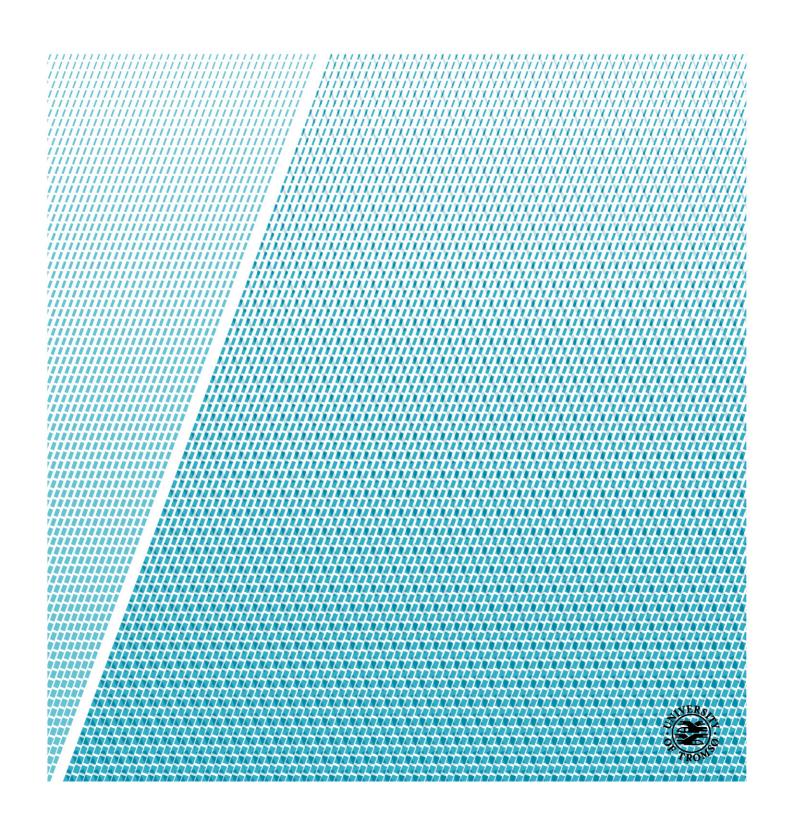UiT

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Playing Soviet Soldiers:
Virtual Communicative Memory in Kyrgyzstan
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Abstract

The thesis explores the fields of memory studies and video game studies. As a result, it proposes the concept of virtual communicative memory to encapsulate the special form of memory that can be produced by player interaction with video games. As an instance of modern media, video games bring the added dimensions of player agency, engagement of personal values and ethical sensibilities of the players, and shared experience of simulated historical environments. These factors justify the investigation of the memory-making potential of video games. To explore the feasibility of the proposed theoretical development, the thesis presents an analysis of the game *Company of Heroes 2* (Relic Entertainment, 2013). In this analysis, the dominant historical themes of the game are fleshed out and the memory making potential of the game is evaluated with a view to virtual communicative memory. The thesis also contains the results of empirical research carried out during the summer of 2016 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. The research was designed to explore player engagement with the game and the process by which players negotiate the meaning potentials and historical themes contained in the game. This research provides some support for the concept of virtual communicative memory and points to numerous further research avenues, such as the use of video games in education.

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This was not easy.

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Chapter 5: Interview Analysis and Findings

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations

Chapter 1: Introduction

1. Introduction

The fields of memory and video game studies are both well-established areas of academic inquiry. Both fields circumscribe clusters of questions that provide significant insight into the function and nature of the modern world. Collective memory concerns the evolution of societies as entities with some degree of cohesion and identity (Olick 1999), while the explosion of the video game industry over the past few decades has made video games an important aspect of modern life. The latter field is not only concerned with how games can be made more enjoyable and financially profitable, but also with their social and educational significance. The present thesis concerns itself with the latter sphere of inquiry by taking an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates both academic fields.

The interaction of modern media and collective memory has been a subject of academic discussion for some years now. For example, Alison Landsberg (2004) has put forward the idea that media such as films and museums can enable the formation of what she calls "prosthetic memories" – that one can incorporate the experience of some 'other' that happens to be the subject of the media into her or his own identity while remaining rooted in their contemporary moment, place and person. However, the relative novelty of the medium of video games and the characteristics that set it apart from other forms of modern media make the investigation of this relationship of particular interest and importance (Hammar 2016, Pötzsch and Šisler 2016).

The complexity of the relationship means that the interaction between video games and collective memory cannot be covered in full in a master's level thesis. The complexities become evident from the very outset of the inquiry. The issue of collective memory, for example, is in itself quite problematic. Given the constraints of the thesis, it is impossible to cover even a considerable fraction of this debate. The following text, therefore, refers to the continued existence and evolution of societies as entities with at least some degree of cohesion as evidence of the presence of some substrate of collective memory that allows social co-existence through time (Olick 1999). When the question of social identity is applied to the issue collective memory, it might make sense to speak of social memory as that substrate. The inquiry further limits the discussion to *cultural* and *communicative memory*, both introduced by Jan Assmann (1995; 2008; 2011). The discussion then turns to the question of digital media and exposes, to a limited degree, the necessity of bringing the effects of modern media into the discussion of collective memory at large and social memory in particular. Having shown the importance of this larger inquiry, the thesis turns to the investigation of the memory-making

potential of video games as a subset of modern media. Again, it is impossible to encompass the discussion in full, so the work concerns itself with the interaction of individual players with a game, providing insights at the lowest level of analysis and highlighting avenues for future research. It is my hope that the ideas presented in this text will prove useful in the investigation of the relationship between video games as a subset of modern media and social memory. This is but a fundament for investigations to come.

This thesis triangulates a theoretical discussion with two pieces of research. Rooted in memory and video game studies, the following text first explores the theoretical potentialities of interdisciplinary research in these fields. As a result, the thesis proposes the concept of *virtual communicative memory,* defined as *the collective store of memories that result from the vicarious personal experiences of a group of players of the settings, in-game events and the concomitant meaning potentials of a particular game*, as a useful encapsulation of the sort of memory that can be produced by player engagement with video games. The second stage of the thesis involves a formal analysis of the game *Company of Heroes 2* (Relic Entertainment, 2013) to flesh out the dominant historical themes in the game and its memory-making potential with a view to the proposed theoretical development. Finally, the third stage of the thesis is empirical research, carried out among players in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan in the summer of 2016. The goals of this research stage is to find if the conditions that enable *virtual communicative memory,* as described in the theoretical discussion can arise in the process of natural play and to find how players negotiate the meaning potentials uncovered during the analysis of the game. Within the context of the proposed terminology, what the two supporting research stages investigate is *individual virtual memories* of players along with the game's memory-making potential, both of which point to the possibility of *virtual communicative memory,* once the meaning potentials of a game are activated and reproduced by actual players in shared experiences of play.

What follows here is some general information about the research project – a short description of the research methodology including the research questions and hypotheses for each stage of the project, followed by a summary of the narrative of *Company of Heroes 2* (Relic Entertainment, 2013).

2. Methodology

This thesis has no chapter dedicated to methodology. Rather, in order to better accommodate the structure of the thesis, every chapter begins with a short description of the methodology at work in that particular stage of the project. Most generally, the methodology of this thesis is

that of triangulating three pieces of research. The theoretical findings of chapters 2 and 3 are explored by and weighed against two pieces of empirical research presented in chapters 4 and 5 with a view to produce a viable theory that highlights future research possibilities. Each section, therefore, calls for its own methodology. The second and third chapters present a purely theoretical inquiry, the fourth chapter contains a formal analysis of *Company of Heroes 2*, and the fifth chapter is the result of empirical research carried out using semi-structured interviews in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

There is also no dedicated literature review. Rather, the discussion of the relevant literature is intertwined with the theoretical background in chapters 2 and 3.

2.1   Research Questions and Hypotheses

This thesis is an exploration of theoretical potentialities. As such, it takes a very broad approach that becomes evermore focused as the thesis progresses, with each stage of the research project building on those that precede it. In the broadest sense, the research asks after the *effect of video games on social memory,* with the hypothesis also naturally broad. *The media-specific aspects of video games condition the unique way through which this new medium asserts its effect, which then necessitates an adaptation of established concepts.* With a view to the theoretical base, laid out in chapter 2, a theoretical answer to this question is proposed in chapter 3 of this thesis. The conceptual adaptation is encapsulated in the concept of *virtual communicative memory* as a useful expression of a possible result of player engagement with video games.

Chapter 4 is an exploration of the feasibility of the concept through the analysis of a specific historical video game, namely *Company of Heroes 2,* a real-time strategy game that deals with the Soviet involvement in WWII. The research questions for this section of the thesis concern *the dominant meaning potentials and historical themes in Company of Heroes 2* and *whether the game is conducive to personal moral engagement*. Given the fact that the game is a Western post-Cold War production, it can be hypothesized that *the representation of the USSR, both at the level of game mechanics and narrative will be fairly one-sided with some controversial historical themes emphasized;* and *given such a representation of the USSR, personal moral engagement will depend on the extent to which the player is made knowingly complicit in the portrayed cruelty.*

Finally, chapter 5 contains the results of empirical research in Bishkek Kyrgyzstan, with a view to answer questions regarding *the presence of conditions that enable virtual communicative memory during regular gameplay* and *how players negotiate the meaning potentials of Company of Heroes 2.* The hypotheses are that *some of the interviewees will have*

experienced personal involvement in the events of the game; and that *the negotiation of meaning potentials will take place against the background of the players' existing historical knowledge.*

3.   **Summary of the Game Narrative**

Company of Heroes is a series of historical video games developed by Relic Entertainment and published by Sega Games. This thesis deals with the second title in the series – *Company of Heroes 2* (2013). The game's single player campaign simulates a series of battles of the Second World War from the Soviet perspective. It is a real time strategy in which the player controls Soviet soldiers grouped into squads of different types. The player is tasked with managing the troops and calling in reinforcements while exploiting the landscape to utilize cover opportunities and attempting to outmaneuver enemy forces.

The gameplay is interspersed with cinematic non-interactive cutscenes that occur between missions and drive forward the narrative. The gameplay has no individual protagonist. However, the cutscenes present the in-game missions as the memories of Lev Ivanovich Isakovich, a Soviet ex-officer who has been incarcerated in a GULAG camp after the end of the war as *an enemy of the people* and a *traitor to the Motherland* for writing a book that outlines his experiences in the War and exposes the pragmatic cruelty of the Soviet leadership. Lev was going to defect with this book to reveal his story to the world. His memories are brought up in the course of an interrogation of Lev by Churkin, an NKVD[1] employee, who was Lev's commanding officer during the war. The themes of excessive violence and brutal military discipline enforced through friendly fire dominate the conversation.

At the end of the game, a soviet officer comes into the room, informs Lev that he'd been sentenced to death for "crimes against the state" and intends to shoot him. Churkin shoots the would-be executioner in the head at pointblank range. He lets Lev go with the book. In a letter attached to the book, he explains that he had not read the book until he'd learnt that he would be a victim in the next purge. He agrees with Lev that the truth has to be told. At the close of the game, a second gunshot is heard, implying Churkin's suicide.

In short, the game presents the plight of the Soviet soldier as suffering not only at the hand of the evil of Nazi aggression, but also through the climate of ruthless military exploitation by Soviet authorities, willing to throw people at problems until full resolution is

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[1] National Committee of Internal Affairs of the Soviet Union (1934 - 1946) (precursor to the KGB)

achieved. The game thus posits Soviet military command as a "ubiquitously absent" (Pötzsch, 2013) enemy to its own soldiers who are forced to survive in a space of deadly violence outlined by their Nazi counterparts and Stalin's orders to shoot deserters on sight.

Such portrayal of Soviet forces and leadership stands in stark contrast to the established consensus in Russia and, arguably, the post-Soviet space at large. The tension between the established narrative and that presented in the game can be seen in the game's reception in Russia, where it sparked such controversy that Russian distributors had to stop sales to avoid bad press. The publishers addressed this by saying that "Sega and Relic are aware of the press stories circulating concerning Company of Heroes 2 and the historical context of the game from a Russian perspective" (Peel, 2013). The portrayal of the Soviet sources in the game also moved a famous Russian YouTube user to post a review of the game, titled "Why Russians hate Company of Heroes 2" in both English and Russian ([BadComedian], 2013 a, b).[2]

This chapter has presented some general information about the research project and provided the general summary of the narrative of *Company of Heroes 2* (Relic Entertainment, 2013). The following chapter will explore the concepts of collective and social memory and present some implications of modern media in the study of memory. Building on this, chapter 3 will return to video games and explore them in particular, proposing the concept of *virtual communicative memory.*

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[2] The English version of the video gathered well over one and a half million views. Interestingly, the Russian version has only been viewed just over 134 thousand times. This suggests an overblown media scandal rather than any form of massive grassroots campaign against the game. Alternatively, the Russian version of the video may have garnered more views on Russian social media, which could not be surveyed in the course of this research project. A full investigation of the general consensus on the War and the Soviet involvement in it is outside the scope of this thesis.

Chapter 2. Theoretical Background: Memory and Identity
1. Introduction

This chapter provides the theoretical basis on which the discussion of video games and their memory-making potential will take place. While collective memory is an extremely broad term, I take social memory to mean the specific application of collective memory to the issue of social identity. Continued individual or social existence presupposes a means by which cohesion is carried through time (Olick 1999). Therefore, the main themes taken up in this portion of the thesis are collective memory and its relation to identity – this chapter concerns social memory. By exploring the work of Jan Assmann (1995, 2008, 2011) and Aleida Assmann (2008, 2006), alongside the work of Alison Landsberg (2004), I establish a theoretical background within social memory studies and the importance of including the role of modern media in the discussion of social memory. The subsequent chapter builds on this to discuss the memory-making potential of video games given the characteristics specific to this medium.

2.   Jan and Aleida Assmann

In many of their publications, Jan and Aleida Assmann highlighted connections between memory and social identity. Jan Assmann argued that "memory is the faculty that enables us to form an awareness of selfhood (identity), both on the personal and on the collective level" (Assmann, J., 2008, p. 109). He distinguished *cultural* and *communicative* forms of social memory. The connection to social identity is identifiable in both forms.

2.1.   Cultural Memory

Jan Assmann's conceptualization of memory highlights the connection between a nation's (or some other society's) perception, or version, of its past and its present identity. He saw *cultural memory* as "a kind of institution" (2008, p. 110). This is the aspect of social memory that "is exteriorized, objectified, and stored away in symbolic forms" (p. 110). Cultural memory is the formal assemblage of a group's historical memory and collective identity. It is formed by such institutions, symbols, and stores of knowledge as "monuments, museums, libraries, archives, and other mnemonic institutions" (p. 111). Cultural memory contains the formalized history of a nation or some other group. It situates the group within the larger world and conditions, to a certain extent, the relation between the group and the world in history as well as the relationships within the group. At the same time, cultural memory establishes a dominant historical narrative that works to predispose the memories of the individuals who together form

a particular collective. This is the background against which dissent and and counter-hegemonic forms of memory and commemoration take place.

2.2.   Memory Politics

An important component of this line of thinking is the distinction between the past "as it is investigated and reconstructed by archaeologists and historians" and "the past as it is remembered" (Assmann, J., 2011, p.19). Another way to approach this dichotomy is to differentiate between knowledge and memory. J. Assmann writes that "knowledge about the past acquires the properties and functions of memory if it is related to a concept of identity" (2008, p.113). It can thus become an object of politics. The remembered past involves selective emphasis, aimed at highlighting and strengthening certain aspects of history to support, and, perhaps, enforce, a present identity.

There have been instances in history, where past events were created, made up, in order to support a version of the present. A number of examples of such fabrications of history aimed, essentially, at modifying contemporary cognition and cultural memory are presented by Peter Meusburger, Michael Heffernan, and Edgar Wunder in their chapter titled *Cultural Memories: An Introduction* in the book *Cultural Memories from the Geographic Point of View* (2011). One of the examples are monuments put up by fascist Italy in regions of South Tyrol. Historically, no battle deaths took place in that region, but the monuments erected there listed names of imaginary soldiers, that were imagined to have died while 'liberating' the region. The authors argue that this was done to strengthen the territorial claims of the government of fascist Italy by creating the notion that "the blood of Italian soldiers had been spilled in a national struggle in this location" (Meusburger, Heffernan and Wunder, 2011, p. 9-10). This practice is not limited to autocratic regimes. The decision of the US authorities to raze the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq is another example of the attempt to strengthen a version of the past that may be very different from reality (Meusburger, Heffernan and Wunder, 2011, p. 9-10). 'Remembered' past allows for purposeful editing. Memory can be politicized. What matters here is intent and political capital.

2.3.   Communicative Memory

In contrast to cultural memory, *communicative memory* is "non-institutional" (Assmann, J., 2011, p. 111). Such memory resides in and is enacted through everyday communication. Jan Assmann (2011) argues that because this form of memory is not actively maintained and reinforced by an authority, because at its core it is an emergent phenomenon rooted in everyday

interaction, it "has only a limited time depth normally reaching no farther back than eighty years" (p. 111).

As such, communicative memory is much more resilient in the face of purposeful 'editing.' An example of such resilience is also presented by Meusburger (2011). In another contribution to the same book he talks about the futility of Soviet attempts to impose a version of history on the countries of Eastern Europe. Meusburger claims that

> Even 70 years of oppressive communist rulers completely controlling all media, museums, libraries, and the whole educational system; faking thousands of documents; monopolizing the distribution of memorials and rituals in public space; banning the "visible" dissidents to the gulags; and threatening opponents with the death penalty were not sufficient to create a collective memory that was accepted by more than 30% of the population. All these measures could not prevent people from developing their private memories, their own historical narratives and interpretation of events (2011, p. 58).

In short, Jan Assmann's ideas on cultural and communicative memory can be interpreted as a model of the evolution of identity through time. In this model, memory is presented as the interaction of institutionalized cultural memory with the living memory of recent and present experience – communicative memory. The next section looks into this interaction.

2.4. Transitions of memory

There must be a process by which some contemporary events become incorporated into cultural memory as time goes by. Jan Assmann illustrates this transition "from autobiographical and communicative memory into cultural memory" (2008, p.117) by citing the role of the book of Deuteronomy in the formation of Judaism and its subsequent centrality in the cultural memory of the Jewish nation. He argues that the aim of the book of Deuteronomy was "to teach what to remember and how to remember" (2011, p.22). Rituals associated with the Exodus have since become regular reminders, passing on the message of the book and sustaining a Jewish social and religious identity. Codified in the form of ritual and remembered text, Deuteronomy is at the basis of "both religion and sociopolitical organization, which rests primarily on memory" (2011, p.23). This is a dramatic example, and is thus an outlier. Normally, cultural memory "accumulates and changes in the course of centuries instead" (2011, p. 22-23).

Jan Assmann presents the 'normal' formation of cultural memory as an organic process that takes place as a society exists through time. He argues that "human memory brings about a synthesis of time and identity" (2011, p.15). As a society progresses through time, its

contemporary store of cultural and communicative memory plays a role in how the society faces historical challenges and how it interprets historical events. These challenges and interpretations then become part of the store of communicative memory, with some becoming part of cultural memory.

Another transfer within memory takes place within cultural, institutionalized, memory. Depending on contemporary circumstances, certain aspects of cultural memory may gain in importance. Following a dichotomy proposed by Aleida Assmann, Jan Assmann (2008) talks of the "move [within cultural memory] from the rear stage to the forefront," (p.117) or, in the words of Aleida Assmann (2008), from the 'archive' to the 'canon.' For her, cultural memory is divided into "actively circulated memory that keeps the past present as the *canon* and the passively stored memory that preserves the past as the *archive*" (Assmann, A., 2008, p.98). Movement between the two takes place through "a rigorous process of selection," based on the 'value' of a given memory in regards to the continued maintenance of a group identity and the community's contemporary challenges (p.100). This process amounts to the active practice of both voluntary and forced forgetting and remembering. (Assmann, A., 2008) In another book, *Erinnerungsräume* (2006), A. Assmann adds the category of 'rubbish' to the dichotomy of canon and archive to account for those remnants of the past that are actively suppressed or disposed of.

Peculiarly absent is the transition from cultural to communicative memory. This is conditioned by the conceptual formulation of the two. Communicative memory is temporally limited to three generations. This makes it impossible for 'archive' or 'canon' cultural memories to become parts of the "living and embodied" (Assmann, J., 2011, p. 22) communicative memory. One cannot live through something that has already happened. This point will be taken up in section 4 within the context of the discussion of Alison Landsberg's (2004) concept of modern media and *prosthetic memory*.

However, before the role of modern media in social memory can be productively engaged, a number of considerations pertaining to the role of the 'other' in the formation and the continued re-formation of social identity are in order.

3. Relational Identity and Popular Conceptions of the 'Other'[3]

The discussion of the formation (and, arguably, ongoing re-formation) of identity in relation to external entities naturally flows from the transfers of memory discussed by Aleida Assmann. In her treatment of archive and cannon, she speaks about certain aspects of the remembered past gaining or losing importance in response to contemporary challenges. Fluctuations in memory take place in and in response to a larger context. In relation to identity this highlights the observation that "identity remains unintelligible unless it is located in a world" (Berger and Luckmann, 1991, 195).

An extensive presentation of literature pertaining to the relational nature of identity would certainly be of benefit to this discussion. Such a survey, however, can be found in a number of publications. In *National Identity and the 'Other'* (1998)*,* for example, Anna Triandafyllidou dedicates a lot of space to the survey of literature on the subject. Certainly, a number of other scholarly pieces have come out since her publication. Unfortunately, it is impossible to give justice to the literature within the scope of this thesis. All that can be accomplished here is an extension of and a supplement to Aleida Assmann's thought on the transitions of memory in relation to contemporary circumstances.

Identity presupposes difference. This is true for every level of identity from personal to national. In *National Identity and the 'Other,'* Triandafyllidou begins her discussion of national identity from the simple observation that "for the nation to exist, it is presupposed that there is some other community, […] from which it needs to distinguish itself" (1998, p.594) Similarly, the formation of counter-cultures takes place within the framework of the 'parent' culture – a process that has been argued to be largely driven by "othering or difference," rather than "sameness" (Desmond, McDonagh, and O'donohoe, 2000, p.244). In other words, identity is often formed and re-formed in relation to some 'other.'

This is not to say that identity is formed or re-formed only by and in response to the 'others.' Nonetheless, the role of the other in this process cannot be discounted. It has often been observed that in times of crisis or change, societies have turned to some internal or external other in search of someone to blame. Anna Triandafyllidou, for example, writes that the other "serves in overcoming the crisis because it unites the people in front of a common enemy, it reminds them 'who we are' and emphasizes that 'we are different and unique'" (1998,

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[3] The limited nature of this work does not allow space for the discussion of the psychology of belonging or the discussion of the need to belong. Unfortunately, this means that the discussion of the formation and re-formation of identity presented here is limited. The goal of this section is predominantly to supplement the thought of Jan and Aleida Assmanns on the intrinsic sources of identity, namely cultural and communicative memory.

p.599). In short, "national identity […] may be conceived as a double-edged relationship. On the one hand, it is inward-looking, it involves a certain degree of commonality within the group. [...] On the other hand, national identity implies difference" (p. 599).

An important observation in this regard is that it is impossible for every member of a group to have direct access to this/these 'other(s).' What matters here, therefore, is the *conception* of the other. If identity must stand in relation to some other member of its world, and if the people actually ascribing to this identity have limited access to the other, then identity responds to some image of the other rather than the 'real thing.' Triandafyllidou echoes this consideration when she writes that "the quest for authenticity of the national self is inseparable from the *conception* of the others" (1998, p. 595, my emphasis).

The source of this conception is the next and final consideration in the present section. In the absence of direct contact, the representation of the other in the media in all its guises, be it news, newspapers, books, films or video games, largely informs the conception of the 'other,' in relation to whom social identity is formed and re-formed, and in response to whom the dynamics of archive and canon (A. Assmann, 2008) take place.

Having put the discussion of a group's social memory in the context of a surrounding world and having brought modern media into the discussion, the text can now turn to a more thorough discussion of the relationship between modern media and memory.

4.   Alison Landsberg: Modern Media and Prosthetic Memory

In *Prosthetic Memory* (2004), Alison Landsberg outlines how modern media, such as film, allow a new form of memory. She claims that along with certain physical environments, such as museums, modern media can present a historical narrative in such a way that one "does not simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live" (p. 2).

Landsberg claims that such memories have "the ability to shape [a] person's subjectivity and politics" (p. 2). These memories do not propagate a sense of unity between the viewer and the subject of media. From a historical perspective, "people who acquire these memories are led to feel a connection to the past but, all the while, to remember their position in the contemporary moment" (p. 9). Landsberg claims that such memories create the conditions necessary for ethical thinking "by encouraging people to feel connected to, while recognizing the alterity of, the 'other'" (p. 9).

The reality and effect of such an experience are strengthened by its emotional component. Films like *Schindler's List* (Spielberg, 1993) and *The Pianist* (Polanski, 2002)

engage their spectators not only through a narrative focused on producing knowledge by presenting historical facts, but also through allowing the audience to identify with the people in the films on an emotional level. (Landsberg, 1997) These films are examples of modern media that enable a "processual" (Landsberg, 2004, p. 130) form of knowledge rooted in empathy, as opposed to sympathy, and in personal connection as opposed to abstract detached knowledge. Landsberg claims that whereas sympathy is based on the presumption of sameness or at least similarity between two subjects, empathy "recognizes the alterity of identification and the necessity of negotiating distances" (p. 24) Thus, if it is true that "thinking ethically means thinking beyond the immediacy of one's own wants and desires," (p. 149) empathy is "essential to any ethical relation to the other" (p. 24).

Landsberg (2004) argues that modern media and, in some cases museums, enable the formation of such memories through opening up 'transferential spaces,' where the transfer of experience can take place. She claims that such a space has to exist outside the locales of both the viewer and the people represented in the media (p. 120) This allows the spectator to experience the past while retaining their own frame of reference. Such an experience, although its parameters and media are artificial, is itself quite real. The reality of the experience empowers it to the point of being able to affect the viewer's moral and ethical frame of reference. Given the popularity of video games, the discussion of the memory-making potentials of this medium in particular is in order. The following chapter concerns this question.

This chapter has presented the theoretical background of the thesis. It engaged the work of Jan and Aleida Assmann (Assmann, J. 2008, 2011; Assmann A. 2006, 2008) in the discussion of social memory and identity. It also highlighted the role of the 'other' in the formation and re-formation of social identity. With this in mind, the chapter also brought up Alison Landsberg's work (2004) on the memory-making potential of modern media. While games share a number of characteristics of other historical media, some of their aspects set them apart. The following chapter deals with the media specificity of video games and discusses the resulting memory-making potential of the medium.

Chapter 3: Virtual Communicative Memory

1. History and Memory in Film and Other Forms of Modern Media

The role of video games in historical representation and cultural memory has been addressed by Holger Pötzsch and Vit Šisler (2016). They use the role of film in these issues as a springboard to describe "the textual features through which certain responses and particular subject positions are systematically invited and certain understandings encouraged, before these are actively negotiated in situated practices of reception" (p. 2). Pötzsch and Šisler use the work of Robert Rosenstone (2006), alongside other scholars, to ground how modern media "assert relevance for historical discourse and memory politics" (p. 3). While historical film can dramatically present historical events and historical settings, include original documentary recordings, and present alternative historical narratives, Pötzsch and Šisler argue for the discussion of "history as simulation," when video games are considered (p. 3).

2. Media-specificity of Video Games

2.1. Simulation and Procedurality

What sets video games apart from other examples of modern media is that they are interactive simulations. In an article focused on the use of simulations in education, Jeremiah McCall defines simulation as "a simplified working model of one or more aspects of the real world, especially systems and processes" (McCall, 2012, p. 9). Another definition of simulation that informs much of the modern scholarship on the matter is presented by Ian Bogost in *Unit Operation* (2008). He defines simulation as "a representation of a source system via a less complex system that informs the user's understanding of the source system in a subjective way" (Bogost, 2008, p. 98). A simulation video game, therefore, is a game that models, through the use of game mechanics, rules, and goal-setting, some model that refers to a non-digital event, setting or mechanical construct. A simple example of a digital simulation, which, admittedly, might not be construed as a game per se, would be a program, that allows one to observe chemical reactions on an atomic scale, while putting the 'player' in control of some aspects of this system, such as temperature, presence of a catalyst, or certain other chemical reagents. A simulation is interactive and referential. The 'player' retains limited control, and the simulation refers to something outside of itself, and bears "a degree of verisimilitude" (McCall, 2016, p. 522) to some process in the non-digital world.

Clearly, this does not have to be the case. The program can reimagine chemical processes, presenting some 'alternative chemistry,' but if it does not refer to any system outside of itself, such a program would no longer be a simulation, but a system onto itself. McCall,

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thus, includes another characteristic to simulation video games, stating that they must "offer defensible explanatory models" (McCall, 2016, p. 522) of whatever system they represent.

Another differentiating aspect of video games is their procedurality. In *Is Sid Meyer's Civilization History?* (2013) Adam Chapman argues that games are procedural in that they are dependent on the computer's "defining ability to execute a series of rules." (p. 314) As computer programs, video games can be conceptually reduced to a series of digital events, governed by predetermined rules and algorithms that together allow players to make meaningful choices with outcomes that may not necessarily be anticipated, but can always be explained within the context of the rules of the game. This makes possible the "free space of movement within a more rigid structure" that Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman define as "play" (2004, p. 304)

2.2. Procedural Rhetoric

Simulations can be rhetorical devices. In *The Rhetoric of Video Games* (2008) Ian Bogost describes the potential of such rule-dependent systems to function as devices of "procedural rhetoric." He argued that "just as verbal rhetoric is the practice of using oratory persuasively and visual rhetoric is the practice of using images persuasively, procedural rhetoric is […] the practice of authoring arguments through processes" (p. 125) Similarly, Gonzalo Frasca (2007) talks about "play rhetoric," which he defines as "the use of play (and game) activities in order to communicate meaning, forming attitudes or inducing actions through signs, rules and player performance" (p.88). In other words, a set of rules that acts as the underlying mechanism of a simulation of a system constitutes an argument about how that system functions.

Such rhetoric need not be limited to the function of physical systems, but can also be used in argumentation regarding conceptual systems. For example, the game *Animal Crossing* (Nintendo, 2001) can be seen as a simulation of consumer capitalism. In this game, the player is invited to build a life in a fictional village, populated by animals. The object of the game is the continual accumulation of consumer items. This accumulation makes necessary the expansion of the player's fictional house, which in turn creates space for the accumulation of more goods. Another important aspect of the mechanics of this game is that as the player spends more money in the village shop, the owner of the shop becomes increasingly and exponentially richer, upgrading his shop and thereby giving the player more options of consumer items. Bogost (2008) points out that the argument of this game, embedded in its rule structure and therefore set forth procedurally, concerns the cycle of consumption inherent in modern capitalism and the disproportionate benefit that the system yields for capital-owning elites. (p.

126)

Another example of a game that makes a procedural argument is *Phone Story* (Molleindustria, 2011), which traces the production chain of mobile phones. The game consists of a number of sub-games, or levels, which are meant as step-by-step representations of the production chain. These include the challenge of whipping slave laborers in Africa to increase their production speed in order to generate the necessary level of raw resources to progress to the next level; controlling a rescue team tasked with catching workers who attempt suicide by jumping out of the windows of a factory in China; and finally managing workers in an unsafe, exploitative, and unregulated recycling operation in Ghana (Molleindustria, 2011). This game is a particularly good example of procedural rhetoric, in that progression from level to level is only possible if the player acknowledges the ethical position of the game and becomes complicit in the atrocious actions the game represents. If one fails to whip enough slave workers to make them work faster, one will not have sufficient raw resource to continue on with the production.

In other words, meaningful engagement with a simulation, which is an interactive system of rules, is possible only if the player works within those rules. Such engagement must take place on the simulation's turf and terms. Despite being a truism, this raises an important point. Playing a simulation game makes it necessary for the player to 'sit through' its procedural argument, because, as a simulation, such a game *is* a procedural argument about some external system.

This does not preclude people from modifying the rules of engagement. This can happen by modifying the simulation itself through altering its code, as sometimes happens with video games through "mods." These can often be downloaded and installed by the users. For example, Adam Chapman (2013) describes one case, where Croatian gamers modified the map of their region as it was presented in *Europa Universalis II* (Strategy First, 2001), a grand strategy historical simulation game. The members of a gaming forum redrew the map to make it more historically authentic, changing the in-game borders of the Balkan provinces, and made the code available for download. (p. 317) Another way of 'playing with the game rules' "entails players setting each other goals that do not align with the prescribed 'win conditions' of the game, but that better reflect particular historical concerns, questions and interpretations" (Chapman, 2013, p. 317). For example, players may attempt to play *Europa Universalis* by only colonizing areas that the country they are controlling in-game colonized in actual history. In both examples, the players overlay their understanding of an external system onto the simulation at hand. In the first example, the simulation itself is altered. In the second,

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modification based on the player's idea of the course of historical events is introduced within the context of existing rules. Such modification arguably amounts to a procedural rebuttal of a procedural argument.

2.3.   Historical Video Games

Applied to historical video games, these aspects of video games lead to a number of considerations. Based on McCall's observation that simulations must "offer defensible explanatory models," (McCall, 2016, p. 523) some video games may be historical, but will not be historical simulations. Alongside the model of an 'alternative' chemistry, these games would be systems of rules, that model no system outside of themselves. Arguably, examples of such non-simulation historical video games include the *Assassin's Creed* series (Activision, 2007 - present), in which each game puts the player into the skin of an assassin in some historical setting and in some geographic area. The first game of the series, for example, is set in the Middle East at the time of the Third Crusade (Activision, 2007). There, the player has to find ways to assassinate the targets, while exploring and exploiting a detailed architectural representation of the region. In other games of the series, the player can even interact with real historical personages, such as Leonardo da Vinci and Niccolò Machiavelli. (Activision, 2010) While these games are referential inasmuch as they refer to real historical settings, architecture and people, they do not attempt to simulate historical events or systems, but rather overlay a fantastical narrative and system of rules on the real settings.

Such games, however, can be of social significance inasmuch as they may allow for what Emil Hammar (2016) has termed "counter-hegemonic commemorative play." They have "the potential to influence processes of cultural memory related to marginalized identities and contemporary and past forms of oppression through practices of play." (p.16) In a recent discussion of the 2015 installment of Assassin's Creed, he asserts that the game "enables the recognition of marginalized identities and histories within larger frameworks of cultural memory." Even though the game is not strictly a historical simulation, the fact that it is referential and that it puts a person of a non-hegemonic identity in the position of power, means that the game can allow "players to playfully negotiate, and perform against, contemporary hegemony thereby influencing processes of cultural memory." (p. 16) From this perspective, one socially significant aspect of historical video games is that they "possess the capability to enable the legitimacy and acceptability of marginalized identities in the same manner as hegemonic identities by offering counter-hegemonic commemorative play." (p.17)

There are also games that, while remaining in close connection with the history that they represent, do not simulate any historical system directly. An example of such games is *Czechoslovakia 38-89: Assassination* (Charles University in Prague/Czech Academy of Sciences, 2015), discussed in a recent article by Holger Pötzsch and Vit Šisler (2016). This is "a single-player dialog-based adventure game that combines a historically inspired storyline with authentic documentary materials" (Pötzsch and Šisler, 2016, p. 22). Within the game, the player controls the grandchild of a fictional J. Jelinek, who was arrested after the historically real assassination of Reinhard Heydrich, *Reichsprotektor* of the Nazi-occupied Czech Territories. In control of the grandchild, the player must carry out conversations with a number of eye witnesses of the event, read personal diaries and review historical documents, all in the attempt to understand the grandfather's role in the events. The game, however, does not simulate any historical system at work in the past, but rather the very act of historical research. This encourages the players to "reflect upon the situatedness of personal memories and to critically engage the constructedness of received perspectives on the past," and to notice the "contradictory, fragile, and fragmentary nature of personal memories" (Pötzsch and Šisler, 2016, p. 23). This allows the game to challenge history as a construct, while allowing the player to explore a number of narratives, all based on the testimonies of real people and revolving around the events connected to the assassination.

Historical simulation games include titles such as *Sid Meier's Civilization* (Sid Meier, 1991 - 2016), and *Europa Universalis* (Strategy First, 2001), (Chapman, 2013), both mentioned earlier in the text. In both games, the player is invited to guide a civilization through a period in history. In *Civilization,* the player controls a civilization and takes it from pre-history to space age, attempting to develop the civilization economically and culturally, or focus on military conquest, depending on play style or the victory conditions of a given instance of play. In *Europa Universalis,* the players take a civilization through a particular historical period, depending on the game of the series in question (Chapman, 2013, p. 311 - 314). Both games are complex simulations based on historical, social and economic research. The designers of *Civilization,* for example, "used Paul M. Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* as a central text with which to model their game" (Taylor, 2003, n.p.).

This leads to a number of arguments regarding the use of simulation video games in general, and historical games in particular, in education. For example, McCall argues that "simulation games are potentially powerful in the role of studying historical systems because they are systems themselves" (McCall, 2012, p. 13).

2.4.   Media-Specific Biases of Video Games

At the same time, McCall (2016) recognizes a number of biases specific to historical video games. These are mostly interrelated and include entertainment bias, oversimplification, over-access to power and information, quantification bias, and narrative bias. McCall notes that in spite of the existence of video games made specifically for education, the primary objective of most video games is to entertain.[4] This means that historical accuracy is often sacrificed to improve gameplay. This is achieved by oversimplifying the complex causal relationships and contextual data that surround the subject of the game. At the same time, video games put the player in a position of power that no real person can have and provide an abundance of information far beyond what would be available to a historical figure. McCall (2012) uses the example of the *Total War* series (Creative Assembly, 2000 – present) to illustrate the point. Here, the player is in control of an army, but unlike a general, the player can zoom in on any part of the battlefield at any time, view the statistics related to every unit, including their level of morale and stamina, and micromanage tactics by controlling, if necessary, individual units (McCall, 2012, p. 15). This information is a symptom of the quantification bias within historical video games. Since the games are, at bottom, computer programs, any factor within the game must be portrayed numerically. Thus, while troop morale or stamina in real life are qualitative measures, the in-game representation of these factors is always numerical, and can be presented to the player as such. (McCall, 2016, p. 528) The narrative bias is an outcome of the drive to entertain and results not only in a highly structured systematic representation of history, but also manifests itself in the presence of clearly defined goals (McCall, 2016, p. 529). An example of this bias would be the campaign section of any *Age of Empires* game (Microsoft Studios, 1997 - present), where the historical progress of real historical generals and leaders is reduced to a series of missions with clearly defined goals, objectives, and outcomes. In short, the need to entertain and engage the player leads to an oversimplification of the historical process by employing a reductive and heavily quantitative approach to what the designers of the game think to be the historical systems at play.

The creation of a historical video game makes necessary the reduction of historical processes to systems to be simulated and made interactive. The process imbues these systems with clear chains of causation and understandable outcomes. This reduction is necessary, much

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[4] This is mainly due to their commercial nature. On balance, however, entertainment encourages engagement, and engagement is what drives the experience of video games.

like it is necessary to reduce a landscape to only a number of relevant features in cartography. This process, however, relies on a preexisting understanding of history. There being no actual historical landscape with which to compare the reductive version, the resulting simulation is permeated by the designers' historical and ideological biases. In the words of McCall, "although games of this sort also elicit speculative engagement with the past, they tend to be built upon particular visions or theories of long-term historical development." (McCall, 2016, p. 521)

While these biases can be seen to disqualify video games from being part of historical media, some scholars have noted that many of these biases can also be observed in other, much more accepted, historical media. Adam Chapman (2013), for example, claims that "as soon as we try to arrange [historical facts and figures] into a narrative using the words of literature, the cinematography of film or the algorithms of the videogame, we also begin to construct meaning" (p. 321) Many of the downfalls of historical video games in how they represent history can be attributed to how we engage with our pasts in general, rather than any media-specific attribute of video games. In the words of Adam Chapman, "this is a key debate in history but in no way specifically challenges the videogame's (or indeed any form's) ability to produce historical narratives, which we acknowledge as pertaining to, but never recovering, an actual past" (p.324). The nature of video games does not make them especially susceptible to the pitfalls of historical misrepresentation or ideological bias.

2.5.   Autotelic Play

Games can be enjoyed just for the fun of playing. The fact that they contain a system of rules and goals, with in-built lines of progression and rewards means that playing can be a completely autotelic activity. An example of a non-historical game built solely around the fun of playing is Tetris (Alexei Pajitnov, 1985). The falling blocks of Tetris have no meaning outside of their in-game function.[5] While this game is not a simulation of anything, the popularity of Tetris is an example of a game that is completely autotelic. Its structure of rewards and rules is sufficient for enjoyment.

When applied to simulation video games, this means that the fact that they are simulations may not be central to their experience. The presence of an engrossing procedural aspect in games means that even in games that aim to 'say' something about an external system,

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[5] While the monotonous activity of setting blocks down can be interpreted in any number of ways, no such interpretations would be intrinsic to the game.

the procedural argument can go unnoticed, drowned away by the activity of playing itself. The rule-based system of a game, along with clear goals, progressive levels of difficulty, and rewards, can involve the player solely through its procedurality and, possibly, graphics. Simply said, games do not need to be simulations nor do they have to be 'educational' and 'meaningful' to be fun. The fun of video games does not usually rest in their meaning.[6] Applied to 'serious games,' games made with some form of educational goal in mind, this means that there must be a balance between droning didacticism and frivolous fun.

3.   Getting the Message Across

In some sense, it follows from the previous discussion that in order to increase the probability of player engagement with the procedural argument of the game, as opposed to engagement in simple mechanical activity, games would have to be in confrontation with their own tendency to become autotelic.[7] In order to increase the reliability of getting the message across to the player, the game would have to 'yank' the player out of the flow of gaming. In terms of player experience, this means that the game would have to go from being an object of autotelic activity to a space where the player can personally engage the activity while remaining rooted in their own person and context. To return to the question of memory studies and the thinking of Alison Landsberg (2004) specifically, the game would have to become a "transferential space" (p. 130). While it is impossible, within the scope of this thesis, to present a comprehensive discussion of how this can be achieved, the role of ethics in video games in eliciting personal player engagement is presented below.

3.1. Miguel Sicart: Ethical Experience in Video Games

This section does not aim to discuss the psychological consequences of playing violent video games and the ethical implications of this debate.[8] Rather, the present section concerns itself with ethical experiences when playing video games. Building on the work of Miguel Sicart and Lykke Guanio-Uluru, the section argues that in-game ethical experiences as described by these scholars invite a direct personal connection between the player as a person, rather than a person playing a character, and in-game events and entities, a point illustrated in the subsequent

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[6] The heavy reliance of other forms of media on character and plot means that a cinematic version of Tetris, for example, is feasible only as a very questionable artistic piece. The reason this game is fun is not because it has some message.
[7] This is not to say that autotelic gaming, or flow, excludes the possibility to engage with the procedural argument. I speak here of probability. Simply said, the player is more likely to pay attention to what the game 'means' when encouraged to do so.
[8] See, for example, Ferguson (2007) for an example of a meta-analysis of a number of studies that have to do with psychological effects of violent video games.

chapter.

Miguel Sicart (2005) begins with the conception of video games as designed objects. As such, they can be "designed with a value system in mind," which would then permeate to the "experience of [the] artifact" (n.p). In the process of play, these values can be enacted or rejected by the player, but since they are hardcoded into the structure of the game, sometimes it is impossible to play the game successfully when trying not to enact its value structure. For example, many strategy games, such as *Star Craft* (Blizzard, 1998) cannot be played without engaging in war. Victory in these games means annihilation of the opposing parties or forcing the opponent to surrender through necessarily violent means.

Sicart argues that it is possible (and advisable) to create games that would provide ethical experiences for the players (2005, 2010, 2013a, 2013b). He views in-game ethics as "[moral] systems by which we take choices and experience the gameworld in which we are voluntarily immersed" (2010, p. 2). This, however, renders some games "ethically irrelevant" (2008, p. 8). He gives Tetris (Alexei Pajitnov, 1985) as an example of such games. He argues that because Tetris consists purely of mechanics, without any structure of meaning positioning the falling blocks within some larger world, the game has no ethical underpinnings, it is a game wherein "the procedural dominates over the semantic" (p. 8). Sicart (2008) sees this larger world that Tetris lacks, the semantic layer of video games, as the overlay of meaning that allows players to be in some relation with the cultural and ethical values of the game. Even some games that seem to contain some value structure, such as the *Knights of the Old Republic* (LucasArts, 2013),[9] are "flawed" in this respect because the dichotomy between "good" and "evil" in these games is nothing more than an in-game mechanic, a part of the game's procedural level. In Sicart's (2008) words, in such games, players "[are] not require[d] to use their ethical reasoning within the semantic layer in order to make a choice: it is enough to understand the arbitrary ethics assigned to a particular game state, and let the game system evaluate the behavior" (p. 9). Simply put, the game makes very clear what decision will lead the player to which side of the dichotomy. One does not have to think to understand.

Sicart (2010) contrasts this type of games with a number of others, for example, the *Fallout* series in general (Bethesda Softworks, 1997 – present) and *Fallout 3* (2007) in particular. In his view, this game "creates a moral universe that has to be interpreted by the player" (2010, p. 11). As an example, Sicart brings the *Tenpenny Tower* mission in *Fallout 3*.

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[9] The game is set in the *Start Wars* universe. In it, player actions determine whether the player character is seen as belonging to the 'dark' or 'light' side of the Force – a Sith or a Jedi.

In this mission, the player is confronted with a thriving community living amid an irradiated wasteland and surrounded by a group of hungry radiation-affected 'ghouls'. The player can side with the community to kill off the ghouls, side with the ghouls to eradicate the community or try to bring peace between the two factions. While the third option seems to be the most moral choice, its result is always that the ghouls slaughter the community as soon as the player leaves the area. Upon return, the player who has brokered peace will always find a bloodbath (Sicart, 2010). This is only an illustration as the game is full of morally ambiguous choices and situations, whose resolution is rarely what would be expected. Sicart (2010) argues that "by eliminating moral compasses from the world, Fallout 3 succeeds in creating a complete moral universe to play in" (p. 11).

This moral ambiguity is only one example of how ethical experiences within the framework of a video game can be made possible. There are a number of other means, most of them interrelated. One way to induce an ethical experience is by designing games to include what Sicart (2010, p. 12) calls "cognitive ethical dissonances." He uses the example of the game *Shadow of the Colossus* (Team Ico, 2005) to illustrate his point. In this game, the player is tasked with killing gigantic beasts. With each kill, the player becomes stronger, the player avatar can deal higher damage and has more health points. However, with each kill the player avatar also looks physically sicker and dies after taking down the last colossus. Sicart argues that this "is an example of increasing cognitive friction to create ethical gameplay" (Sicart, 2010, p. 12 – 13).

The point is not that the game reliably induces an ethical experience for every one of its players. Rather, the argument concerns how games make ethical experiences possible and invite and encourage players to have such experiences. Additionally, the fact that the player has no choice but to kill the colossi means that the game does not really leave space for ethical expression through choice. While true, this consideration only goes to show that the ethical dimension of a video game need not be rooted in choice. As long as the game makes an effort to encourage moral reflection, the game has the potential to engage the player ethically. *Shadow of the Colossus* can be seen as a game that points to the effect of killing on the murderer. It does not, however, dictate this message to the player. By introducing the dissonance, the game invites reflection along these lines.

Another way to invite ethical experiences in Sicart's view is through manipulating player agency. He uses the introductory cutscene in *Call of Duty 4* (Activision, 2007) to illustrate this. The opening sequence of this game involves the player being dragged through a street, shoved into a car, knocked out, dragged through a town square, tied to a pole, and finally

executed – all in first person. Throughout, player agency is restricted to only looking around. In Sicart's (2010) words:

> Since the game is a conventional first person shooter, players may await eagerly the time where they are given weapons and a chance for revenge. But that time never comes: the intro sequence concludes with the execution of the character the players were controlling. After that, the game starts, but for many, what came afterward could not be played like any other FPS games (p. 2).

For some, the cutscene can lead to the understanding that the in-game enemies deserve to be killed throughout the game because they are willing to execute who one can only assume was a 'good guy.' It can charge the rest of the game with a moral dichotomy between the player, executed without trial, and the on-screen enemies. However, the game also sends out the message that not all heroes live, and that war, ultimately, involves deaths on both sides, a consideration highlighted by putting the player in control of the victim of the execution, inviting personal identification. Again, while this means that the game contains an ethical message, there are no guarantees that the message will get across. The game only invites player reflection and makes an ethical experience possible.

Finally, in another publication, Sicart (2013) suggests that the inclusion of 'wicked problems' in a game can give rise to an ethical experience. Such problems are defined as "a class of social system problems which are ill-formulated, where the information is confusing, where there are many clients and decision-makers with conflicting values, and where the ramifications in the whole system are thoroughly confusing" (Buchanan, 1992 quoted in Sicart, 2013). The aforementioned mission in *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Softworks, 2008) is a good example for this type of problem introduced in a game. The information deficiency inherent in the mission, inasmuch as the player does not know how the situation will develop after the two sides are seemingly reconciled, puts the player on guard in all subsequent encounters and missions; and since the information deficiency also makes it impossible for the player to deduce in-game moral structures or the consequences of their actions, the player is forced to rely on her or his own values in making in-game decisions.

In each case, the result is an interruption in otherwise fluid gameplay. Sicart (2013) refers to this fluid gameplay as 'instrumental play. When engaged in such play, the player is focused on the result of the activity – either in-game progress or "the social aspects of the game"—the player is playing by the rules of either the game or the player community. These

clear systems of rules make for an activity that is "fluid, rewarded, and encouraged by design elements, such as incentives and goals" (Sicart, 2013, p. 31).

It makes sense to discuss ethical play in contrast to instrumental play. Indeed, Sicart (2013) calls ethical play a "pause" that "forces players to evaluate their behaviors in light of ethical thinking, rather than ludic strategic thinking" (p. 31). The next question, therefore, is what happens *in* this pause.

3.2.   The Player in the Ethical Experience

In every case of ethical play, as described by Sicart, (moral ambiguity/wicked problems, cognitive ethical dissonances and agency manipulation) the player is encouraged to 'snap out' of the mode of thinking and interacting with the gameworld in which only parameters present within the gameworld play a role (instrumental play). Faced with a wicked problem, for example, the player still has to make a decision for the game to progress. Under such circumstances, the player has to make the decision as the person playing the game, not a character within the gameworld. This alienation of the player from the game ultimately allows for the direct connection of the player to the activity, without the interlay of strategic thinking dictated by in-game goals. The central question in such a mode of interaction is not "what yields the best results in relation to game goals," but "what am I to do now?"

Exactly how the player is to approach this question, whether through trying to guess the outcome in terms of the in-game goal structure, or by trying to make a moral judgment along the lines of "which action is right?" is completely up to the player as the person playing. In the latter case, the mode of judgment shifts from deciding which choice is optimal in the context of the game mechanics and in-game economy to deciding on the course of action in the absence of such parameters. Even when 'role-playing' a character that stands in contrast to the player's personal morality, the player would have to engage in abstract ethical thinking. What is important here is the identity of the player in relation to in-game events. When engaged in ethical play, when caught in that 'pause,' the player has the opportunity to exercise her or his own values in the interactions – the player can engage with the game as her/himself. This shift can be illustrated by a discussion of a recent article in *Game Studies Special Issue WAR/GAME* (2017).

In "*War, Games and the Ethics of Fiction,*" (2017) Lykke Guanio-Uluru touches upon the question of ethics in video games only indirectly. The main crux of her argument concerns the treatment of the relationship between war and video games in literature, which she traces through roughly three decades by analyzing the novels *Only You Can Save Mankind* (Pratchett,

2009 [1992]), *Ender's Game* (Card, 1991)*,* and *Hunger Games* (Collins, 2012)*.* Her main argument concerns the increased 'gamification' of war and the distancing of the events of war from the bodies of soldiers. Both of these tendencies she ascribes to the prevalence of highly technological military practices, such as the use of drones or long-range missiles, where the person actually pulling triggers and pushing buttons her/himself is situated in the relative safety of a bunker or even an office room, far removed from the consequences of her or his actions. Nonetheless, Guanio-Uluru's treatment of how the games in the novels she discusses trigger ethical engagement from their players deserves attention.

Her discussion of *Only You Can Save Mankind* is particularly relevant to the question of ethics in video games. This book's main protagonist is a player of what seems to be a generic first person shooter video game. The protagonists of the other two books are also players, but the games they play are far from generic. Ender is training to be a space commander using the games, only to realize that the last game he plays is an actual battle, not a simulation; and Katniss of *The Hunger Games* is fighting for her life for the entertainment of others from the very start, and knows it.

Johnny of *Only You Can Save Mankind,* on the other hand, just wants to play a game. At some stage in the game, it turns out that the alien antagonists of the game are sentient, and for them, the game is a real battlefield, where they really die:

> We surrender. Do not shoot… We give in. No more war…
> Johnny stared at the screen. What he wanted to type was: No, I mean, this can't happen,
> you're Aliens, you can't not want to be shot at, no other game aliens have ever stopped
> aliening across the screen, they never said
> We DonT Want to Go…
> This is probably that Virtual Reality they're always talking about on the television.
> He typed: It's only a game, after all… I shoot you and you shoto (sic!) at me. That is the
> game.
> But we die.
> Johnny typed: Sometimes I die. I die a lot.
> But YOU live again (Prachett, 2009 [1992], p. 14, quoted in Lykke Guanio-Uluru, 2017).

Guanio-Uluru (2017) argues that "what happens here is that an unexpected occurrence inside the game turns the game into ethical gameplay, and that the space confining the game is ruptured" (n.p). In this, she echoes Miguel Sicart, who also argued that unexpected in-game events, instances when gameplay includes a deviation from the standard, traditional set of tropes for video game narratives and mechanics, allow for ethical experiences (Miguel Sicart,

2013, p. 87). This, however, is an incomplete account. The event was certainly unexpected, but it had a much more profound impact on Johnny than just surprise.

The fact that the aliens did, in fact, stop aliening across the screen, that they revealed themselves as real, making in-game events 'real' as well, also forces Johnny to relate to in-game events not as the person playing the part of a character tasked with shooting aliens, but as Johnny himself. After all, Johnny could have ignored this sudden change and continued shooting alien after alien, but that would make *Johnny*, not the character, a killer. The fact that the game involved real entities makes the choice to either shoot at the aliens or protect them a personal choice, one not rooted in the attempt to reach goals determined by the game or to optimize game performance. In order to make that choice, Johnny has to ask *himself* which action is the right one. He proceeds to subvert the game and ignore the rules and goals set up by its designers.

Such sudden changes of the ontological status of video games belongs to the realm of science fiction. Activities such as on-line casino games excluded, mainstream video game titles only influence it to the extent that they influence the player. In the case of historical video games, such as *Company of Heroes 2* (Relic Entertainment, 2013)*,* they are also connected to the extra-ludic world in that they refer to events or systems outside of themselves, but, again, they have no causal relationship to these events.[10]

The idea of direct personal engagement in a video game, however, can be maintained. The discussion of both Sicart and Guanio-Uluru can stand in that both suggest that gameplay leave room for "pause" (Sicart, 2013, p. 31) if an ethical experience is to occur, be it through information deficiency, presentation of wicked problems or the unexpected in general. What matters in each case is engagement of the player in her or his own personal cultural, geographic and contemporary context, rather than in the in-game context alone.

Sicart (2010) hints at this distinction with his discussion of the reflective player, one that takes into account the semantic content of the game:

> The reflective agent interprets the semantic contents of the game and puts them into the perspective of an individual, social, and cultural domain. By doing so, the reflective agent becomes an ethical agent: playing is interpreting the world and who the agent wants to be in its context; playing is understanding the values of the gameworld and developing an ethical persona that is at the same time coherent with the in-game world, and with the external values

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[10] This prompts the question of historical accuracy and designer responsibility, both of which lie outside of the scope of the present work.

of the player as an ethical being. (p.5)

To conclude, what happens in Sicart's pause is a shift in the identity of the player in relation to the game. In presenting the player with such instances of gameplay as described by Sicart in his many publications, the game appeals directly to the player, inviting direct personal point of contact between the person at the console or computer and in-game events or entities.

4.   Virtual Communicative Memory

It has been mentioned in the previous chapter that Jan Assmann's (2008, 2011) theory of memory precludes any transfer from cultural to communicative memory due to the latter's temporal limit of around three generations. Alison Landsberg (2004) describes the role of modern media in evoking affective compassion with some 'other' represented in film or museums. The resulting memories, which she labels "prosthetic", have the ability to influence the present ethical sensibilities of the audience. The experiential nature of Landsberg's prosthetic memory makes the temporal limits of communicative memory less absolute. These memories, however, cannot be argued to be identical in quality to 'real' communicative memory. While they establish a connection to the past, one remains firmly rooted in "the contemporary moment" (Landsberg, 2004, p. 9); and while they have the power of connecting people across racial, ethnic, religious and other such divides, one remains a member of their group. This points to the importance of modern media in the discussion of social memory. The emergence of video games as a popular form of media makes evident the need to investigate their memory making potential in particular. At the same time, the media-specific features described above call for a specialized approach.

As procedural simulations, some video games are examples of procedural rhetoric – they can be seen as arguments about non-game physical and conceptual systems. Additionally, the fact that games allow the player to act with agency means that certain games allow for personal engagement with in-game events at an ethical level. The resulting memories are qualitatively different from prosthetic memories because in the process of playing video games, the player is invited to confront a simulated environment and act in it *personally* and *with agency*, rather than just see a story, no matter how affective, unfold in front of their eyes. I label this new form of memory *Virtual Communicative Memory* (VCoM).

While the term denotes a proposed theoretical advance, the combination of words itself is not new. Writing in 2013, Irit Dekel wrote about what she also termed 'virtual communicative memory' in relation to the Holocaust Memorial in central Berlin. She observed

that the memorial and the associated multimedia and photographic representations can allow for a flow of memory from cultural into communicative. Dekel argues that by providing a space entirely dedicated to the tragic events of the Holocaust, the memories can be brought forth into and embodied in living communication. She defines the term as "the possibility of articulation that is facilitated both in and outside of the memorial through various media (archives, testimony, conversation about the site), which escapes the phase of cultural, more established memory, and enables different forms of engagement with the past" (Dekel, 2013, 71). Much as I am doing here, Dekel builds on the work of Jan Assmann. She differentiates virtual communicative memory from Landsberg's prosthetic memories by saying that it arises from "accidental engagement with memory through curiosity about the Field of Stellae [the memorial], its history and experience," whereas in the case of prosthetic memories, Dekel claims that "one has to assume some kind of physical and emotional proximity to the act and will of remembering" (Dekel, 2013, 165). Dekel argues, therefore, that the difference between prosthetic memories and what she has termed 'virtual communicative memory' is original intent. Since Landsberg (2004) has already included physical spaces as potential vehicles of prosthetic memories, it seems that something along the lines of 'accidental or unintentional prosthetic memories' would suit the idea better than the term *virtual communicative memory,* which carries in it the media specific aspect of generating memories through direct interactions with simulated environments both alone and in groups.

I propose that the term be limited to memories acquired through personal vicarious experience of simulated *virtual* environments. *Virtual communicative memory,* as I define it, is a result of the reinterpretation of the framework defined by Jan Assmann in the light of the emergence and the popularity of video games.

I propose *the collective store of memories that result from the vicarious personal experiences of a group of players of the settings, in-game events and the concomitant meaning potentials of a particular game* as the definition of *virtual communicative memory*.

In contrast to standard communicative memory, *virtual communicative memory* does not denote the living experience of some historic event by a group of people and the communication and dissemination of their experience to their contemporaries. Rather, it results from the vicarious experience of historic events in a simulated virtual environment. Communicative memory is such because it exists in communities and through communication. *Virtual communicative memory* shares this quality. In the case of a multiplayer

experience, this experience is directly shared with a group of others. However, even in the case of single-player gaming, in-game experience is often shared and discussed in online or offline player communities.

Prosthetic memories are generated through engagement with such media as films and museums as 'transferential spaces' (Landsberg, 2004). In the case of video gaming, the player also operates while rooted in her or his person and time, but the activity takes place in a simulated *virtual* environment, and in addition, players *possess agency* and *can act as themselves*, based on their own values and can interact with the environment as groups. It is to account for the new affordances of digital simulation technologies and games that I propose virtual *communicative memory* as a new concept.

Not much can be achieved in the framework of this thesis. One important aspect of this work has been a discussion of the circumstances that have made the concept of *virtual communicative memory* a useful part of discussions of social memory and identity in the context of the modern world. The prevalence of video games and their media-specific memory-making potentials mean that along with communicative memory and cultural memory, *virtual communicative memory* is a vital part of social memory. Modern media have the power to "create shared social frameworks for people who inhabit […] different social spaces, practices, and beliefs" (Landsberg, 2004, p.8). This means that they "can structure "imagined communities" that are not necessarily geographically or nationally bound and that do not presume any kind of affinity among community members" (Landsberg, 2004, p.8). These communities bridge existing divides, creating connections between existing pools of communicative memory. A community, whose members are players of a certain game, for example, may have members in many nations, all united in their having experienced the certain game and the historical events portrayed in this game, or historical systems simulated in it, and through online platforms like gamer forums, or even in direct interaction with each other through online multiplayer games. *Virtual communicative memory* denotes the memory stores of such communities.

Another important part of this thesis is a discussion of the type of engagement with a game that makes for such memories. This was illustrated and discussed above with reference to Sicart's work, when I dealt with the role of ethics in video games and the conditions under which the player's own values and ethical sensibilities can be addressed through play. The core of such interaction is the engagement of the player at a personal moral level.

In relation to *virtual communicative memory,* what is presented here is only a sketch of the concept, a preliminary discussion that leaves much more to do than it achieves. For

example, this thesis does not include a survey of online player communities. This thesis remains a proposition and a description of potentialities. The chapters that follow are devoted to only one level of analysis – single player interaction with a game.

Building on the discussion of the fields of memory and game studies presented in chapter 2, this chapter has sketched out the concept of *virtual communicative memory*. The following chapters are devoted to a more practical exploration of the concept. The next chapter contains the results of a formal analysis of the historical video game *Company of Heroes 2* (Relic Entertainment, 2013) at the level of game mechanics and narrative. It is aimed to elucidate the dominant meaning potentials in the game and determine whether the game invites for personal engagement. The chapter after that presents the experiences of a group of players in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

Chapter 4: Game Analysis

1. Introduction and Methodology

This chapter conducts a formal analysis of the game *Company of Heroes 2* (Relic Entertainment, 2013) that looks at the game's mechanics and narrative to identify its dominant meaning potentials and find whether the game invites personal moral engagement. The identified meaning potentials will serve as the baseline for the analysis of data gathered through interviews with gamers in Kyrgyzstan to see how players engage and potentially subvert these meaning potentials. This data is presented in the subsequent chapter.

The game will be analyzed using an adapted framework of analysis designed by Holger Pötzsch and implemented in a number of his articles (2010, 2011, 2013, 2017) that deal with the representation of war in films and video games. This will be supplemented by the analysis of the procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2008) of the gameplay. While the use of tools designed for the analysis of films in a project that has to do with an entirely different medium may seem to cause a number of obvious methodological issues, the choice of methodology is justified by the structure of the game itself. The game invites a dual approach by adopting a structure wherein the cutscenes serve the role of narratively framing the gameplay, and can therefore be analyzed separately from it. As a non-interactive aspect of the game, these cutscenes can be analyzed in the same terms as film.

This analytical structure allows for a crossover from film to video games, making possible the use of already developed analytical tools that have a long academic history. Additionally, the combined analysis of narrative and procedural argumentation that the structure invites may itself become a useful academic tool in the field of game studies. This approach exposes those aspects of the video game that can be analyzed as film, creating a hybrid approach to the analysis of video games that combines the analysis of narrative and procedural rhetoric.

Along with the identification of the game's dominant meaning potentials, the overall aim of the present chapter is to find if *Company of Heroes 2* is conducive to the formation of *virtual communicative memory*, discussed in the previous chapter. Methodologically, the project of analyzing the single-player campaign section of a game to shed light on a concept that presupposes community and communication may seem odd. While a full exploration of this question would require a different object of analysis, this inquiry limits itself to the analysis of *Company of Heroes 2* to find whether the game has the potential to involve the player at a personal moral level. While virtual communicative memory, like communicative memory, is shared and exists in communication, each person experiences the memory-forming events as

an individual. Within the terminology this thesis proposes, what this chapter aims at is an examination of the potential of the game to induce *individual virtual memories* as a precondition for the emergence of virtual communicative memory, and what the potential contents of such memories relating to concrete historical incidents might be.

The following sections of this chapter address in turn and in detail the narrative argument presented in the conversation between Lev and Churkin (for a summary of the game narrative, please refer to the introduction of the thesis) and the procedural rhetoric of the gameplay. After that, the chapter expands on the emergent synergy of the two arguments and fleshes out the meaning potentials within the game. Finally, the experience of playing this game is connected back to the concept of *virtual communicative memory,* developed in chapter 3 of the thesis. Before these become the focus of this discussion, however, a number of general observations are in order.

2. *Company of Heroes 2* as a Simulation

The game simulates WWII ground combat as a system of interactions among different types Nazi soldiers, Soviet soldiers, pieces of heavy military equipment (all hereafter referred to as 'units') and their environment. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss the actual accuracy of this game as a historical simulation. Such a discussion would call for a much larger work than the present text. It would call for a large literature survey related to the historical events depicted in the game. All that can be achieved within this thesis in this regard is a limited attempt to establish that the game is referential.

That the system is rooted in real word events is demonstrable through a glance at in-game reference text that presents real historical text as well as historical descriptions of unit types, including infantry, weapons, and machine units. The game continuously relates itself to history, indicating dates and historical background information ahead of every mission. It also uses famous quotes from the period to frame each engagement. For example, a mission where Joseph Stalin's order prohibiting retreat is a major part of the gameplay, Stalin's famous saying that "it takes a brave man to be a coward in the Red Army" is presented on the introduction screen (Relic Entertainment, 2013). The game also establishes an air of historical credibility from the very outset by giving the date and place of Lev's interrogation: Norilsk Corrective Labor Camp, Siberia, 1952. (Relic Entertainment, 2013)

The game's single player campaign simulates ground combat from a Soviet perspective. During gameplay, the player is in control of squads of Soviet soldiers. The game encourages tactical thinking, targeted at outmaneuvering enemy forces through flanking and the use of

cover. The player, however, while in control of the Soviet units, receives mission objectives, presumably from some higher military authority. This situates the player as a member of Soviet military personnel above ground troops, but somewhere along the chain of command below high military command.

Compared to a real historical figure in a similar position the player has access to a lot of numerically codified information. This is a usual bias in simulation video games (Schut, 2007). Along with this quantification bias, McCall (2012, 2016) argues, they include entertainment bias, oversimplification, over-access to power and information, and narrative bias (McCall, 2016), all discussed in the chapter 3. All of these biases apply to *Company of Heroes 2*. As has already been mentioned, the game presents the player with an abundance of information of the processes on the battlefield, especially the vital unit statistics such as health points. In addition, the player has a sway over the units that no real commander could have over ground troops. Player commands will always be obeyed – soldiers will go on a suicide mission or burn down buildings with no regard for civilians with just a click of a mouse. These biases are all inherent in the genre. They result from the nature of video games as simulations aimed at mass-market entertainment and, since they do not represent any characteristic unique or special to this particular game, warrant no special attention here.

The only observation pertinent to the present task at hand is rooted in the power of the player as commander. Since the units will obey every command issued to them, all responsibility for their actions rests exclusively with the player issuing the commands.[11] As will be shown below, this 'moral entanglement' of the player with the gameworld, made even stronger by the game's normatively loaded narrative, creates the conditions for viewing the game as an example of memory-making media. This combination allows the game to provide the type of experience necessary to produce *virtual communicative memory*, a concept grounded and explained in the previous chapter.

3. The Narrative Argument

The narrative aspect of *Company of Heroes* is presented through cutscenes as an ideological verbal confrontation between Lev and Churkin – a GULAG prisoner and a Soviet interrogator. Viewed separately from the game, the cutscenes make up a standalone object of analysis, like a film structured by conversation and flashbacks. It can also, clearly, be read as a part of the

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[11] One could argue that responsibility rests with the game designers rather than the player, but the designer is extrinsic to the process of play at this level of analysis. It is the players who are clicking mice and pressing the keys.

game. This section of the chapter leaves out the latter, which is addressed under the heading *Argumentative Synergy,* later in the text.

Lev is imprisoned for attempting to stand up to the Soviet state and its military apparatus by defecting to the allies after the end of the War. Churkin, in full military uniform, is a clear representative of the Union. Throughout the cutscenes, what ensues is an ideologically charged moral argument.

The game sets up a dual confrontation. Lev is not only fighting the Nazis, but also, in effect, struggling against the Soviet military leadership. This approach represents a break from the usual tradition of representing WWII in video games (Ramsay, 2015). For example, the previous game in the series, *Company of Heroes 1* (Relic Entertainment, 2006)*,* which is a portrayal of the US invasion of France, presents the conflict as a clear-cut confrontation between American Soldiers and the Nazis. The problematized narrative presented in *Company of Heroes 2* thus deserves added attention.

In a number of articles that deal with the representation of war in films, Holger Pötzsch (2010, 2011) develops a framework of analysis that can be applied to the the game's cutscenes to flesh out their narrative argument. In these articles, Pötzsch deals with how films establish epistemological boundaries between the parties to the conflict that they present.

3.1. Conflicting Parties

The game erects epistemological barriers around the perceived evil of the Soviet authorities similarly to the process Pötzsch outlined in his analysis of *Black Hawk Down* and *Alien.* (2010, 2011) In these films, a number of cinematic techniques are called on to invite audience identification with one particular side of the depicted conflict. In *Black Hawk Down,* US soldiers are presented as individuals that have different idiosyncratic habits that the viewers can identify with, and the viewer is allowed a glimpse into their thoughts, principles, and motivations through voice-over and dialogue. By way of contrast, "[t]he other is largely excluded from the picture and figures in the background as either an anonymous group of helpless victims to be secured, or as faceless villains posing a deadly threat" (Pötzsch, 2011, p. 81). Similarly, the soviet soldiers, Lev Isakovich in particular, are given personalities and fear. Through Lev's book the onlooker can see into his past, and through intrusive flashback to the battlefields, the viewer is invited to see that Lev suffers. The personalities of other Soviet soldiers are especially evident in the mission Stalingrad, where they express their fears and frustration with the Soviet authorities to Lev and later save him from under a fallen building. By way of contrast, Churkin's past is completely unavailable, and Soviet commanders only

appear briefly shouting commands, shooting deserters or as voiceover giving the player commands during missions.

Another technique used to favor one side of the conflict over another is "focalization," or the "the establishment of an authority through which the events of the story world become discernible" (Pötzsch, 2011, p. 81). In *Black Hawk Down* this is achieved, *inter alia*, through promoting the perspective of the US soldiers as the authoritative narrators through eyeline matches between the perspective of a presumed omniscient reliable narrator of the opening shots of the film and US helicopter pilots (Pötzsch, 2011, p. 82). Similarly, the very first cutscene begins with Lev's intrusive flashbacks that hint at PTSD, while the rest of the gameplay is presented in the context of his memories. The truth of Lev's allegations is never disputed.

Pötzsch (2011) argues that the inaccessibility of the other side in films renders the deaths of people belonging to it much more acceptable. The deaths of US soldiers in *Black Hawk Down* are shown in slow-motion, dramatic music playing in the background, while the deaths of their enemies are depicted in quick cuts or from a great distance, masked by smoke and explosions, ultimately unimportant (Pötzsch, 2011, p. 82). Similarly, the death of the Soviet executioner at Churkin's hand at the end of the game is fast, unseen and very matter-of-fact.

3.2.   The Conflict

The conflict introduced in the narrative section of the game does not revolve around Nazi aggression. Lev's imprisonment is triggered not by his failure as a commander or a soldier during the War, nor is there a central Nazi villain character. Rather, it is his attempt to 'smuggle' the truth from behind the Iron Curtain that lands him behind iron bars. The central conflict here is a confrontation of values. The conversation between Lev and Churkin is little more than an exposition of their respective ideological positions and personal value structures, interspersed by flashbacks to the battlefields.

The very first cutscene introduces the player to Lev as a prisoner and Churkin as the interrogator. It is revealed that during the war, Lev served a number of years as a war journalist. His experience as a soldier and a reporter moved him to write a book documenting the suffering of Soviet soldiers and what he saw to be unjustifiably wasteful and unnecessarily violent tactical and strategic decisions of the Soviet government that in his view led to many avoidable military and civilian deaths. It is revealed in a later cutscene that he had tried to desert the army and leave his post as an army reporter to bring to light these truths that he had seen. He deemed it his moral responsibility to show the people the reality of war and the suffering of the soldiers,

even if it meant exposing the cruelty of Soviet authorities. Churkin is tasked with interrogating his former comrade. The ensuing conflict is moral and ideological.

Churkin's justifications of the cruelty that Lev describes always come down to the claim that the glory and continued post-war existence of the USSR are enough to justify the deaths and suffering. The fundamental disagreement, thus, is about the value of human life in relation to the value of the state, a debate between individualism and collectivism. Boiled down to its essence, Lev's position is similar to the categorical imperative of Immanuel Kant (1996 [1797]),[12] in that his attempt to bring the truth to the people is rooted in moral reasoning that follows the criteria proposed by Kant: he believes that anyone in his position would be morally obligated do the same and refuses to use other people as means. Lev is shown to be acting as a moral agent. His decision to defect, even his decision to just write the book, are examples of taking control of his own life and trying to live by his own moral compass.[13] Churkin, on the other hand, perceives the lives of the soldiers sacrificed in the battles as appropriate means to achieve the ends of the Soviet Union. His every action is guided by the demands of the Soviet leadership, his life purely devoted to the Soviet cause. In one telling exchange, Churkin replies to Lev's condemnation of a victory won at the cost of thousands of lives by insisting that he "didn't have the luxury" to think along such lines. (Relic Entertainment, 2013)

This makes Churkin, even before he is revealed to be an anti-Soviet sympathizer, a condemnable character, but not the ultimate villain. Churkin is not acting on individual ambition. Everything he does over the course of the story he does not to benefit his own standing in the military, but to further the Soviet cause. Combined with his turn at the end of the game, this position completely acquits him of any guilt, leaving only the abstraction of the Soviet leadership to blame. His explanation that he would also be a victim of Stalin's purges and his decision, at the end, to take control of his life, even if all it means is that he would "choose by which bullet [to] die," (Relic Entertainment, 2013) represent the crossing of the ideological border between him and Lev, once again emphasizing the culpability of the Soviet leadership, and of Joseph Stalin in particular.

The proposition that the two conflicting sides clash along an ideological border defined by personal allegiance to one's own morality on the one hand, and a surrender to the pragmatic morality of the Soviet Union on the other, is further played out in Lev's experience as a

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[12] Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law. Kant, Metaphysics of Morals, (1996 [1797], Chapter 11)
[13] I would not be surprised if a large-scale survey of Cold War and post-Cold War media would show the same ideological difference extrapolated to stand for difference between United States and the USSR.

journalist. When assigned to accompany another soldier, sergeant Pojarsky, and a group of Polish snipers, Lev witnesses the betrayal of the Poles by the Soviets. After Pojarsky shoots the last Polish officer, he explains that these deaths were necessary by, again, referring to the Union. He claims that if left strong after the War, Poland would attack the Soviet Union immediately after the fall of the Third Reich.

Pojarsky's justification of the murder and betrayal is indicative of Pojarsky's position in relation to the ideological border set up by the game's narrative. Pojarsky has surrendered his moral fiber to the Union; his individual being no longer belongs to himself to the same extent as Lev Isakovich – he is not in control of his own life and is not bothered by this surrender. This makes Pojarsky a much clearer representative of Lev's enemy – the unnamed mass of people blindly devoted to the Union, those who have surrendered their own morality to that of the Union, along with the Union itself. These people are willing to sacrifice lives in service to the Soviet cause without giving their actions a second thought or taking any responsibility for them. While this could be extrapolated to war in general, presenting the game as an anti-war piece, this does not seem to be a point that the game aims to make. This is especially evident if the game is viewed as part of a larger franchise. Whereas in previous installments of *Company of Heroes* had one clear villain, the German soldiers, the discourse around villains in *Company of Heroes 2* is far more complicated. By demonizing the USSR in particular, the game does not seem to invite a generalized anti-war argument.

3.3.   The Villains

One narrative device commonly used in cinema to render the murder of enemy combatants morally justifiable is what Holger Pötzsch (2011) calls 'evil deed': "some great atrocity committed by the enemy-other and witnessed by the soldier-self that once and for all establishes the former's completely remorseless and inhumane nature." (p. 83) The game presents no specific evil deed perpetrated by the Third Reich or the Wehrmacht until Lev reaches Majdanek in the middle of the game. Arguably, it is unnecessary to present any specific evil deed before that, as the evil of the Nazi regime and its crimes are well-documented and widely known. A Nazi is evil by definition. Notably, the game seems to draw a distinction between Nazi leadership and Nazi ground troops. This happens in a small episode that takes place in the context of the battle of Stalingrad, where a German soldier is shot while trying to surrender. Lev refers to this, saying that "those Germans" just wanted to live.

The game abounds with evil deeds committed by the Soviet command. These include the demolition of a bridge just before a number of soviet soldiers are able to cross it, the murder

of an unarmed German begging for his life at Stalingrad, the murder of Polish operatives after promising them supplies for the starving people of Warsaw, and finally the imprisonment of Lev himself for attempting to disclose these wrong-doings.

3.4.   Border Control

The mutual exclusivity of the two ideological positions of Lev and Churkin condition the Manichean, unresolvable, nature of the conflict between the protagonist and the Soviet authorities. Both Churkin and Pojarsky are, at different points of the game narrative, in the position to cross this ideological border and engage in meaningful discussion with Lev. The narrative would allow for this crossing of the boundary and the development of the relationship beyond these mutually exclusive positions, producing an alternative synthesis. This production of a third alternative, a crossing of the border between the conflicting parties, Pötzsch (2010) calls "liminality." (p. 72)

The game even contains an instance of liminality. When Stalin's order to shoot routers is instituted, commanding the immediate execution of deserters, Lev speaks to the men of his squad. He admits his disagreement with the order: "The enemy should save their bullets and let us shoot each other," but at the same time he admits to the soldiers that he is in the same boat as them: "The only way we can survive this day is by going forward." (Relic Entertainment, 2013) As a member of the military command himself, Lev thus signals his understanding of and belonging together with the soldiers. The soldiers in turn answer: "we are with you to the end." This represents an alternative third position to Lev's stringent moral individualism and the blind moral surrender of the other commanding officers. In this instance, the soldiers and Isakovich all make a personal decision to fight – not to satisfy the demands of the Union, but because that is what they deem right. The soldier's allegiance is in this instance to their commander rather than the Soviet authorities, a commitment they later prove by saving Lev, pinned under the rubble of a destroyed building, only to be shot, upon their return to the HQ, for abandoning their posts. Neither Pojarsky nor Churkin achieve the same type of relationship with Lev, although both have ample opportunity.

Lev and Pojarsky share a hospital room in the aftermath of Lev's injuries under the rubble of Stalingrad. There, Lev confides in Pojarsky that he suffers from nightmares and is tortured by feelings of responsibility for the deaths of his men. Pojarsky reveals that he has suffered a similar experience at Leningrad, recounting the horrors of the Blockade and the deaths of thousands. The shared experience of war seems to bring the men closer together, but

Pojarsky encourages Lev to "drink to forget," rather than face his experience and take moral responsibility.

Churkin seems to come closest to establishing a liminal space at the end of the game. However, instead of coming to "an ethical alternative to mutually exclusive divisions," (Pötzsch, 2010, p. 72) Churkin simply abandons his ideological position in favor of Lev's. He is simply revealed to have crossed this line by identifying completely with the protagonist's position. He shoots the executioner, a death justified by the soldier's ostensible position in relation to the ideological border. There is no synthesis of the two positions, no admission of the partial fallibility of both. Lev's argument stands at the end of the game, and the drama of suicide only serves to reinforce it.

The narrative part of the video game thus presents the ideological conflict between Lev and Churkin as a moral disagreement.[14] The cutscenes invite the viewer to identify with Lev through framing the narrative. His attempt at defection is presented as a noble act of heroic defiance of a cruel and irrational authority, rooted in his drive to take control of his own moral decisions.[15] Lev's intention to make public his experiences in the war further strengthens his position by portraying him as a victim of unjust punishment. By contrast, Churkin's attempts at vindicating cruelty are entirely conditioned by a position of support of the Soviet authority. The conflict is ultimately resolved when Churkin, having been betrayed by the authority he supported, fully endorses Lev's position in the conflict. The Manichean nature of the conflict and the unsustainability of Churkin's faith in Soviet authorities are further emphasized by his suicide. As the game ends, Lev's position remains unchanged. After a presentation of the two sides of an ideological confrontation, the game does nothing more than brand one as wholly wrong, and the other absolutely correct. The demonization of the Soviet Union in particular and this extreme dichotomization undermines any anti-war potentials the game might have had. The narrative makes no attempt at synthesis or liminality, erecting a structure of argument that ends exactly where it started. The cutscenes, thus, serve the purpose of presenting each mission as a part of an overarching chronological narrative and simultaneously of reminding the player of what looks like an ongoing conversation, but is in fact a static ideological conflict, whose

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[14] This conflict is highly reminiscent of Western Romantic literature, where the conflict between the individual and the state was a prominent theme. See, for example, *The Prince of Homburg* by Heinrich von Kleist (1978 [1811]).
[15] It would be very difficult to imagine a financially successful high-budget video game that would treat the government of, for example, the USA or another Western country with the same level of criticism or justifying, even praising, the decision to defect. This points to the other side of the relationship between social memory and video games specifically and media generally – they can only deviate from the popular consensus to a limited degree, else their contests become too controversial.

balance tips only when the people in the wrong are dead, and where Lev's position is ultimately correct, while anything else is morally reprehensible.

4. The Procedural Argument

This section of the chapter is built around the concept of procedural rhetoric, developed by Ian Bogost in *The Rhetoric of Video Games* (2008) and discussed at length in chapter 2 of the thesis. In short, Bogost argues that procedural rhetoric is a manner of argumentation not too dissimilar in nature to 'regular' oral rhetoric. The difference here is that within the framework of procedural rhetoric, arguments are embedded in a process. The concept is useful when discussing meaning potentials in video games because it allows the analysis of games as meaning-laden processes.

The game's single player campaign manipulates game mechanics by introducing limitations on which unit types are available in each mission, establishing mission objectives, and the number of squads the player can have at any time. This allows for a controlled gameplay that expresses embedded meaning potentials and dominant historical themes through its function and progress.

The expendability of the soldier is a theme that is very deeply embedded in the *Company of Heroes 2*. While this is arguably true for every strategy game that involves war, it is a point that is at the very center of the mechanics of this one in particular. This becomes evident from the very beginning. The game does not contain a dedicated tutorial. Fundamental mechanics are explained during the first few missions. In these missions, danger is illustrated by death, and trial and error necessarily leads to numerous deaths. For example, in the very first mission, Stalingrad, there comes a point when the road forward is blocked by heavy machinegun fire. As the voiceover explains that an alternative route must be found, Soviet troops outside of player control run into the line of fire and die *en masse*. This continues while the player searches for a way around the blocked street. In the same mission, the player is tasked with finding an anti-tank weapon, while non-controllable soldiers die in the attempt to hold back a German tank.

The game also incentivizes the practice of sacrificing weaker troops to prolong the lifespan of the more expensive and more experienced units. Shock Troops, for example, is a Soviet six-man squad capable of dealing a lot of damage at considerable distance. They also have the ability to throw anti-personnel and smoke grenades. Shock troops, however, come at considerable cost. By contrast, fresh conscripts are provided for free every few minutes of the campaign. They cannot carry grenades, but can be upgraded with Molotov cocktails or be made

to pick up some heavier guns. They are also more effective at shorter ranges and can merge with the stronger squads to keep up the soldier count in them. This creates a natural dynamic between these two unit types. The obvious strategy here is to send fresh conscripts into battle, followed by the more valuable shock troops and to continue sending in more conscripts as they become available to replace those that die at the frontline, or to merge them with the shock troops. During the Battle for Berlin, for example, the player is given only a few snipers and a lot of conscripts, with German sniper units scattered throughout the game. Given that conscripts cannot be merged with sniper squads, the optimal strategy here is clearly to send conscripts ahead of the snipers to identify German sniper positions when they shoot the conscripts dead, and then to take the German units out with the Soviet snipers in the rear. There is also the ever-present temptation of sending large numbers of cheap units deep behind enemy lines to destroy artillery units – a suicide mission brought about through sheer frustration at incremental head-on progress.

The theme of expendability is further strengthened by the veteran system. As a squad participates in combat, it gains experience points. The accumulation of these results in three field promotions, indicated by the number of stars above the squad health bar. With each promotion, the squad gains in battle attributes and gets some new abilities, depending on squad type. An experienced squad is, therefore, a more valuable asset on the battlefield than either a conscript squad or even a fresh squad of the same type. This incentivizes the player to spare these more experienced squads and continually merge new conscripts into them, prolonging their lifespan. A similar dynamic as described above is the best way to achieve this. By positioning the more experienced squads so that they are as far away as possible from the enemy while still in range to fire effectively and sending conscripts ahead to stifle enemy advances, the player will spare the more experienced soldiers.

The theme of sacrificing weak infantry squads with the aim of making the other units more effective extends to the interaction between Soviet infantry and armored mechanized units. This has been observed by a number of people, with one player-generated game strategy guide stating that "tanks for the Soviets are not so much independent actors like that of German armor but as a form of support for infantry, much like the Su-85 parked in the rear of assaults used to snipe off enemy armor or T-34s used for flanking attacks while infantry bare the brunt of the assault" (Rambo, 2013).

The expendable nature of the Soviet soldier is echoed in how the squad members audibly respond to player commands. Penal battalion squads, for example, respond with "You need a

suicide squad?" and "If you are not dying, you are not trying." Their availability is signaled with "Penal battalions are available to die for the Motherland." (Relic Entertainment, 2013)

The theme of unquestionably following orders is another meaning potential that is emphasized during by the gameplay. Every mission contains a general objective that is broken down into smaller incremental goals as the mission progresses. Thus, the mission Scorched Earth is broken down into first defending a reinforced position while non-playable Soviet Units retreat, then burning down the surrounding buildings, before ultimately sending player-controlled forces into a retreat. This establishes a focus on goals as the primary ludic attitude of the gameplay. It positions the player as an officer, her- or himself under the command of a higher authority, a lot like the soldiers under player command.

The procedural rhetoric of the game, thus, is centered on the necessity of a pragmatic approach to using lives in pursuit of a goal, determined by mission objectives. This includes the lives of cheap conscripts, used to locate snipers and overwhelm enemy forces in Berlin, and the lives of members of penal battalions throughout the game. All of these actions are either made explicitly necessary by mission objectives as in the mission "Scorched earth," or encouraged by gameplay mechanics throughout the game by virtue of certain unit types being less resource-intensive or, in the case of penal battalions and fresh conscripts, sometimes free.

Another theme, emphasized especially in regard to the Soviet Union, is the idea of overcoming power through raw numbers. Soviet squads contain more individual units than German squads, with each individual weaker than their German counterpart. For example, while the German sniper is a lone unit, the Soviet sniper squads consists of two snipers, taking turns to fire. While this mechanic makes Soviet squads generally less susceptible to area damage, such as artillery and grenade fire, it invariably leads to more individual deaths on the Soviet side.

This is further reinforced in the game's achievement[16] structure. Among the achievements the player can unlock are "Blood Toll," which asks the player to "win a game despite having twice as many deaths as kills," "Human Wave," which asks to "win a game as Soviets despite having three times as many deaths as kills," and "Invaluable Resources," which labels soldiers as resources by asking the player to "keep the Shock Troops alive throughout Mission 2." All three of these achievements, along with some others, and "Invaluable Resources" in particular, make necessary the tactic of sending out massive amounts of cheap

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[16] Badges that a player can earn when certain conditions are met. This is a system designed to extend the time it takes to complete a game.

conscripts ahead of the stronger, more expensive troops, or sending conscripts deep behind enemy lines to take out artillery or just to kill them if the player is simply trying to get the respective achievement.

5. Argumentative Synergy

There is a conspicuous disconnect between the cutscenes and the gameplay. While the missions are presented as flashbacks that substantiate Lev's memories of the War, at no point in the game does Lev himself become a playable character. Nor is the player playing as Lev, given that Isakovich serves as a frontline journalist for some time in the game. Rather, the player seems to take on the role of some officer somewhere along the line of command, receiving orders through in-game instructions and mission briefings, but with no assigned personality, almost like the soldiers she or he commands. Within the narrative of the game, the player is Lev's contemporary, who had lived through the same battles as Lev, whose memories are implied throughout the cutscenes to be a true account of what had happened.

At the same time, the fact that the missions are presented as flashbacks clearly encourages their interpretation in conjunction with the conflict between Lev and Churkin. Thus, while Lev never becomes a playable character, the conversation between Isakovich and his interrogator serves as a motif and backdrop that narratively frames the tactical gameplay and portrays the strategies and the pragmatic goal-centered ludic attitude described above as morally condemnable. This interplay of the game's narrative and procedural arguments puts the player in a difficult moral position because the game encourages and sometimes forces the player to do exactly what it condemns. The moral involvement of the player is further intensified by the non-traditional representation of violence in this game.

It has been shown that the point of contention emphasized in the conversations between Lev and Churkin in the cutscenes is the condemnable nature of the way Churkin, and through him the rest of the Soviet military command, surrenders his personal identity and moral agency to the ideological sway of the Soviet Union. This is contrasted to Lev's insistence on seeing the process of war, along with the position of the Soviet soldiers within it, for what they are in this game – a world infused with violence, the soldiers caught between German bullets and Soviet cruelty, a world in which moral agency is tantamount to betrayal and a death sentence. At the same time, the gameplay makes tactical sacrifice a necessity. Unit costs, unit availability, mission objectives, and game achievements all encourage the player to knowingly send the cheaper conscript and penal battalion squads ahead of the more valuable units, such as tanks or snipers, to curb the damage to the later or identify the positions of enemy units. The player

is thus constantly exposed to Lev's moral uprightness, encouraged to identify with his position, and then immediately thrown into missions, whose parameters encourage a much more pragmatic approach to the value of human life and mission objectives. Throughout the gameplay, the player is denied the opportunity to make a moral stand analogous to Lev's decision to insist on personal moral agency and defect. This creates a palpable dissonance between the cutscenes that set up the narrative frame of the missions and the ludic attitude encouraged in the gameplay. In short, the only way to adhere to Lev's position is to quit playing.

5.1.   De-normalized Violence

The dissonance between the normative stance of the cutscenes and the necessities of gameplay is further emphasized by the non-traditional approach to the portrayal of violence that the game takes. In *Selective Realism: Filtering Experiences of War and Violence in First- and Third-Person Shooters* (2017), Pötzsch investigates aspects of the reality of war and conflict that are usually ignored in video games. He argues that the representation of war in generic first and third person shooter video games often avoids a number of aspects of war. This makes in-game violence much more acceptable and palatable to the players. He bundles these aspects under the heading of "violence filter", "consequence filter," "character filter," and "conflict filter."

Applied to real time strategy games, these filters raise a number of interesting questions. For example, attacking villagers in the *Age of Empires* (Microsoft Studios, 1997 - present), a tactic often employed to deny the enemy access to resources, is, at bottom, little more than murder of civilians. Given the absence of a resource-gathering infrastructure manned by civilian units, however, such considerations do not play a role in the deployment of these filters in the context of *Company of Heroes 2* (Relic Entertainment, 2013).

The application of these filters will highlight those aspects of the game that deviate from the more traditional representations of violence. Such deviations not only indicate conscious decisions that went into the production of the game, but also aspects of the game that will potentially stand out to players by virtue of being different from the kinds of violence that they are normally exposed to. Most importantly, however, the application of these filters to *Company of Heroes 2* shows that the game makes no attempt at normalizing some violent acts committed by the player, or making them acceptable.

The **violence filter** refers to the practice of making friendly fire impossible and rendering battlefields as void of civilians. Pötzsch (2017) observes that if civilians are represented and happen to die, their deaths are usually disconnected from the actions of the player.[17]

The clearest example of how *Company of Heroes 2* breaks from traditional representation of violence is the clear presence of civilians in a number of the campaign missions and the possibility of their deaths in direct connection to the actions of the player –in the final stages of the mission Scorched Earth, for example. This mission takes place in 1941, "on the outskirts of Moscow" (Relic Entertainment, 2013). Following a series of engagements, the player is tasked with burning down a village, through which the Soviet forces are retreating. The introductory cutscene involves a section of dialogue, in which Isakovich reminds Churkin that some civilians are still to be evacuated, but their presence remains unseen throughout the engagements. It is only after the mission objectives change to reflect the necessity to leave no supplies behind for the German forces and thus burn down the village, and after the player uses flamethrower-armed engineer units to set fire to the houses, that civilians emerge from their houses, screaming and burning. While this may be seen as an expression of a general anti-war stance, the fact remains that it is the Soviet forces that carry this out, and no such mechanic is present in any other installment of the series.

It is possible to burn the houses without killing any civilians by having the squad aim their flamethrowers at the side of the house, rather than its front. This, however, is not readily apparent in the gameplay, nor is it explained in the mission briefing. Such manipulation also involves 'micromanaging' the positions of the individual members of the squad, something that is required only in the direst situations during regular gameplay. Such 'considerate' play is therefore only likely in consequent playthroughs – the player would be quite unlikely to have the forethought to reposition the squad, given that civilian deaths at the hand of player-controlled units are rare in video games, and given how far removed this section of the mission is from the fleeting mention of the possible presence of civilians in the introductory cutscene.

The same mission tasks players to burn down a gasoline-soaked field of wheat. Unless careful, the players stand the risk of burning their own units. Even in a careful playthrough, there remain a number of Soviet units outside of player control on the field, who will die if the game objective is to be achieved, which it must be if the game is to progress.

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[17] With some notable exceptions, such as the mission 'No Russian' in Call of Duty Modern Warfare 2 (Activision, 2009). See Keogh (2013).

With the **consequence filter** Pötzsch (2017) points to the fact that the long-term consequences of war, be it the personal psychological trauma to the people involved or the socio-economic consequences for the society at large, often go unaddressed. (p. 160)

The game does address these issues to some extent. For example, in the hospital room with Pojarsky, Lev describes the effect that his experience has had on his life. He says that he can't sleep and describes the nightmares he has when he can. Pojarsky echoes this and makes clear that he uses alcohol "to forget." (Relic Entertainment, 2013) On the other hand, the larger social and economic effects of prolonged conflict are only hinted at in the cutscenes, Lev's imprisonment and Churkin's suicide ascribed to Soviet authorities and misplaced personal devotion respectively. At the end of the game, Lev is shown to have overcome his personal trauma by taking moral agency and "[making] peace with the truth." The presumed truth here is the ongoing evil of Soviet authorities. He goes on to say "If it means my death, let them do what they must." (Relic Entertainment, 2013) Lev is redeemed by his decision to take control of his own life. By keeping to his own morality, he becomes no longer complicit in the evil of the Union.

The **character filter** determines which characters are presented in a way that makes them relatable and accessible for the player. (Pötzsch, 2017, p. 160) Character identification is most clearly encouraged in the narrative of the cutscenes. The game strongly encourages the player to accept Lev's moral and ideological position, while identifying with the people tasked with actually carrying out the commands of the military leadership. Within the simulation, the player takes the role of a military leader, who is in turn subordinate to higher leadership issuing mission briefings. The other major characters, Pojarsky and Churkin, remain behind the ideological barrier.

Finally, the **conflict filter** represents the fact that the peaceful resolution of the conflict is often presented as impossible, which conditions the war game itself and justifies any violent acts committed by the player as unavoidable. (Pötzsch, 2017, p. 160) As a game set in WWII, *Company of Heroes 2* does not need to ground the inevitability of armed conflict between the Nazi soldiers and the Soviets. The secondary conflict, however, the conflict between the moral individual and the Soviet state, remains important. Set forth as an ideological debate that does not allow for compromise since the values involved in the conversation are so fundamental, the conflict is presented as unresolvable. No shots are fired in this fight until Churkin kills the soldier who had come to execute Isakovich. This act of violence however, is only an illustration of the Manichean nature of the conflict, since this happens in conjunction with Churkin's

'redemption' when he shows himself to be on Lev's side of the divide. As a representative of the other side, the executioner remains beyond compassion.

The only act of violence that the game portrays as acceptable is the murder of the executioner. This has to do with the fact that the parties to the conflict portrayed by the game are divided by an ideological boundary that revolves around a moral question, and the executioner is on the wrong side. Even violence against Nazi soldiers, which would normally go unaddressed, is questioned.[18] At the same time, the player is often in the position to commit acts of violence, such as the murder of civilians or discounting the value of soldier lives, which the game does not try to justify.

5.2. Personal Moral Engagement and Virtual Communicative Memory

Through the establishment of a ludic attitude focused on completing mission objectives and unlocking achievements, the game very strongly encourages the player to use soldiers with extreme pragmatism, essentially behaving as Churkin would have behaved, a position openly opposed by Lev, with whom the player is encouraged to identify. The game, thus, presents a narrative within which the actions and attitude of the player are morally condemnable. Within the context of this game, the player is acting as the game's villain, an individual that has surrendered her or his moral integrity in service of mission objectives, set up by the Union. The player's moral dilemma, outlined by the game's narrative and gameplay, is conducive to direct personal moral engagement on the side of the player. *Company of Heroes 2* consistently encourages and sometimes forces the player to behave in ways that the game itself condemns.

This puts a moral debt on the player and encourages ethical reflection. The player her/himself is faced with a version of Soviet authority that issues mission objectives that the player cannot disobey, and often cannot carry out without taking on a pragmatic attitude to human life. The fact that this is exactly what the player is doing is continuously emphasized in the game's cutscenes. These actions are *personal* in that while engaging with a historical context, the player remains rooted in "the contemporary moment" as the person at the computer aware of Lev's attitude to their actions.[19]

The implication of the player in acts of murder and merciless pragmatism, made necessary through mission objectives and game mechanics, ultimately cast Soviet military command as the player's personal villain, who robs the player of moral agency and humanity.

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[18] Stalingrad, unarmed soldier shot when surrendering.
[19] Ibid, 9

The game further dehumanizes the player by making it impossible to take a moral stand against the conditions unless the player quits. One cannot play the game and remain human in the eyes of Lev Abramovich Isakovich. Ultimately, however, the player is forced into this position by the USSR, as it is portrayed in the game. This makes the Soviet Union the real villain of the game.

Company of Heroes 2 puts the player into personal contact with a version of the past. In doing this, the game illustrates the memory-making potential of the medium at large. By putting the player in personal contact with a historical entity, this game allows the player to experience history in a manner much closer-at-hand than a film. The fact that it is the player's decisions that allow gameplay to progress, even if the player's hand is forced, makes the experience qualitatively different from the experience of watching a film, and the resultant memories qualitatively different from *prosthetic memories*, outlined by Allison Landsberg. By involving the player as person, the game has the potential of contributing to the emergence of what I, drawing upon Assmann's (2008) seminal distinction, would like to term *virtual communicative memory*.

6. Dominant Meaning Potentials

To conclude, the dominant meaning potentials of the game include the expendability of the soldier from the perspective of the Soviet command; the necessity of following orders at the cost of human lives; and the idea that under such conditions, redemption only comes with the acceptance of personal moral responsibility. The game paints the Soviet leadership as culpable for creating such conditions. While the German attack obviously brought forth the war, how the war is waged is determined by the Union. This is emphasized by constantly reminding the player of such practices as barrier troops, penal battalions and a sloppy attitude to civilian evacuation on the part of the Union. The point is further emphasized by the dissonance between what the player is shown to be moral in the cutscenes and what the player is strongly encouraged to do by game mechanics that are meant to represent Soviet war practices and mission objectives that, presumably, come from Soviet military command.

While the game may seem to exhibit a generalized anti-war stance, such interpretation is barred by the fact that it is only the Soviet leadership that is portrayed as so unnecessarily cruel. It is the wanton nature of the violence and cruelty towards its own soldiers that show the Union as ultimately villainous. The idea that this violence and cruelty is unnecessary and unjustified is continuously highlighted by Lev Isakovich in the cutscenes, which constitute the "pauses" in an otherwise fluid gameplay that progresses from objective to objective, described by Miguel

Sicart (2013) and discussed in the previous chapter as opportunities to involve the player at a personal moral level.

Arguably, the game is also very much dependent on the preexisting political and historical views of its players. In the Western post-Cold War climate, where the USSR was presented as an evil communist monster for decades, anyone who does not stand up against its authority might be seen as pitiable, ignorant, or morally condemnable. In the Post-Soviet space, where the parents and grandparents of most people were born in the Union, the USSR is often seen differently. A full exploration of this point is impossible within the framework of this inquiry as it necessitates much more research than will fit into this thesis. The following chapter, however, does address this point to some limited extent.

Rooted in the genre-specific features of video games in relation to memory-studies and the concept of *virtual communicative memory* discussed in the previous chapters, this chapter presented an analysis of *Company of Heroes 2* based on my personal experience of the game. It resulted in a number of dominant historical themes and meaning potentials in the game. The following chapter will correlate the meaning potentials invited at the level of narrative and mechanics with data from players actually relating to these frames.

Chapter 5: Interview Analysis and Findings

1. Methodology

I carried out the fieldwork for this thesis in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan in the months of June and July of 2016. I conducted a series of 16 semi-structured interviews with the goal of exploring player engagement with the digital historical game *Company of Heroes 2* (Relic Entertainment, 2013). This serves to complement the game analysis carried out in the previous chapter and to further support the argument regarding *virtual communicative memory* by exploring whether the conditions for the formation of such personal memories are present in the conditions of natural play and how the meaning potentials of the game are negotiated by players. To adapt the terminology proposed here, this chapter examines the *individual virtual memories* of a group of players in Kyrgyzstan.

This section of the project is deductive inasmuch as the data collection followed theoretical work rather than preceding it (Marshall, 2014). The fieldwork was intended to investigate how a few players in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan negotiated meaning potentials in the game and whether they experienced the sort of personal engagement with the gameplay that is invited at the formal level of game narrative and mechanics described in chapter 4. The research questions for this section of the thesis are:

How did the players negotiate the meaning potentials and dominant historical themes in Company of Heroes 2, as identified in the analysis of the game?

Is there evidence for the presence of the type of personal involvement in the game described in the theoretical chapters of this thesis in the experience of a group of players in Kyrgyzstan?

It can be hypothesized that *some of the interviewees will have experienced personal involvement in the events of the game;* and that *the negotiation of meaning potentials will take place against the background of the players' existing historical knowledge.* Given that the analysis of the game in chapter 4 took place with the specific goal of fleshing out dominant meaning potentials and the game's memory-making potential in mind, I do not expect the results of the analysis to be mirrored in the experience of a large proportion of the players.

The nature of the topic as well the research questions that the interview process was aimed at called for the use of a qualitative rather than quantitative research methodology. As opposed to a quantitative research project, one that relies on qualitative methods allows for

much more flexibility in probing the topic and accessing individual descriptions of experience (Rossman and Rallis, 1998). This fits the nature and goal of the fieldwork. Qualitative research allows for the exploration of the meaning potentials that the research participants have derived from their experience with the game. The superiority of qualitative research methods when exploring questions of meaning and meaning construction has been discussed in a number of scholarly works on research methodology (see Denzin and Lincoln,1998; and Berg, 2001).

The conditions of my scholarship program limited my field of research to Kyrgyzstan. This created a number of advantages and a host of complications, some of which could not be addressed in the thesis. As a post-Soviet republic, Kyrgyzstan is still largely influenced by the Soviet tradition of presenting the Second World War as the Great Patriotic War. This is significant inasmuch as this perspective on the War is far more focused on the Soviet involvement in the war and generally portrays the Union as a benevolent power, downplaying its crimes and the more questionable war practices, such as the institution of penal battalions and barrier troops. The Victory has also been argued to be ideologically significant to the Russian state and its identity politics (Polegkyi, 2016; Gudkov and Kuzmenko, 2016). On the one hand, the fact that both of these practices played very important roles in the plot of *Company of Heroes 2* (Relic Entertainment, 2103) makes the dynamic between the players' existing knowledge of the War and the game narrative all the more interesting. On the other hand, a full exploration of this dynamic would make it necessary to conduct a survey of the history textbooks used in the country as well as a large-scale survey of the media to establish a baseline for the interviewees' exposure to the topic. Unfortunately, it was impossible to conduct such a survey in the time I was able to spend in the country. I have, however, tried to somewhat rectify this issue by addressing the interviewees' previous knowledge of the War in our conversations.

The fieldwork took the form of semi-structured interviews with a number of university students. The interviews were structured around a set of prepared questions with a degree of flexibility built in. The choice of methods followed Bryman's (1988) suggestion that research methods be determined by the question at hand. I have decided against using a rigid structure for the interviews as well as going into the interviews without preparing any guidelines at all. As interviews guided by a set of questions, but not limited to them and without the requirement to follow them to the letter in every interview, (Berg and Lune, 2004) semi-structured interviews presented the best balance between the dual goals of following up on my theoretical work as well as fleshing out the individual experiences of the players. I sought above all to avoid influencing the responses of research participants either by asking leading questions or

including questions about specific episodes in the game with the exception of the section of the game related to the representation of the Battle of Stalingrad.

In total, 16 interviews were conducted. In the search for research participants, I decided to use my existing network of connections in the American University of Central Asia in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. I prepared an email that was later sent to the university's students. In it, I asked people who have recently played the game or were willing to play the game for a few hours and later be interviewed about their experience to contact me. Additionally, research participants were asked to suggest other people who might be willing to participate. I have also been able to talk some of my personal acquaintances into playing the game for some time. In summary, the group of interviewees was put together through a combination of a call for volunteers and snowball-sampling (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981).

All of the participants with the exception of one were male, and every one of them was a member of the middle or the upper class. Additionally, the sample is skewed in terms of the level of previous education. Both selection biases are conditioned by the selection method. The American University of Central Asia has high standards of admission in relation to other institutions of higher education in the country. It is also relatively expensive, even when all the possibilities for financial aid are taken into account. As a result, the sample is completely unrepresentative of the population of Kyrgyzstan, or even the student population of the country.

While such a sample would be utterly unusable in a research project with a goal of fleshing out the contents of cultural and communicative memory and generalize to the whole population of Kyrgyzstan, the goal of this fieldwork was much less ambitious. As this thesis is informed by theoretical work with a view to future research, all that was required of the fieldwork is to find support for the existence of conditions that enable the formation of *virtual communicative memory*, a concept proposed in chapter 2 of this thesis. In other words, all I had to determine was whether any of the gamers experienced the sort of personal relation to the in-game events described in chapter 3. The skewed nature of the sample does not render it useless with a view to this goal.

The thesis would certainly have benefited from a deeper engagement with the player community in Kyrgyzstan, which would prompt a lot more reflection of my position as an outsider to these communities. Unfortunately, I have been unable to find to any player community formed around the particular game under consideration in Kyrgyzstan. I have, however, in the course of my fieldwork acquired a large number of connections in gamer communities formed around *World of Tanks* (Wargaming, 2010), *DOTA 2* (Valve Corporation, 2013), and *Counter Strike* (Valve Corporation, 2000). While these contacts will certainly prove

valuable in future research projects on the topic of virtual communicative memory, access to these communities played no part in the discussion of the meaning potentials of *Company of Heroes 2* other than the fact that some of the participants have referred me to their friends who played the same game as them. This meant that the question of the insider/outsider issue (Dwyer, S. C., and Buckle, J. L., 2009) in regard to the fact that I am not a member of a stable gaming community did not play a significant role in the interview process.

I do, however, come from Bishkek and have studied at the American University of Central Asia. This means that the research participants and I come from very similar social and educational backgrounds. In this regard, I was very much an insider and certainly shared in many of the tacit assumptions that underlay our conversation. Generally speaking, I believe that this similarity of backgrounds has allowed me to better conduct the interview process. Not only was I able to accommodate the interviewees' language requirements[20], but I was also able to better grasp the implications of some of the things said in the interviews than would a researcher who does not share the background. On balance, a thorough examination of these assumptions, unspoken agreements and common ideas of history and identity is impossible not only due to reasons of space, time or resources but also by virtue of their silent, almost subconscious presence. As John Roberts (2009) argues, total reflexivity and transparency in qualitative research is impossible.

A full interview guide is attached to the thesis as an appendix. Thematically, the questions were divided into those that broadly dealt with WWII history, questions about the interviewees' experiences with the game, a set of questions that probed the interviewee's historical perceptions of the battle of Stalingrad, and some wrap-up questions. While I have tried to avoid asking specific questions about the game so as to see what naturally stood out to the research participants, the Battle of Stalingrad presented a good opportunity to discuss game specifics as it is presented in the very beginning of the game, so every one of the interviewees has played through this part of the game. Additionally, the Battle is a widely known episode in the War.[21]

The interviews were recorded. Following the ethical guidelines of the Arctic University of Norway and the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD) the data was anonymised. The necessity to anonymize the data was clearly communicated to every one of the participants.

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[20] Most of the interviews were conducted in a mixture of Russian and English. Since all of the research participants were students of AUCA, they were all fluent in both languages.
[21] I have also tried, towards the end of he interviews, to see whether the interviewees' perceptions of the Soviet involvement in the War had any bearing on their perception on the Russian state to situate the project in relation to the contemporary challenges to Kyrgyzstan. This avenue, however, yielded no significant results.

I informed them that I will not quote them by name in the thesis. They were also told that the interview can be interrupted at any point and that they can ask that the recordings be erased both during or any time after the interview. I also obtained permission for recording our conversation from each participant.

Company of Heroes 2 (Relic Entertainment, 2013) is a game rated "M" by the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB), which means that it recommended for players 17 years of age and older. At the same time, the age of maturity in Kyrgyzstan is 18, which allowed for the possibility that some minors be allowed to play the game. No minors were interviewed in the present project.

The gathered data was analysed thematically. In other words, in my review of the interviews, I tried to find "patterns of experiences" (Aronson, 1995) and present them as direct quotes or by paraphrasing common ideas. The results follow.

2. Interview Analysis

Four dominant themes emerged in the course of player interviews. These are the extent to which the game guides the player into a certain type of strategy, both in campaign missions and single battles; the "boring" and "disconnected" nature of the cutscenes; the complex nature of the game controls and lack of instructions; and that for most interviewees, the game reminded them of their conversations with their parents and grandparents or of what they had learned about the period previously. A rather unexpected outcome of the interviews came as a result of wrap-up conversations. After the more formal part of the conversation, some people took interest in the nature of the research project. When I explained to them what I was doing, many re-evaluated their experience with the game. The following sections address each of these themes and correlate dominant meaning potentials described in the previous chapter to the interview data. A section after that addresses the players' personal involvement in the game and the post-interview conversations.

2.1. Encouraged Strategy

A number (4) of the interviewees have pointed out how constrained they felt when playing Company of Heroes 2. In most cases, these observations were cast as criticisms of the game, with one research participant saying that "I've played both campaigns and single battles, but they are designed as campaigns. You just need to hold one point and you cannot leave this point. If you fight against the other side, you have to go in one direction, you don't have freedom. I usually prefer the game to be free. This one was very structured, very one-way

directed." At the same time, some of the players figured out that in order to achieve the clear objectives of "holding points" and "getting to the goal spots," soldier types have to be prioritized: "infantry is cheap and fast, so you make them go, and they die, but the better soldiers can shoot from the back." This was echoed by 5 others. For others, this caused difficulty in playing: "There is an order. You know what you have to do, it's just not clear how to." This ties into the next dominant theme, the complex nature of the gameplay and the lack of instructions.

2.2. Lack of Instructions

The complexity of the game controls was pointed out by most (11) interviewees. For most, the difficulty did not lay in seeing what must be done, but how one is to do it: "the control, like, the buttons, it was quite complicated. I had to know that every single type of soldiers had its own functions, that I didn't figure out very well. I never learned to put mines, even after four missions. They didn't teach me even. I saw tanks coming, and I didn't know which soldier to pick. The gameplay was complicated, but also straightforward. There were clear instructions, but I didn't know what to do." Another interviewee went on to speculate that the complexity could be part of the design: "I think the whole chaos, the whole gameplay itself, it was made intentionally to make you feel as if in battle. You know, in battle, you feel kind of maybe distracted, spontaneous, all of that, and you have to figure it out very fast, and you don't have time to make a pause and find the needed button."

2.3. The Cutscenes

Some of the interviewees noticed the disconnect between the cutscenes and the gameplay discussed in the previous chapter. For some (7), the fact that the cutscenes contained no hints or information that could be advantageously used in the missions made the cutscenes seem unnecessary. In response to a question about the game's protagonist, one interviewee said: "I didn't understand [the backstory]. He did something and ended up in a Gulag. It was boring. Some dude talking to some other dude. It was boring, so I didn't pay attention. He wrote a letter or something." Others (5) acknowledged the significance of the backstory as an ideological debate, with one participant pointing out that "He [Isakovich] survived a trauma and couldn't forgive the government for letting thousands of their own people die like this." The same interviewee continued, saying: "the interrogator said they were protecting their land, but he was skeptical of that, but I cannot say that the policeman was a bad guy, he just believed in his own propaganda."

2.4. Background Knowledge

For a number of project participants (5), playing the game brought to mind their previous knowledge of the period. For some, the message of the game in regard to the Soviet Union stood at odds with their pre-existing notions. One interviewee in particular spoke about how the game's representation of the Union clashed with the way his grandparents spoke about it: "We live among our grandparents. They talk about the USSR and Russia. Good things. My Grandfather was better off. He said that there were free hospitals and no homeless people. […] We hear from older people that the Soviet Union was good." When speaking about how the game portrays the Soviet Union, the same interviewee said that "the game begins with violence from Stalin right from the beginning." He also said that the portrayal of Stalin in the game reminded him of an episode in a book by Chingiz Aytmatov, a famous Kyrgyz author. In the book, a lesson in biology is described, wherein the proposition that every living thing dies ends with an angry reaction from the teacher when one of the students asks him if that means that Comrade Stalin would also die one day. The interviewee compared this with how the soldiers sometimes shouted "for Stalin!" when responding to orders.

The uneasy relationship between the existing knowledge of the research participants and the in-game representation of the events of the War stood out with some interviews more than in others. For some, the idea of barrier troops was something they were not aware of before playing the game: "In school we never talked about *zagradotryady* [barrier troops]. But now I don't know if it happened." For others, their interest in history meant that that they were themselves critical of some aspects of the Soviet involvement. One interviewee in particular, when asked if there was a difference in how the USSR and the Western allies waged war, responded emotionally, saying: "Of course! In 1937 most of the good generals were murdered by Stalin. The [sic] pure genius, just eliminated, and not the best ones had to manage the war, so the Soviet army was less prepared for war than the Western armies." When asked if the game influenced his image of the Soviet soldier, the same interviewee said "No. Since I am generally interested in history and I have studied politics for a long time, I understand that the game is quite biased. However, everything that was in the game actually happened."

2.5. Correlation with Identified Meaning Potentials

The dominant meaning potentials identified in the game analysis presented in the previous chapter were the expendability of the Soviet soldier; inflexible and often cruel orders; the concomitant strategy of pragmatically using soldiers to achieve the goals; and the evil of the

Soviet Union, illustrated by condemnable war practices such as barrier troops, penal battalions, and a disregard for civilian lives.

In addressing the question of what the Soviet soldiers were, in the opinion of the interviewees, scared of, some (6) brought up barrier troops. All of the interviewees agreed that war generally is scary and dangerous. However, a fair number mentioned Stalin: "if you go forward you get shot, if Stalin said something it was law: "*po prikazu*" [according to orders]." For others, the meaning potentials in the game simply coincided with their own views: "I know that Stalin was dictator [sic] and could let millions of people die. It wasn't a surprise for me. I saw people running and dying, but that didn't change anything."

The theme of inflexible or cruel orders came up in answers to a number of questions. For example, one interviewee said that the mission objectives sometimes made "rational" gameplay difficult. He cited the very first mission as an example. In it, the player has to find a way around a German tank while holding the tank back using fresh conscripts. The interviewee said that it was "stupid," continuing that "it would be better to retreat, let the tank pass, go back a few blocks, go around, find the anti-tank gun and shoot it." Instead, even if the player did not send in fresh conscripts, units outside of player control would continue to die trying to stop the tank. Speaking of the soldiers, a different interviewee said that "they were just running forward, dying like zombies. [...] They were just following the orders, doing what they are told to." Another interviewee echoed this, saying that "You just click and the soldiers will all throw themselves. This is ridiculous. They were just running from behind the blocks [from cover] and dying for literally nothing."

When answering who they thought was the villain of the game, the interviewees divided into three distinct groups. Every one of them agreed that the Nazi soldiers were an enemy. However, some (9) thought that it was just the Nazis that represented evil in the game: "it was the Germans that invaded," or "when you play, the Germans are the enemy. The Germans were trying to kill me." Others, (3) mostly those that never finished the game campaign, pointed to Churkin[22] as a villain in addition to the Nazi invaders. Others yet (4) said that Joseph Stalin, or the USSR leadership were cast as villains.

The strategy of sacrificing some soldiers to prevent the death of some other more valuable troops did not come up in the answers to any of the questions in the interview guide. Rather, only when asked how they played, and what tactics they found useful, did some of the

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[22] The Soviet interrogator questioning Lev Isakovich. For summary of the game narrative, please see the chapters 1 and 4.

interviewees describe this strategy. It seems that the strategy is so obvious that it is unremarkable.

When asked specifically about Churkin, one of the respondents said that "he just believed in his own propaganda," a sentiment echoed by a number of others. This exculpates Churkin, leaving only the conscious propagandists to blame. This clashes somewhat with the game analysis presented in the previous chapter. While this interpretation portrays true believers in the Soviet cause as blameless, in my analysis the game suggests that anyone not willing to take personal moral responsibility for the events of the war is guilty. This is illustrated by the murder of the executioner, whose views never got expressed in any way other than a terse formal recital of Lev's death sentence.

Finally, the the idea that the USSR relied on raw numbers to overcome the German offensive stood out to a number (6) of the interviewees. One interviewee, who was particularly dissatisfied with the game's portrayal of the Union, said that "I remembered a quote [from a mission briefing] "we will win by numbers." There was something about numbers. They may have technology, but we have human resources. I remember that clearly."

3. The Player and the Game

Throughout the interviews, I tried to understand whether my collocutors had been morally implicated in the game, whether the dissonance between the cutscenes and the gameplay stood out to them as it does upon a close inspection of the game – whether they felt that they were personally involved in the gameplay on a moral level. From some of the interviewees I got a clear negative. When asked if, in his opinion, there was a difference between watching a movie about WWII and playing *Company of Heroes 2*, one research participant said: "In the movies you can see more individuals. Not, like, AIs [artificial intelligences] running around." Some of those who had not skipped the cutscenes, (3) said that watching the cutscenes was like watching a film, that they felt sorry for Isakovich and that that made them think about the soldiers: "he [Isakovich] said many died, and then I clicked [ordered soldiers into battle], and some got shot."

My sometimes clumsy probing into this issue highlighted a theme that I have since noticed in a number of interviews when listening to the recordings: *the attitude toward the game determines personal involvement to large extent.* To illustrate this point, one of the interviewees, with whom I had corresponded briefly via e-mail prior to the interview because

he wanted to know what the research project was, said: "When I played *Call of Duty*[23], I didn't think about anything, but when I played this game I thought about it. I tried to think because from your letter I understood that I will have to pay attention when I play. I tried to get something, but when I usually play, I don't think." A number of others echoed this. For a considerable proportion of the interviewees, the very conversation about the game made them think differently about it. For them, Sicart's "pause" (2013, p. 31) did not naturally occur during gameplay, and they were not personally drawn into the game's moral and ethical discourse during play. Rather, reflecting on their experience is what made them rethink their engagement with the game. Unfortunately, many of these conversations happened after the interview, after I had turned off the recorder. This invites a host of considerations regarding my own role in the research process. The fact that it was my probing and my questions that caused these mental processes means that the observation regarding player attitude and personal involvement is not exactly pertinent to the inquiry at hand, which asks after natural play. It is my belief, however, that this accidental discovery presents a number of exciting research avenues for the future, discussed in more detail here and in chapter 6.

To conclude, most of the meaning potentials identified in the game analysis also stood out to the players. Not all of the players saw the game as the game analysis chapter presents it, and very few people naturally became morally invested in the game. Some were in outright disagreement with how the game portrayed the USSR, saying that the game was biased by virtue of being a Western production. Others, and this includes most of the research participants, merely saw *Company of Heroes 2* as a boring, overly complicated game.[24] Thus, the personal involvement necessary to form *virtual communicative memory* arose in the experience of only a few of the players.

One important conclusion is that the player's attitude to a game seems to determine the degree of personal involvement. In informal conversations after the interviews many respondents pointed out that just talking about the game, engaging in an intellectual discussion about it and the meaning potentials and historical themes present in the game made them much more aware of what they did while playing and what it meant to them personally. Only one of the player engaged with the game with a rough idea of the research project, and the effect of this knowledge became very evident in the interview. This opens up possibilities for future

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[23] A popular first-person shooter franchise, with some titles set in WWII
[24] Since I cannot say much about how versed the research participants are in game play, this says nothing about the game itself, just the experience of these particular players.

research and the proposition that player attitude affects personal involvement is easily tested by performing a controlled experiment where some of the participants would be told that there will be an interview after a play session, while the other would not be. If it can be shown that player attitude does indeed affect the degree of personal involvement, then the investigation of how a more thoughtful attitude to play can be encouraged may be in order.

This chapter has presented the results of the analysis of 16 interviews on the basis of the theoretical developments presented in chapters 2 and 3 and the game analysis in chapter 4. The fieldwork has established that at least in some cases, the conditions that enable *virtual communicative memory* are present. This chapter also investigated how the players negotiated the meaning potentials in the game. As a result of the fieldwork, the theoretical developments of this thesis have found some limited support. This investigation has also shown the need for future research into how the attitude of the player towards the game can affect their perception and negotiation of the meaning potentials.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations

1. Project Summary and Conclusions

This thesis has discussed the relationship between memory and video games. Given the vastness of the proposed inquiry, this research project has systematically limited the discussion of collective memory to Jan and Aleida Assmann's thought on *cultural* and *communicative memory* (2010, 2011), before moving on to outline the importance of incorporating modern media into the discussion of social memory by referring to the work of Alison Landsberg (2004) in chapter 2. Having done so, the thesis brought up the issue of video games, their medium-specific characteristics and memory-making potential in chapter 3. Building on the work of Jan and Aleida Assmann and Alison Landsberg, the concept of *virtual communicative memory* was introduced to describe the sort of memory that can be generated during player interaction with video games. The theoretical findings of these chapters were tested against and complemented by two pieces of research – a formal analysis of the historical video game *Company of Heroes 2* (Relic Entertainment, 2013) and empirical research in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan that involved interviews with people who have played this game.

As a result of the theoretical investigation of video games and their medium-specific characteristics, I posit that *virtual communicative memory* is brought about through involving the player in the game at a personal moral level through thoughtful interruption of an otherwise fluid play. This can be achieved in a number of ways. While the thesis does not make the attempt to provide an exhaustive list of such possibilities, it does provide an explanation of the general principles (chapter 3) and an illustration (chapter 4) supported by empirical data (chapter 5). Building on the work of, among others, Miguel Sicart (2005, 2008, 2010, 2013 a, b), I propose that one way in which personal player involvement can be achieved is by depriving the player of the ability to make every in-game decision based exclusively on in-game parameters such as strategy or the in-game economy, but rather inviting genuinely ethical personal considerations. Another, as illustrated by *Company of Heroes 2*, is by putting the player into personal contact with a simulated historical entity while presenting a narrative that casts in-game actions from an ethical perspective. A more detailed exploration of these methods is an important future research avenue highlighted by the present thesis.

Another implication of the work presented on these pages concerns the relationship between modern media and social memory at large. In this thesis, building on the work of Alison Landsberg, I have argued that the experiential nature of modern media, and video games in particular, has the potential to form memories that can affect the ethical and moral sensibilities of the consumer. By bringing the work of Alison Landsberg into the discussion of

memory, I have posited that this makes the temporal limits of Jan Assmann's communicative memory less absolute, allowing for a way to experience past events and the lives of others in such a way that can affect one's contemporary identity and cognition.

The wider question of modern media and collective memory has social implications inasmuch as this interaction may be producing groups of people who share in prosthetic memories, but not necessarily in communicative or cultural memory. Such pools of prosthetic memories shared by a community represent an intriguing concept. The 'other' at whose experience such memories are directed does not have to be entirely 'other.' In some cases, like the game *Company of Heroes 2,* media may be rooted in the cultural memory of group A (the Post-Soviet space), produced by members of group B (the game is a Western production), but then consumed by the members of group A. In such cases, the original historical event goes through many stages of interpretation, with critical engagement possible at each stage. In other cases, such pools of prosthetic memories may create parallel communities within a society. These communities share in the cultural and communicative memory of the larger society, but the moral, ethical and political sensibilities of their members are also informed by their store of prosthetic memories. The widespread availability of media today also allows, in most cases, for individual control of what one is exposed to. This makes possible a form of subversive media consumption. An example of such subversive consumption is the popularity of bootleg rock-n-roll records in the USSR. [25]

This wider discussion is much larger than the scope of this thesis. The present work is focused on the memory-making potential of video games. What differentiates video games from other forms of media is their interactivity. Not only does this influence the manner in which the narrative is experienced, but it also imbues player actions with meaning and consequences. Video games are "dynamic systems" that "contain thousands of potential stories" (Frasca, 2001, p. 2). In the words of Vit Šisler and Holger Pötzsch (2016), historical video games differ from other forms of historical media in that they enable "creative practices of experimentation that allow for playful encounters with a variety of possible pasts" (p.6) They emphasize contingency and historical ambivalence. At the same time, they allow for individual personal actions on behalf of the player in shared simulated environments.

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[25] If true, these considerations have serious political and social implications. It could be that a similar phenomenon has manifested itself in the US, where political partisanship is currently at its peak. Of course, further research is needed, and no definitive claims should be expected here, but it could be argued that the social polarization evident the 2016 presidential election is a symptom of the existence of such 'parallel communities.'

This conditions their specific memory-making potential. Whereas it is possible to be a passive spectator of a film, a game will not progress without player interaction. At the same time, the player's freedom is limited by "game mechanics, procedures, and narrative devices" (Pötzsch and Šisler, 2016, p. 6). Meaningful engagement with a historical game positions the player, rooted in their contemporary moment, in a system of rules, mechanics and procedures that simulates a historical setting, making video games an excellent example of what Landsberg (2004) calls 'transferential spaces.' In other words, they exhibit the sort of potential for memory-making described by Landsberg in regard to other forms of modern media, but add to it the dimensions of player agency, engagement of personal values and ethical sensibilities of the players, and shared simulated historical environments in which the actions take place.

This lead me to introduce the term *virtual communicative memory* to conceptually encapsulate the type of memory they produce. The term denotes *the collective store of memories that result from the vicarious experience of a group of players of the settings, in-game events and the concomitant meaning potentials of a particular game*. Given that games as simulations and devices of procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2008) need not be limited to physical systems means that their memory-making and educational potential, and, therefore, their social impact, do not depend on whether, or not, they exhibit a historical connection.

Given the rise and continued expansion of the video game industry, the question of how video games and social memory are related becomes evermore important. This thesis has provided some insights into how players interact with historical video games and negotiate the dominant meaning potentials and historical themes that such games may contain. It is my hope that the resulting idea of *virtual communicative memory* can serve as the basis for future research into the relationship between video games and memory.

The simulatory capabilities of video games have inspired a number of scholars to discuss their possible uses in education. Ian Bogost (2008), for example, concludes that "video games are models of real and imagined systems. We always play when we use video games, but the sort of play that we perform is not always the stuff of leisure" (p. 136). The ideas laid out in this thesis can provide the impetus for the creation of video games designed for education, but imbued with the sort of ludic characteristics that would make them as enticing as they are educational. While educational, or "serious" games are not a new idea, low budgets and design with a specialized use in mind often limit both their play value and educational potential. If games are not interesting as games, they might as well not be games. I plan to build on the work presented here to incorporate the ideas of personal involvement and *virtual communicative memory* into the design of video games created with education in mind. While

this is especially well-suited for historical video games, a number of other conceptual questions can be addressed through this medium – questions of governance, social justice an economics, among numerous other issues. In short, video games can be representative of a highly personal form of education that involves the student/player at a personal moral level.

2. Recommendations for Future Research

Before this practical work can take place, the questions laid out in these chapters must be explored further. This thesis has achieved much less than it has exposed as worthy of research. A lot of work is called for in the investigation of video games and collective memory. For example, while this thesis has concerned itself with the single player campaign of a historical real time strategy game, more research is needed that would look into different genres of games, such as first person shooters. Another line of inquiry that would complement the present research project is a deeper exploration of multiplayer engagement that would ideally involve the researcher engaging in multiplayer games with a group of other players as well as an inquiry into online player communities formed around certain historical video games to provide further insight into *virtual communicative memory* as a fundamentally communal phenomenon.

Another research project could build on the present work and compare memories produced by different genres and iterations of video games to further flesh out the principles of personal involvement and *virtual communicative memory.* The present thesis can be used as a basis for the hypothesis as well as a theoretical foundation for such an inquiry.

Alternatively, one may extend the parallel between this work and the thought of Jan Assmann and ask whether there exists some form of *virtual cultural memory,* whether, for example, there exist stable communities within the modern massive multiplayer online role playing games, whose evolution and existence through time carry similar characteristics to the relationship between identity and memory described by Jan Assmann. A number of online multiplayer video games incorporate player and NPC (non-playable character) factions that players may join. *EVE Online* (CCP Games, 2003), for example is a complex space trade and combat simulation online multiplayer video game that involves a large number of "corporations" that players may join. These corporations compete economically and militarily, pitting the players against each other. Each corporation comes with different entry requirements and benefits, with some focused on economic expansion, while others make an emphasis on military force. The world of EVE also abounds with in-game myths and "lore" that acts as a source of background knowledge for the game's universe. The internet abounds with blogs and websites devoted to in-game lore. Eve-history.net, (2010) for example, has an

entry devoted to "Steve," which was at one point the biggest ship in the game. Steve was destroyed by members of rival corporations and later made into a permanent ruin in space. Heavy in in-game jargon, the website describes the grueling battle. Evetravel.wordpress.com is another website devoted to EVE Online. Here, the author describes her travels through the world in first-person, weaving stories into the fabric of the gameworld. The entry describing a trip to the Steve Memorial reads:

> "Warily, I told Aura my destination and set off. […] I came out of warp a few kilometers away from the wreck. It didn't quite strike me just how massive the thing was from so far out. […] Whatever killed Steve had clearly not been a pleasant experience. Gashes on the sides of the hull were large enough to fit most cruisers inside, and I easily maneuvered the Professor [my ship] into the hull. Not surprisingly for New Eden, the insides had been completely stripped: not even the deck plates remained." (Eve Travel, n.d.).

Today video games have become a natural part of life. They provide a way to experience simulated environments first hand, alone or in groups. Some of them are fully autonomous fictional worlds, complete with their own geographies, myths and histories. Yet we, as players, constitute their impact on the world extrinsic to them. We experience. We remember. An inquiry in the memory-making potentials of video games and their importance to contemporary social existence appears timely and necessary. Not only will such an endeavor give insights into an important aspect of modern life, but also into how the games' power to incorporate players, their values, ethics, morals and more, can be harnessed in education, possibly making us all a bit more considerate and less belligerent. After all, as one of the research participants pointed out, "People start to realize that they should be good and spend more time with their friends only when they die. If you can play those games and feel from the first person [sic] what those people felt, it would be amazing. You could create empathy. And people could actually start to be in those shoes."

This thesis has taken an interdisciplinary approach to the question of the relationship between video game and collective memory. By triangulating theoretical work with two pieces of research, this work has proposed the concept of *virtual communicative memory* as an addition to the present terminology used in the discussion of social memory and its relationship with

modern media. The thesis has provided limited support for the utility and feasibility of the concept and highlighted numerous avenues for future research.

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Appendix: Interview Guide

The following will be communicated to the informants:

The data is anonymous, and any connection between informants and their responses will be erased.

The informant can decide to terminate the interview at any moment. In that case, the recording will be deleted immediately.

At any time after the interview, informants can demand that all recordings be deleted.

Informants will not be consulted when their responses are used in the final report. Due to anonymization, this is not necessary.

Informants will be provided with researcher contact details (phone and email) to ensure future accessibility.

Each interview will have four main sections:

(1) History — general:

i. Describe your image of an average Soviet soldier in WWII.

ii. What is he/she scared of?

iii. What episodes of the Soviet involvement in WWII stand out to you most?

(2) Game- related

i. Who do you think is the villain in Company of Heroes 2? Why?

ii. Was there a specific tactic employed by the Soviet Union during WWII that was especially well-represented in the game?

(3) History - specific

i. How well do you think the battle for Stalingrad was represented in CoH2? (I think the word "well" is just vague enough to cover historical accuracy without asking about it directly)

ii. What differences, if any, do you see between seeing a film about Soviet soldiers in WWII and playing a game such as CoH2?

iii. Do you think there was an essential difference in how the Western Allies and the Soviet Union waged war?

iv. In your opinion, how much of this style of war has Russia inherited? (I think this question will help expand the argument a bit, or, if that is unnecessary, it will allow us to see if further research into the socio-political implications of historical games is feasible.)

(4) Wrap-up

i. So what does all this mean to you? Do you think any of this is at all significant for our generation?

Thank for the interview, reiterate opportunity for deletion, and distribute contact details. Ask for permission to contact again for possible in-depth interview or group interview at later stage.