difficulty they experienced while playing, which made them think about what soldiers must have experienced when taking part in the Normandy beach landings. This is shown in Cedric’s comments below, which explicitly refer to the reenactive potential of *Call of Duty* identified in the literature review:

Van den Heede: Earlier, when we were talking about [the idea that] *Call of Duty* expresses the chaos of battle well. Is that something you would agree with? Or...?

Cedric (male, 41): Yes. Indeed.... Just take the part [in *Call of Duty: WWII*] where you storm the Normandy beaches: when you play that on the highest [difficulty] level, then you’ve got the real thing. It’s like: you cannot run five meters across the beach without catching a bullet, it’s that simple. And that’s what it really was. It was a crapshoot whether you survived or not.... By chance, I started to play it on the highest difficulty level yesterday. It took me almost two hours to get across the beach. That’s how often I died.³⁵

Some participants expressed explicit criticism of this reenactive potential, in particular by referring to insufficient “realism,” e.g., concerning the functionality of weapons or the implementation of military strategy in the game. They also noted how gameplay elements could make the game predictable, thus undermining the authentic historical experience. Despite the criticism, however, players still acknowledged *Call of Duty: WWII*’s reenactive potential, as shown in the excerpts below:

Leandro (male, 25): ... if you play [the D-Day level] on the highest difficulty level, then you know... Because you die so often, you know exactly: now [the Germans are] going to shoot that, so now I can run that way. And then I have to wait a moment, and then someone will run over there, and then I can run over there, and then you have to...

Cedric (male, 41): You know what the joke is? It is partially “scripted” indeed. You know you can walk a certain safe path. But make no mistake: you play it five times, maybe ten times, and then you realize it.... But if in reality, you run up the beach for the first time...

Leandro: Everyone dies.³⁶

In addition to emphasizing the ability to experience warfare more directly, several participants in this study also observed that historical *Call of Duty* games allowed them to learn more about the history of World War II by offering additional sources of information or by motivating them to consult additional information elsewhere. As such, several participants pointed to *Call of Duty* and *Call of Duty: WWII* in particular as

a means of keeping the memory of the war alive. This indicates *Call of Duty*'s potential to activate forms of "tangential learning," as discussed by Stephanie Fisher, as well as the game's "memory potential," including among Dutch players, as shown in the following comments:

Fabian (male, 23): I usually play the single player together with a friend, and then we watch all the additional movie clips.... Because you also partly learn about history through the movie clips. You partly see how all the maps change, and how everything, well, changes throughout the war.

Gerald (male, 45): Also for young people, [it] makes them want to know more.... For me, it's a new means to not forget what happened.³⁷

Finally, when asked whether the participants considered *Call of Duty* and *Call of Duty: WWII* in particular to be a historical game, two opposing views could be identified. Some participants, in particular those who were primarily interested in *Call of Duty: WWII*'s competitive multiplayer component, were very critical of the game's explicitly fictional depiction of history. By contrast, many other participants, in particular those who were interested in the narrative component of the game, stated that, despite some limitations, the game could certainly be seen as one that is historical in nature, sometimes explicitly in reference to school history or other US media depictions of the war:

Van den Heede: Is this a game that says something about history?

Hendrik (male, 20): Yes. Especially if you also took history classes, so to speak, then you can also recognize it in the games.

Cedric (male, 41): Yes. The games, if they are put together well, then they should... if you've seen [the television series] *Band of Brothers* from HBO, then you should be able to get that feeling back.³⁸

To sum up, in the case of *Call of Duty* games about World War II and *Call of Duty: WWII* in particular, a majority of the participants appreciated the ability to "experience" and virtually "reenact" historical battles, and thus to learn about and remember key events from the war. In addition, whereas several participants reflected on the "realistic" nature of the game and how its gameplay design shaped its historical representation, many participants regarded *Call of Duty* and *Call of Duty: WWII* in particular as a meaningful platform for historical engagement. From the perspective of

historical memory, these results reaffirm many of the observations made in the literature review, also in a Dutch context. For the participants, *Call of Duty*'s reenactive potential, as a set of affordances that allows for a more directly embodied form of prosthetic memory making, actively complemented existing cultural memories of World War II, as expressed in Dutch school history textbooks and American films and television series. Most participants did not subvert or reject the legitimacy of the dominant US cultural memory of the war, which illustrates how this cultural memory has also gained a firm footing in the Netherlands through transnational (re)mediation. The participants did not refer to additional Dutch, family-related or other memories, as they primarily reflected on the depictions of the war included in the games.

PLAYER REFLECTIONS ON THE REPRESENTATION OF THE HOLOCAUST IN
WOLFENSTEIN: THE NEW ORDER AND *CALL OF DUTY: WWII*

In the previous section, I discussed how *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Call of Duty: WWII*, and by extension other games in these series, complemented the cultural memories expressed in other, often American, transnationally circulating media representations of Nazism and World War II. They did so by allowing for interactive forms of prosthetic memory making that were perceived as at least partially faithful to the historical events, also in a Dutch context. In the following section, I focus on how the participants reflected on engaging with the Holocaust as a sensitive and contentious topic through gaming. I seek to provide a more specific conceptualization of interactive prosthetic memory making, by studying whether, and how, the participants in this study gave expression to experiences of gaming fever, also in light of the specificity of Dutch historical culture.

Wolfenstein: The New Order—Scene 1 (Camp “Belica”: Selection)

When asked about the first scene in *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, in which the character/player undergoes a “selection” inside the fictional concentration camp “Belica” (figure 2), the participants first reflected on how realistic the scene is. Although some of them were critical, a majority of the participants stated that the scene referred to what had happened to

Jews and other victims inside the concentration camps during World War II, albeit as part of an over-the-top exaggerated fictional narrative. The participants therefore mostly perceived the scene as a historical representation, expressing experiences of what Bogost calls “simulation resignation” with regard to the scene’s historical dimension. As Nigel (male, 30) stated: “The choice between types of people was made in exactly the same way. Does [a victim] eat too much: not good. [Is he] a good worker: then you go to a labor camp. And the rest were just killed. Corresponds with [what happened].”³⁹ This relatively uncontested notion of simulation resignation can be attributed to the Holocaust’s central place in how World War II is remembered in the Netherlands, as noted above. At the same time, it can be explained by the ethnic homogeneity of the group of participants, which did not include people from non-European and, in particular, Muslim communities who may question the history of the Holocaust more actively, for example by referring to Holocaust denial theories or allegations of Israeli instrumentalization of the Holocaust.⁴⁰ The participants in this study did not express such views.

When asked what the scene meant for the participants, some of them explicitly mentioned that it showed the dehumanizing nature of the selections carried out by the Nazis and that they found the scene discomfiting because of their direct involvement as players:

Kamiel (male, 29): You can feel that people are actually more treated like animals ... in that scene. You see ... a crowd of people that is simply led to the slaughterhouse.

Sebastiaan (male, 31): ... In that respect, it is somewhat confrontational, yes. Suddenly, you are the one who controls the mouse and presses play and walks through that world....⁴¹

Here, the participants referred to what can be described as a “positive negative experience,” i.e., an experience that is unsettling at first, but ultimately gratifying because it leads to new insights. Game scholar Kristine Jørgensen characterizes these as experiences of “positive discomfort.”⁴² Here, I identify it as a first possible form of gaming fever when engaging with sensitive and contentious pasts through gameplay, as enabled by the specific affordances of the scene. From the perspective of digital memory, it can be described as one possible form of interactive prosthetic memory,

and as such also a uniquely digitally enabled and gaming-related form of meaning-making.

However, apart from the reference to a simulated experience of dehumanization and the accompanying sense of “positive discomfort,” many other participants reported that the scene had only a limited impact on them, for several reasons. Some mentioned that since the narrative of the game had alerted them to what they would get to see inside the camp, they were not surprised when they virtually entered it. This accords with the above-mentioned discussion of the character/player as a “prepared and distracted observer” of atrocities. Several participants also interpreted the scene in a functional manner, considering what role it played in the narrative. Others described how the scene was meant to introduce the fictional concentration camp as the setting and show the cruelty of the Nazis. They therefore identified the selection as a ludic “evil deed,” as discussed above. It points to a more outspoken awareness of game-design conventions, which is more likely among players who self-identify as “gamers.”

In addition, some players stated that they did not feel an emotional connection with the other victims during the selection, because of their anonymity. As a result, they did not explicitly identify the sense of dehumanization expressed in the scene, even though it was a central aspect of how victims were treated by the Nazis. As Quinten (male, 32) explained,

It has no emotional impact because you don’t have a connection [with the other victims], I also think. All those heads you see [walking] in front of you are all more or less the same.... you don’t know who they are... Not that they deserve it therefore, of course not, but... [The scene] lacks emotional impact because of it.⁴³

Finally, several players thought that the scene was less meaningful because they were forced to act in a certain manner, as shown in the following exchange:

Van den Heede: How did you feel when you saw this scene?

Kasper (male, 35): You ... have to follow that row. I find that annoying. I’d rather watch a cutscene than [being] forced to run at a certain pace that doesn’t match your character.

Niels (male, 30): Yes, or that you can just type in a combination. As in: fuck it, I know what’s happening here, done, let me pass. Or

simply built-in as [a standard feature], that you just press “escape” and you’re done, you can start.

Xander (male, 22): That would be a great cheat-code. [*Comment made as a quip, in reference to how victims during the war did not have this option; laughter among the participants.*]

Tim (male, 31): I thought it was ok. Yes, you have to queue up. You wait for your turn; you have to listen and ... do what they tell you.⁴⁴

The participants came to the insight that the scene tried to express a sense of disempowerment similar to what camp inmates must have experienced during the war. For some participants, however, this was not how they had reflected on the scene prior to the focus group discussion, but was an outcome of the latter. These excerpts therefore point to a different manifestation of experiences of gaming fever in relation to engagements with sensitive and contentious historical topics such as the Holocaust: a sense of “ludic indifference,” or a neutral acceptance of/disinterest in how a (section of) a game represents a sensitive past and casts players as active participants therein. This leads to an important observation from the perspective of digital, cultural and prosthetic memory: through gaming, memory potentials are sometimes not actively identified by players because they are considered to be secondary to other interests and desires, including a longing for more player agency. Such a desire for more agency is likely to be a common point of concern among players, in particular ones who self-identify as “gamers” like the participants in this study. Nonetheless, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions regarding this issue on the basis of exploratory qualitative research alone.

In sum, these reflections on engagement with the Holocaust through gameplay during this scene reveal a distinct configuration of experiences of gaming fever, whereby most of the participants referred to a sense of “simulation resignation,” that is, they accepted the historical reality of the scene. This aligns with dominant views about the Holocaust, also in the Netherlands, even though *Wolfenstein: The New Order* offers a very distorted and entertainment-oriented popular representation of these events. In addition, based on the affordances of the scene, the participants also expressed what can be defined as experiences of “positive discomfort” and “ludic indifference,” as two distinct forms of gaming fever. Experiences of “positive discomfort” are a uniquely digital and playful form of memory

making, equivalent to a more directly embodied form of prosthetic memory. “Ludic indifference” shows that the memory potentials of digital games can go unnoticed when players are preoccupied with other, primarily gameplay-related considerations, without paying further attention to a game’s semiotic layer and historical representation.

Wolfenstein: The New Order—Scene 2 (Camp “Belica”: Torture)

Many participants stated that they regarded the second scene in *Wolfenstein: The New Order* (figures 3a and 3b)—during which the character/player is tortured by a Nazi “doctor” inside camp “Belica” and nearly burnt alive in an incinerator—as a realistic depiction of how Jews and other victims were treated inside the concentration camps during World War II. Some participants also stated that in this case too they felt disempowered, which they also identified as unsettling in a “positive negative” sense. These statements can again be interpreted as references to experiences of “simulation resignation” and “positive discomfort.” In addition, the participants mentioned that the scene clearly depicted the evil nature of the Nazi regime, as shown in the comments below:

Tim (male, 31): I thought it was a pretty horrific scene, that you just lay there among the corpses to be burned. Yes, and I think it’s cool that they actually show the kind of horror that [is actually happening there] in the game. How [the Nazis] experiment a little, stab people and then simply burn them.⁴⁵

Camille (female, 23): Again that feeling of disempowerment, because you can’t do anything. You are simply stabbed, and you can’t do anything against it. Eventually, you open your eyes, and then you actually lie in between the bodies. Ready to be burned, so to say.⁴⁶

The participants also, however, emphasized other elements such as experiences of “ludic indifference.” For example, some participants reflected on the scene functionally and stated that it was meant as a transition to a new section of the game. Others mentioned that they were preoccupied with gameplay considerations during the scene and therefore paid little attention to it while playing. Thus, when asked how he felt when playing that part of the game, Nigel (male, 30) responded simply: “Nothing.

It's all about the next objective. You wake up, [then] you kill the first [guard] as soon as possible, and on to the next one."⁴⁷ Moreover, some participants stated that the scene was unrealistic and unnecessary in its depiction of Nazi violence:

Sebastiaan (male, 31): I think the contrast is too big. On the one hand, I'm like: this is indeed already very intense.... I can certainly see that these are the things that happened during World War II. But then ... the first thing you do is: you just step out of the furnace and you simply stab someone.... Even though you should really be seriously injured.

Kamiel (male, 29): I also think it's just a bit unnecessary. [It's] what [Quinten] says: ... you simply do something else; you're simply watching something. And yes: we already know that Nazis are really evil. And then, being tortured like that, that's not necessary.⁴⁸

These statements not only indicate experiences of “simulation denial,” when players reject (an aspect of) a simulation as an inadequate model of (historical) reality, as discussed by Bogost. They also point to a refusal by some participants to accept this part of *Wolfenstein: The New Order* as a fitting way to engage with the history of the Holocaust, in particular due to the exploitative nature of the torture scene and the depiction of dead bodies. I identify these refusals as an expression of “ludic rejection,” a third form of gaming fever when engaging with sensitive pasts through gameplay. Especially here, interactive forms of prosthetic memory making clash with what is considered to be culturally acceptable, in the Netherlands and elsewhere.

These observations point to a different configuration of experiences of gaming fever. Whereas some participants again referred to both “simulation resignation” and “positive discomfort,” in that they thought that the scene expressed historical realities in a discomfiting but enriching way, several other participants referred to experiences of “ludic indifference” due to the prevalence of other, gameplay-related, considerations, and both “simulation denial” and “ludic rejection” in an interconnected manner. These reactions can be attributed to the transgressive affordances and semiotics of the scene, which can significantly contribute to culturally shaped experiences of unease.

Call of Duty: WWII—Epilogue

When discussing the scene in *Call of Duty: WWII* during which the character/player can walk around in the Berga concentration camp as an American soldier (figures 4a and 4b), the participants also first referred to its level of “realism.” Most of the participants stated that it certainly depicted the reality of what had happened inside the concentration camps during World War II, even though some also mentioned that more information was needed to understand the depicted events. The participants therefore mostly referred to a sense of “simulation resignation” when discussing the scene from a historical perspective, considering both the prominence of US cultural memory of World War II and the recognition accorded the Holocaust in Dutch historical culture, as previously noted. In addition, most of the participants stated that they appreciated the scene’s interactivity, which gave them more freedom to explore the camp. Several participants also indicated that they thought the scene was both unsettling and beautiful, in statements that refer to experiences of “positive discomfort,” such as the following:

Van den Heede: What you’re doing here is: you walk around inside the camp yourself. What do you think about that: does it add something, or...?

Hendrik (male, 20): Yes, it does, actually. Because if you can only walk [the same] fixed route [of the character], then you can’t specifically go and take a closer look. If you can walk yourself you can also see the details better. I think that’s a nice [aspect].⁴⁹

Bianca (female, 26): Well, I found it ... very shocking.... I thought it was beautiful how they put that together.... I actually thought... It actually gave me adrenaline, my heart started racing. As in: wow. I thought it was a very beautiful scene.⁵⁰

Finally, some participants were critical about the scene. Two older participants, Viktor and Gerald, whose comments are quoted below, stated that it was either too grave to be included in a game such as *Call of Duty* or too superficial in its depiction of the horrors of the camps. This latter opinion was expressed by a participant who had visited Auschwitz and had

read extensively about the Holocaust. Both participants also noted that they had experienced a lack of player agency while playing this section:

Viktor (male, 57): I thought it was a bit too invasive for a game. I think: this is going a bit too far for me. I mean, I know how terrible it is. I've seen films about the Holocaust.... It just wasn't necessary for me.... I think it's a bit over-the-top.

Gerald (male, 45): ... For the game, it doesn't have an added value; historically, yes, but then it doesn't go [deep enough].... I've already read and seen a lot about the Holocaust.... I thought: yes, if you want to do it, then you have to be willing to shock.

Viktor: It is terrible and so on, but I'm waiting for people we can shoot at, inside the camp.... You enter such a camp, and then you expect, perhaps, a number of remaining guards.... It's not active enough for me. No matter how terrible it is—I realize that.⁵¹

It can therefore be concluded that in relation to this scene a majority of participants referred to experiences of “simulation resignation” and “positive discomfort” in that they acknowledged the historical dimension of the scene and positively reflected on ludically being confronted with a shocking past. Here too, however, alternative reflections could be identified, in which both an acknowledgment of the realism of the scene and a critical view of it (“simulation denial”) were combined with a desire for more agency. These observations were mostly made by older participants who had already gained more prior knowledge about the Holocaust. This attitude can also be characterized as an expression of “ludic indifference,” one of the previously identified forms of gaming fever.

CONCLUSION

This focus group study generated several distinct sets of findings. Concerning the representation of history in *Wolfenstein* and *Call of Duty* games, and their contribution to creating historical memory, participants appreciated both *Wolfenstein's* humorous and transgressive fictional reimagination of the history of Nazism as a context for “pleasurable” violence against it and *Call of Duty's* ability to offer players a site for virtual reenactment, learning and remembrance. Even though players were often critical of the

games, they generally accepted them as historical representations. This shows that players do question their engagements with the past through gaming, but also that they often only interrogate specific factual elements. This suggests that further critical engagement with historical games by professional historians in classrooms and other public contexts, a practice that is currently still in its infancy, is not only useful but also desirable: as games reach millions of players worldwide, their potential impact is significant.⁵² The discussions showed, moreover, how *Wolfenstein* and *Call of Duty* complemented rather than transformed the cultural memories expressed in other Western, transnationally circulated popular media representations of World War II by allowing for (historically ambiguous) interactive forms of prosthetic memory making. This suggests that engagements with *Wolfenstein* and *Call of Duty* do not fundamentally undermine existing political and aesthetic boundaries to memory making, in contrast to existing expectations about digitized memory practices.

A second set of findings revolved around experiences of “gaming fever” when engaging with the Holocaust through gaming. The participants’ reflections on playing specific scenes from *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Call of Duty: WWII*, each characterized by distinct gameplay “affordances,” revealed several specific configurations of gaming fever, related to both the perceived historical reality and sensitivity of the discussed scenes within the context of Dutch historical culture. These findings contribute to an empirically grounded conceptualization of interactive forms of prosthetic memory making.

Concerning the perceived historical reality of the scenes, the participants in this study had no difficulty in identifying the historical events on which *Wolfenstein* and *Call of Duty* are based and did not question their reality. There were no explicit disagreements or conflicts of opinion among the participants on this issue, which means that these participants did not perceive the Holocaust as a contentious historical topic, possibly because of its central position in Dutch historical culture and because the participants in this study did not belong to (diaspora or other) communities in the Netherlands that may have a different attitude to the Holocaust.

With regard to the sensitivity of engaging with the Holocaust through gameplay in contemporary Dutch historical culture, three forms of gaming fever could be identified. Several players referred to “positive negative” experiences when being confronted with the atrocities of the Holocaust in

these two games. From the perspective of digital, cultural and prosthetic memory, this points to a significant potential of gameplay designs to activate gratifying emotional responses, which can motivate players to expand on their historical engagement with the Holocaust. At the same time, the outcome of these “positive negative” experiences when playing *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Call of Duty: WWII* can also be interrogated, in that they can be attributed to the moral clarity in which they were embedded. When playing *Wolfenstein* and *Call of Duty*, players were unambiguously on the “right side of history,” which allowed for a straightforward identification with the protagonists of both games from a narrative perspective. This raises the question how players would reflect on historical engagements through gameplay where this is not explicitly the case. Apart from these experiences of “positive discomfort,” and perhaps more surprisingly, several participants also referred to notions of “ludic indifference”: they either did not pay attention to the historical atrocities depicted or expressed a desire to skip them to experience more agency. This can be explained by two factors. On the one hand, when playing a digital game, players are often preoccupied with the moment-to-moment gameplay in an instrumental manner, which draws attention away from the game’s historical representation.⁵³ On the other hand, given the participants’ preference for genres such as the FPS, which revolve around virtual violence, one can assume that they were familiar with similar violent imagery and therefore did not express further discomfort. Both elements can be related to the fact that most participants self-identified as “gamers,” which increases the likelihood of a strong preference for agency as well as greater familiarity with violent game imagery. This argument is contradicted by participants who referred to experiences of “ludic rejection,” a third form of gaming fever in reaction to engagements with sensitive pasts through gaming, in particular when they were confronted with scenes in which the emaciated dead bodies of victims of virtual genocidal violence were explicitly shown. In the context of a representation of the Holocaust, players were quicker to regard this as an undesirable transgression.

Since the focus group sessions were held with a relatively homogenous group of predominantly white Dutch players who expressed high levels of interest in history, few significant differences related to age, gender or ethnicity/nationality could be observed. For all the participants, whether male or female, their “gamer” identity superseded their gender identity.

The main differences were related to age and the extent to which the participants were familiar with the history of the Holocaust. The two older participants, who had more extensive prior knowledge about the depicted events, were more critical of the games' historical representation, but this sample is too small to form the basis for more general conclusions. In particular, it would be important to examine how more diversified groups would reflect on playing games that offer an explicit depiction of the Holocaust.

Nonetheless, the present analysis contributes to the study of both contemporary memory making and historical digital (entertainment) games in several ways. First, it sheds further light on how players engage with and reflect on games that offer a historical representation, including ones that are more explicitly fictional. This topic has remained un(der)explored in several fields, including memory studies and game studies. Second, this study presents a way to conceptualize interactive forms of memory making, employing the notion “gaming fever” to analyze engagements through gaming with sensitive and/or contentious pasts, rooted in qualitative empirical data. This toolkit, centered on the notions “simulation resignation,” “simulation denial,” “positive discomfort,” “ludic indifference” and “ludic rejection,” can be used and refined in subsequent studies.

The study was based on an exploratory focus group method, which resulted in rich qualitative data about topics of which little is known, in a research setting that more closely than other settings mimics day-to-day social meaning-making practices among players. In particular, focus groups offered the participants an engaging venue for lively discussions with their peers about the understandings they draw from two games they enjoy playing. A possible disadvantage of this method is that the participants might have felt constrained by social norms when discussing the sensitive topic of the Holocaust and therefore refrained from undesirable responses. Adopting a more individualized method, such as in-depth personal interviews, could alleviate this problem in future studies.

This study offers a rich starting point for further research on meaning-making practices in relation to games about sensitive and contentious pasts. For example, the question arises how players in other sociocultural contexts and countries, with different backgrounds and playing habits, reflect on their engagements through gameplay with World War II and the Holocaust. One interesting venue for further research is to explore

how players in Germany, the country that is most directly confronted with the legacy of perpetratorship concerning the Holocaust, reflect on these engagements. Another question relates to how players engage with other sensitive and contentious pasts, including the history of slavery and other atrocities. More generally, this study draws attention to the significance of gaming as a site for meaning-making and the circulation of (distorting) historical understandings. As such, it urges historians and memory scholars to take the medium seriously and actively engage with the representations it puts forward.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Pieter Van den Heede, “‘Experience the Second World War Like Never Before!’ Game Paratextuality between Transnational Branding and Informal Learning,” in “Popular Uses of Violent Pasts in Educational Settings,” special issue, *Journal for the Study of Education and Development—Infancia y Aprendizaje* 43, no. 3 (2020): 606–51. Here, there are interesting parallels with the study of feature films about the Holocaust, as the audience reception of these films also remained underexplored for a long time. See, for example, Stefanie Rauch, “Understanding the Holocaust through Film: Audience Reception between Preconceptions and Media Effects,” *History & Memory* 30, no. 1 (2018): 151–88.

2. See Jeff Hayton, “Beyond Good and Evil: Nazis and the Supernatural in Video Games,” in Monica Black and Eric Kurlander, eds., *Revisiting the “Nazi Occult”: Histories, Realities, Legacies* (Rochester NY: Camden House, 2015), 248–69; Adam Chapman and Jonas Linderroth, “Exploring the Limits of Play: A Case Study of Representations of Nazism in Games,” in Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderroth and Ashley ML Brown, eds., *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 137–53; Eugen Pfister, “Das unspielbare Spielen: Imaginationen des Holocaust in digitalen Spielen,” *Zeitgeschichte* 43, no. 4 (2016): 250–63.

3. Holger Pötzsch and Vit Šisler, “Playing Cultural Memory: Framing History in *Call of Duty: Black Ops* and *Czechoslovakia 38–89: Assassination*,” *Games and Culture* 14, no. 1 (March 21, 2019): 6. See also Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 30–55.

4. Wulf Kansteiner, “The Holocaust in the 21st Century: Digital Anxiety, Transnational Cosmopolitanism, and Never Again Genocide without Memory,” in Andrew Hoskins, ed., *Digital Memory Studies: Media Pasts in Transition* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 110–15.

5. See, for example, Sian M. Beavers, “The Informal Learning of History with Digital Games” (PhD diss., The Open University, 2020), <http://oro.open.ac.uk/69919/>; Stephanie Fisher, “Playing with World War II: A Small-Scale Study of Learning in Video Games,” *Loading... The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association* 5, no. 8 (2011): 71–89, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220302002418/journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/article/view/96>; Kevin O’Neill and Bill Feenstra, “‘Honestly, I Would Stick with the Books’: Young Adults’ Ideas about a Videogame as a Source of Historical Knowledge,” *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 16, no. 2 (2016), <http://gamestudies.org/1602/articles/oneilfeenstra>; Joel Penney, “‘No Better Way to Experience World War II’: Authenticity and Ideology in the Call of Duty and Medal of Honor Player Communities,” in Nina Huntemann and Matthew Thomas Payne, eds., *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 191–205.

6. See, for example, Hoskins, ed., *Digital Memory Studies*.

7. Andrew J. Salvati and Jonathan M. Bullinger, “Selective Authenticity and the Playable Past,” in Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B. R. Elliott, eds., *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 153–67. For the concept of remediation, see Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney, eds., *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2009).

8. See Penney, “‘No Better Way to Experience World War II,’” 203.

9. *Ibid.*, 197–99.

10. Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), esp. 25–48.

11. See also Brian Rejack, “Toward a Virtual Reenactment of History: Video Games and the Recreation of the Past,” *Rethinking History* 11, no. 3 (2007): 411–25.

12. Fisher, “Playing with World War II,” 77–82; Penney, “‘No Better Way to Experience World War II,’” 197–99.

13. See, for example, Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, *The World Hitler Never Made: Alternate History and the Memory of Nazism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

14. See Ian Bogost, *Unit Operations: An Approach to Video Game Criticism* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2006), 106–9.

15. Miguel Sicart, *Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2013), 49–56, 62–82.

16. Chapman and Linderoth, “Exploring the Limits of Play,” 140–45.

17. I use the term “historical culture” as a concept that allows for the holistic study of how people relate to the past. See Maria Grever and Robbert-Jan Adriaansen, “Historical Culture: A Concept Revisited,” in Mario Carretero, Stefan Berger and Maria Grever, eds., *Palgrave Handbook of Research in Historical Culture and Education* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 73–90.

18. For a broader discussion, see Jeroen Jansz, “The Emotional Appeal of Violent Video Games for Adolescent Males,” *Communication Theory* 15, no. 3 (2005): 219–41; Toby Smethurst and Stef Craps, “Playing with Trauma: Interactivity, Empathy, and Complicity in *The Walking Dead* Video Game,” *Games and Culture* 10, no. 3 (2015): 269–90; Kristine Jørgensen, “The Positive Discomfort of Spec Ops: The Line,” *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 16, no. 2 (2016), <http://gamestudies.org/1602/articles/jorgensenkristine>; Stephanie de Smale, “Ludic Memory Networks: Following Translations and Circulations of War Memory in Digital Popular Culture” (PhD diss., Utrecht University, 2019), 143–65.

19. See Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 5th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 500–524.

20. Kees Ribbens, “De Nederlandse Belangstelling voor de Tweede Wereldoorlog” [The Dutch interest in the Second World War] (report of Kenniscentrum Oorlogsbronnen, Amsterdam, May 2015), 5–6, <https://www.oorlogsbronnen.nl/sites/default/files/Rapport%20De%20Nederlandse%20belangstelling%20voor%20de%20Tweede%20Wereldoorlog.pdf>. See also Frank van Vree, “De Dynamiek van de Herinnering: Nederland in een Internationale Context” [The dynamics of memory: The Netherlands in an international context], in Frank van Vree and Rob van der Laarse, eds., *De Dynamiek van de Herinnering: Nederland en de Tweede Wereldoorlog in een Internationale Context* [The dynamics of memory: The Netherlands and the Second World War in an international context] (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Bert Bakker, 2009), 17–40.

21. Van Vree, “De Dynamiek van de Herinnering,” 17–40; Ribbens, “De Nederlandse Belangstelling,” 5–6.

22. Marc L. F. van Berkel, “Wat weten Nederlandse jongeren over de Tweede Wereldoorlog? Een onderzoek naar kennis, kennisbronnen en attitudes van Nederlandse scholieren in het voortgezet onderwijs en het middelbaar beroepsonderwijs” [What do Dutch young people know about the Second World War? A study into knowledge, knowledge sources and attitudes of Dutch students in secondary (vocational) education] (Arnhem: HAN University of Applied Sciences, 2018), https://www.han.nl/artikelen/2020/12/jongeren-weten-weinig-over-de-tweede-wereldoorlog/kennis_jongeren_wo2_marc_van_berkel_13_juni_2018.pdf.

23. See, for example, Entertainment Software Association (ESA), “Essential Facts about the Video Game Industry” (Washington, DC, 2020), 14–16, <https://>

www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Final-Edited-2020-ESA_Essential_facts.pdf.

24. See Adrienne Shaw, “Do You Identify as a Gamer? Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Gamer Identity,” *New Media & Society* 14, no. 1 (2012): 28–44; Frederik De Grove, Cédric Courtois and Jan Van Looy, “How to Be a Gamer! Exploring Personal and Social Indicators of Gamer Identity,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 20, no. 3 (2015): 346–61; Mia Consalvo, *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2007).

25. For a more extensive close reading of the game *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, as well as its direct sequel, *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* (MachineGames, 2017), see, for example, Andrew Denning, “Deep Play? Video Games and the Historical Imaginary,” *American Historical Review* 126, no. 1 (2021): 180–98.

26. Jonas Linderoth, “Beyond the Digital Divide: An Ecological Approach to Gameplay,” *ToDIGRA—Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association* 1, no. 1 (2013), <http://todigra.org/index.php/todigra/article/view/9>. For a discussion of the notion “affordances” from the perspective of ecological psychology, see James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Hillsdale NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1986).

27. For a discussion of the concept “evil deed” in relation to cinema, see Holger Pötzsch, “Ubiquitous Absence: Character Engagement in the Contemporary War Film,” *Nordicom Review* 34, no. 1 (2013): 125–34.

28. See Daniel H. Magilow, Kristin T. Vander Lugt and Elizabeth Bridges, *Nazisploitation! The Nazi Image in Low-Brow Cinema and Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 1–18; Rosenfeld, *The World Hitler Never Made*.

29. See, for example, John Lennon and Malcolm Foley, *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster* (London: Continuum, 2000).

30. The first *Wolfenstein*-game was made in 1981. *Wolfenstein 3D*, one of the first first-person shooter-games, was made in 1992.

31. *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, focus group 2, August 5, 2018.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.

34. *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, focus group 1, August 1, 2018.

35. *Call of Duty: WWII*, focus group 2, August 4, 2018.

36. Ibid.

37. *Call of Duty: WWII*, focus group 3, September 22, 2018.

38. *Call of Duty: WWII*, focus group 2, August 4, 2018.

39. *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, focus group 1, August 1, 2018.

40. See, for example, Remco Ensel and Annemarike Stremmelaar, “Speech Acts: Observing Antisemitism and Holocaust Education in the Netherlands,” in Günther Jikeli and Joëll Allouche-Benayoun, eds., *Perceptions of the Holocaust in*

Europe and Muslim Communities: Sources, Comparisons and Educational Challenges (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2013), 153–71; Tsafirir Goldberg and Geert M. Savenije, “Teaching Controversial Historical Issues,” in Scott A. Metzger and Lauren McArthur Harris, eds., *The Wiley International Handbook of History Teaching and Learning* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018), 515–16.

41. *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, focus group 3, September 22, 2018.

42. Jørgensen, “The Positive Discomfort of Spec Ops.”

43. *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, focus group 2, August 5, 2018.

44. *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, focus group 1, August 1, 2018.

45. Ibid.

46. *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, focus group 3, September 22, 2018.

47. *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, focus group 1, August 1, 2018.

48. *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, focus group 2, August 5, 2018.

49. *Call of Duty: WWII*, focus group 2, August 4, 2018.

50. *Call of Duty: WWII*, focus group 3, September 22, 2018.

51. Ibid.

52. As Andrew Denning notes, the recent decision by the *American Historical Review* to accept reviews of historical games is one indicator of this gradually increasing effort. See Denning, “Deep Play,” 196–97.

53. See, for example, T. L. Taylor’s notion of “instrumental play” in her *Play between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2006), 67–92.

Pieter Van den Heede is a lecturer and researcher in the History Department of Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands. He focuses on the study of historical culture, history didactics, public history and other forms of meta-reflection on history as a discipline. (vandenheede@eshcc.eur.nl)