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ESTRID SØRENSEN AND JAN SCHANK

Abstract

WWII remains a popular adaptation for videogames seventy years after its end, yet, what kind of war is depicted through these games? With inspiration drawn from ethnomethodology, this article asks which cues WWII first-person shooters, strategy games and flight simulation provide players with to categorize WWII. Eight different categorizations are identified. Even though preferred categorizations are found in each of the three genres analyzed, each game invites players to categorize WWII in several different ways. Moreover, it is shown that the sequentiality of these different categorizations is crucial for the way in which players are led to engage in virtual military engagements. They are offered varied moral orders and varied moral engagements.

Keywords

Categorizations of war; ethnomethodology; moral orders; Second World War; sequentiality; wargames

Introduction

The Second World War was already adapted in the early history of videogames: In 1985 the WWII submarine simulator *Silent Service* (Microprose 1985) was released, and the classic first-person shooter (FPS) game *Castle Wolfenstein* (Muse Software 1981) was embedded in WWII. The recent continuation of the *Wolfenstein* series and popularity of *Red Orchestra 2* (Tripwire Interactive 2011) are evidence of the enduring appeal of WWII games.

Academic studies on WWII games are often preoccupied with their historical authenticity, ideological aspects and psychological effects. What about WWII itself as it is depicted in videogames? This paper analyzes how WWII is categorized in games about this war. It shows how varied WWII categorizations are, not only across games, but also within games. Why this variation? Instead of seeking answers from outside of the game playing activity, for example in ideology or the psychological effects on the player, we seek the answer in the games themselves. For this, we draw on membership categorization analysis (Schegloff 2007; Sacks 1992) and inquire how each of the different ways in which WWII is categorized in videogames invites players to participate in a different way in the depicted WWII and in the activity of playing the game.²

Many studies of WWII games examine their representation of historical events, while another large portion of studies focuses on the *military–entertainment complex*. Research of the former kind is variously preoccupied with the question of authentic depictions. While some studies evaluate the historiography of videogames (objectivity and differentiated representation) (Bender 2010, 2012; Kee, 2009; Kee et al. 2011), others discuss the potential of WWII games for counter-factual historiography (Bredel 2010). Due to their immersive potential, Kingsepp (2006) emphasizes that WWII games create an “atmosphere of being personally involved in a re-enactment of history” (p. 61; see also Gish 2010; Salvati and Bullinger 2013). Crabtree describes modding³ communities as digital re-enactment groups. He says that like “traditional reenactment groups, modding is facilitated through rich networks guided by a strong sense of creative spirit, personal achievement, authorship, and at times an obsessive desire for the authentic” (Crabtree 2013, p. 207). Furthermore, the game studies discussion on authentic depiction often refers to WWII games (e.g., Galloway 2004).

Central to the military–entertainment complex literature is the critique of videogames as a tool for the (US) military and government to subliminally implant militaristic ideology into society⁴ (Lenoir and Lowood 2008; Virchow 2006, 2007; Möller 2006; Castillo 2009). While this literature mainly centres on current (US) wars, WWII is also discussed. For example, Gish (2010) notes that WWII games “employ culturally specific notions of individuality and heroism that privilege the United States’ role in the Second World War” (p. 168). With reference to Herz (1997), who first described the military–entertainment complex, Breuer and colleagues (2012) define this as “collaboration between the military and the entertainment industry” (p. 216). Various themes are discussed under this rubric, such as military training through videogames (e.g. Galloway 2004; Höglund 2008), wargames as military recruitment instruments (King and Leonard 2010; Lenoir and Lowood 2008), funding of videogame production through the military (Nieborg 2010; Nichols 2010), and military videogames as tools of political propaganda (Bogost 2007; Höglund 2008) disseminating military ideology

(Allen 2011; Løvlie 2008; King and Leonard 2010; Lenoir and Lowood 2008; de Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders, and Beentjes 2012; Gieselmann 2002; Breuer et al. 2012; Mantello 2012).

Overall, the literature on WWII as a historical representation and as embedded in the military–entertainment complex tends to emphasize *general* characteristics of WWII videogames, such as the generally heroic narratives of games (Power 2007), their authentic framework (Baron 2010) and their generally American perspective (Gish 2010). These studies raise important issues about the potential of wargames to create immersive historicity or political propaganda. As social scientists we research the complexity of unfolding practices through which general characteristics of society and culture are accomplished. In this paper, we aim to contribute to the existing literature on WWII games an analysis of the practical methods that games use to enable players and researchers alike to achieve such and other categorizations of WWII in games.

Method

When approaching ludic activities, the question arises how to take into account the several different ways people play computer games. In game studies, these considerations have led to suggestions that any analysis should apply different perspectives by acknowledging the different ludic activities resulting from different types of players (Bartle 1996), or that analyses should adopt multiple play strategies (Aarseth 2003). Such advice challenges researchers to vary their analysis endlessly, as there is no end to the variations of how individuals play games.

Instead of attending to individuals and their unique or average perception of WWII games, ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967) encourages us to examine the cultural methods that enable the playing of a WWII game. Regardless of the unique approach individual players may apply to a WWII game, for its practical accomplishment players are largely left to cues provided by the game during play. Such cues work as *practical tools* for the player's accomplishing of the game. Sacks (1992) described one of the challenges participants are confronted with when accomplishing everyday practices as the "problem of categorization": there are several possible categorizations of WWII and the player has to decide which they apply in order to continue the game. They must continuously find an answer to the questions "what WWII is this?" and "how can I take part?".

The categorizations are thus *practical activities* accomplished in and by the games, which are in turn intimately tied to the practices of playing the games. Fisher (2011) notes that playing a WWII FPS game affords the player the chance to potentially learn "how to be" a WWII game player. In this paper we do not discuss whether players actually learn this, but simply acknowledge that if the player cannot find an answer to the questions of "what WWII is this?" and "how can I take part?", she will neither know what she sees on the screen nor what she has to do with it, and therefore the game cannot unfold. Our notion of participation thus includes any and all ways of relating to or engaging with the game—"taking part" may mean sympathizing or having empathy with characters or nations, as well as more strictly behavioural types of activities, such as shooting, running, or managing. In order to answer the questions "what is this?" and

“how can I take part?”, the player must look to the participation cues in the game (Keating and Sunakawa 2010), and the game must concurrently provide cues that the player recognizes as enabling her to solve the problem of categorization. The problem of categorization is thus solved through interaction between player and game. This interaction unfolds on both the narrative and ludic levels of gameplay. While the scope of our analysis here prevents us from providing detailed analyses of the game rules, it should become clear that the ways in which players can “take part” in the games depends, *inter alia*, on game rules and similar ludic structures.

Following these analytical principles, and with our particular interest in how the categorization of WWII is accomplished in and through videogames, the analyses below on the one hand describe the participation cues the games predominantly provide for the player—i.e., the preferred participation cues—to answer the question “what WWII is this?” and “how can I take part?”. On the other hand, the analysis asks how the answers to these questions—i.e., the preferred categorizations—work as resources for continuing the playing activity. This way of using the approach expands its analytical domain. Traditionally, membership categorization analysis (MCA) has been applied to analyze how humans categorize other humans in the course of accomplishing their everyday activities. Although this has not been developed in detail, it seems that Sacks envisaged the applicability of MCA to include at least people categorizing “conversational objects” such as lies (Sacks 1992, p. 557–565) or jokes (Sacks 1972b, p. 46–47). Additionally, there are a few works analyzing categorizations accomplished in and by (written) texts, usually focusing on the categorizations of people they accomplish (Jayyusi 1991; Lepper 2000; Smith 2001; Schank 2013). Our analysis takes these precedents one step further by applying MCA in the spirit of the “principle of generalized symmetry” (Latour 2005) to include both humans and non-humans as doing the categorizing as well as being what’s categorized (cf., e.g., Law 2002).

In order to understand how the problem of categorization is solved, the analysis follows the same sequential order through the game as do players—i.e., first analyzing the introductory non-playing parts and subsequently the playing part of the games. It then becomes possible to point out how the particular sequential order of the different categorizations of WWII in the games contributes to the ongoing practical accomplishment of the playing activity.

Game Sample

Table 1 lists the games sampled for the study. Singleplayer wargames centre in general more on the narrative of the historical endeavours than their multiplayer siblings. The latter either invite players to stalk each other within virtual environments or to group together to compete against other groups, as Morris (2002) states. Even if several multiplayer games exist that unfold in historical sceneries of WWII, this backdrop is generally less relevant than in singleplayer games. For these reasons our analysis focuses on WWII games in singleplayer mode. Additionally, we have concentrated on three genres most often adapting WWII: first-person shooters (FPSs), strategy games (SGs) and flight simulations (FSs). A number of games were first selected based on our own expertise and on rankings of most popular WWII games on gamers’ blogs. The number of games was subsequently limited, based on sales volumes⁵ and after consultation with a games sales manager about the popularity of WWII games in Germany. We excluded games published before 2000 to achieve a

reasonably recent sample. We sampled games that, based on the mentioned criteria, fall within gamers' general understanding of WWII games of the mentioned genres. This does not mean that an extended sample would not reveal other categorizations. However, by focusing on categorizations that appear in all the games at least of one genre of the sample, we expect these also to appear in other WWII games of the same genres.

Title	Genre	Released	Developer	Publisher
<i>B-17 Flying Fortress: The Mighty 8th</i>	Flight Sim	2000	Wayward Design	MicroProse/ Hasbro Interactive
<i>Combat Wings: Battle of Britain</i>	Flight Sim	2009	City Interactive	CI Games
<i>Heroes over Europe</i>	Flight Sim	2009	Transmission Games	Ubisoft
<i>IL-2 Sturmovik: Birds of Prey</i>	Flight Sim	2009	Gaijin Entertainment	Iceberg
<i>Birds of Steel</i>	Flight Sim	2012	Gaijin Entertainment	Konami
<i>Medal of Honor: Allied Assault</i>	FPS	2002	DreamWorks	EA
<i>Call of Duty</i>	FPS	2003	Infinity Ward	Activision
<i>Call of Duty 2</i>	FPS	2005	Infinity Ward	Activision
<i>Call of Duty 3</i>	FPS	2006	Treyarch	Activision
<i>Red Orchestra 2</i>	FPS	2011	Tripwire Interactive	Tripwire Interactive/ 1C Company
<i>Sudden Strike</i>	Strategy	2000	Fireglow	CDV/Eidos
<i>Blitzkrieg</i>	Strategy	2003	Nival	CDV
<i>Hearts of Iron 2</i>	Strategy	2005	Paradox	Paradox
<i>Company of Heroes</i>	Strategy	2006	Relic	THQ
<i>Company of Heroes 2</i>	Strategy	2013	Relic	THQ

Table 1: Sample of games analyzed.

Analysis

The analysis was conducted either by playing the games or observing how they were played in Let's Play videos. Searching for the cues the games provided for answering the questions “what WWII is this?” and “how can I participate?” we first coded transcriptions of the games, following the principle of *open coding* described by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The codes were compiled in a *Citavi* (Swiss Academic Software 2013) database. For each coding we noted its context in the game (its place in the game) and the genre of the transcribed game. Through an iterative process of comparing the content of the codes (the cues) and specifying and adjusting them, we finally ended up with eight categories of WWII, each with different cues for categorizing WWII. These are described in the following three parts of the analysis.

The categorizations in the data from the non-playing parts of the games showed systematic similarities across games. Accordingly, the first part of the analysis, which presents the categorizations of WWII found in the non-playing parts of the games (*historical WWII*, *emotional WWII* and *WWII of subjects*), presents the findings of the compound sample. The second part of the analysis deals with the categorizations in the playing parts of the games. Systematic differences in the preferred participation cues appeared across genres in these parts of the games, and accordingly, part two of the analysis is organized into three sections, each presenting the preferred categorization of one of the three genres analyzed (*acting out WWII*, *aesthetic WWII* and *managing WWII*).⁶ The third section of the analysis presents the final two categorizations, which appeared throughout the games in both the non-playing and playing parts (*technological WWII*, *heroic WWII*).

After completing the analysis, we realized that the systematic descriptions of the categorizations poorly conveyed how the cues provided by the games for these categorizations are presented to the player. For that reason, and based on the analyses we had generated, we formulated short, stylized descriptions of what Aarseth (2007) calls an implied player's experience of a game sequence that we found particularly illustrative for the categorization discussed. Each section begins with one such short description. Along with screenshots, we hope these provide readers with a more profound understanding of the character of the categorizations and of the analyzed empirical material.

Non-Playing Part of the Game

Historical WWII

Backed by dramatic orchestra music, a male voice states “June 4, 1940. Nazi forces enter Paris”. A flag with a swastika sags down from the Arc de Triumph, tanks lined up alongside (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Call of Duty 3, (Treyarch 2006), Saint-Lô, introductory video. © Activision.

The date alone could refer to all kinds of events, but together with “Nazi”, “forces enter”, “Paris”, and with the computer-animated footage, these words may be heard as referring to WWII. “If you can hear it as WWII, then hear it as WWII”, to paraphrase Sacks’s (1972a) *hearer’s maxim*. This maxim points to a method members of a culture apply to bind predicates, activities and persons together. His famous example was the two-part sequence “The baby cried. The mommy picked it up.” Even if the sentences do not indicate if the mommy was the baby’s mother, members of our culture hear them as if this was the case. Also, the sentences say nothing about why the mother picked up the baby, but still, we hear this action as evoked by the baby’s crying, and we even hear this, Sacks emphasizes, as the morally right thing to do. All this is due to the *membership categorization device* (MCD) “family” that brings together “baby”, “mother” and certain expected activities and predicates of each of them in relation to the other. Similarly, WWII works as an MCD in the introductory video of the first mission of *Call of Duty 3* (Treyarch 2006) that allows us (if we can) to hear “June 4, 1940”, “Nazi forces”, “enter”, and “Paris” together with the described images as belonging to WWII. These sentences, as well as the introductory videos of the games in general, present “Nazis”, “fascists”, and “Germans”⁷—or those carrying the symbols of these groups—as the aggressive ones and the Parisians, the Russians, the Dutch and all others as their victims. As a solution to the player’s initial question “what is this?” the game invites the player to activate the MCD WWII, indicating a moral division of evil Nazis and pitiful others. In this way, “these videogames engage contemporary understandings of history and manifestations of nationalized collective memory” (Gish 2010, p. 168).

How does the game respond to the player’s question “how can I take part?” It is standard for WWII games to start out with black-and-white video footage resembling materials from the time and place they stage, or similar computer-simulations (such as in Figure 2). The dating and localizing, combined with a generalized overview and authentic looking video footage, indicate to the player that what she sees is observed (and filmed or simulated) by someone else, and shown to her afterwards: it is a description. The introductory videos only allow the player to take part by watching and listening to descriptions, not by interacting. The introductory videos are unable to register any response from the player in the form of talk or interaction. Instead they

offer players the opportunity to take part as second-hand recipients of information, as distant observers of a state-of-affairs described by the videos and by sympathizing with a nation, preferably a non-German one. We label the WWII thus categorized *historical WWII*.



Figure 2: *Birds of Steel* (Gaijin Entertainment 2012), introductory video. © Konami.

Baron (2010) observes how “indexical archival footage from World War II” (p. 303) is used in *Call of Duty: World at War* (Treyarch 2008) to create a historically authentic framework and immersive historicity.⁸ Gish notes that the result of this “is the incorporation of the player not only within the interactive and sensorial world of the game itself, but also within a grand historical and nationalist narrative that exceeds the historical focus of the individual game titles” (Gish 2010, p. 169). Alison (2010) extends this to be a more general characteristic of WWII FPS to grant the games authenticity through black-and-white footage, tones of voice, etc. associated with the 1940s. In this way, the categorization as *historical WWII* achieves its “selective authenticity” (Salvati and Bullinger 2013). This authenticity is (necessarily) selective, since games (like other cultural products) cannot claim convincingly to represent all details of past events faithfully. The authority of the documentary form is one means among others for the games to achieve authenticity (the others being a representation of technological artefacts, which we also discuss below, and an overall reliance on cinematic conventions, which we have also noticed but cannot discuss in detail here). Apart from creating authenticity, attention to historical detail also invites players to engage beyond the game in the authenticity and historical correctness of the way in which the game depicts WWII.

Emotional WWII



Figure 3: *Heroes Over Europe* (Transmission Games 2009), introductory video.

© Ubisoft.

The introductory black-and-white video footage transforms as a male voice introduces himself with name and place of birth along with details from his upbringing. The video turns into colour. A doctor inspects a peculiar X-ray photo (Figure 3). The voice continues:

Don't remember much about the night of the Blitz. I woke up in a repat bed with a shattered pelvis and two shredded femur. Doc said he pulled so much shrapnel out of me legs I should go into the scrap metal business. For the next two years I passed the time teaching meself [sic] how to walk. And how not to scream. (*Heroes Over Europe* [Transmission Games 2009], 'Operation Cerberus', introductory video)

As is often the case in our sample, the sequence after the introductory historical video depicts personal experiences as presented in the FS *Heroes Over Europe* (Transmission Games 2009), rather than detached historical observations. The person (male without exception) talking about his experiences presents himself by name and discloses his personal background. Contrary to the nameless soldiers the player observed at a distance in the historical video, he is now given personal details about a specific, named subject. This enables the player to become intimate with the game character by caring for and empathizing with him. Indeed, he is offered quite a few emotional details that contribute to such feelings of empathy (cf. Figure 4). The game now provides a different answer to the player's question "how can I take part?" He is no longer invited to participate as a distant observer, as was the case in the introduction. Instead, he is encouraged to take part as a caring relative, friend or comrade. In this way a new categorization of WWII is achieved, which we label *emotional WWII*. This categorization is crucial in establishing what Pötzsch (2017) calls the "character filter", inviting players "to align with and ally themselves" (p. 5) to the

main character(s). At the same time, by way of the references to “Blitz” in the excerpt above and to “Germans” and “fascists” in the diary in Figure 4, along with their aggressive category-bound activities and the clear moral preference against the Germans, the *historical* categorization of *WWII* discussed above also continues on.

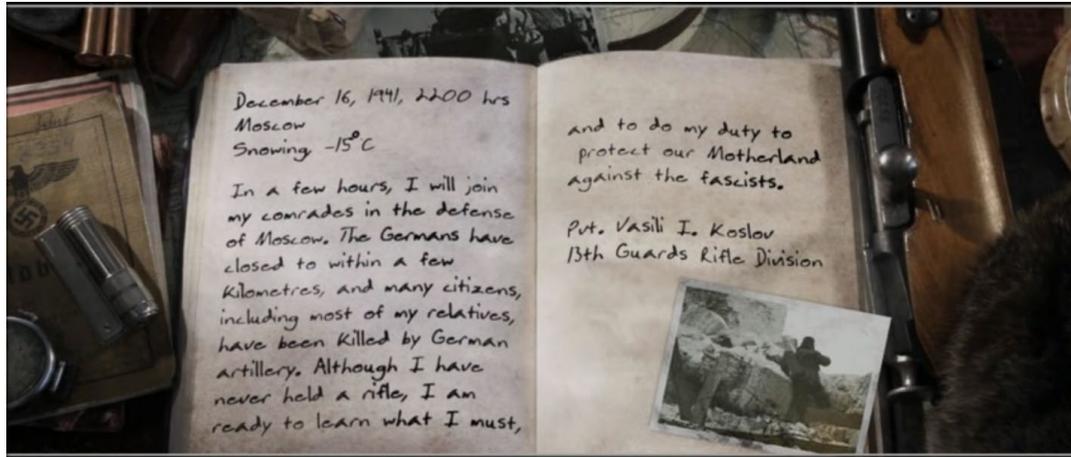


Figure 4: Call of Duty 2 (Infinity Ward 2005), introductory video. © Activision.

The sequential move from *historical WWII* to *emotional WWII* is important. The player's distant relation to the *historical WWII* facilitates an easy entry into engaging with war. It keeps the player at a morally safe distance from the events. He is not engaging, just witnessing the observations of anonymous others. It lays out the state of affairs of nations and quite literally prepares the stage for a drama to take place. Moving to the *emotional WWII*, the player is offered the opportunity to take one step closer to the unfolding events, now relating to a person actually suffering from the state of affairs. This “simultaneously provides the player with a spatio-temporal localization for the coming military encounter, and a personalization of the conflict's stakes and meanings” (Gish 2010, p. 170). Referring to the WWII FPS *Brothers in Arms* (Gearbox Software 2005), Rejack (2007) points out that:

Pre-scripted cutscenes and [the main character] Baker's voiceover narration provide the main avenues for emotional involvement with the characters. The emotional identification with the characters (if there is any) happens – as it does in cinema – by witnessing, not by interacting. (p. 420)⁹

The consequence of taking this step is very clearly formulated in *Call of Duty 2* (Infinity Ward 2005) (Figure 4) and just moments after the excerpt from *Heroes Over Europe* (Transmission Games 2009) above: you are morally obliged to fight back. A similar sequence is discussed by Hess (2007) with reference to *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun* (EA Los Angeles 2003), whereby “the meta-narrative sets up the larger scope of the personal narrative and its interaction with history” (p. 345). While *historical WWII* suggests a moral preference against the Germans (or the Japanese in the case of *Rising Sun*), the *emotional WWII* adds personal legitimacy to fighting the Germans.

WWII of Subjects

Most of the games are introduced through three stages of categorization. Two are the ones discussed above: *historical* and *emotional*. Mission briefings constitute a third stage and prepare the player for the game. Here is how she may experience the mission briefing for the first mission ‘Lighting the Torch’ of *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* (2015, Inc. 2002):

From a perspective that makes me see the hands as ‘mine’ I see them receive and open a secret letter while a male voice says, “you’ve been assigned for a mission few would qualify for” (see Figure 5). Later and from the centre of a room I see maps and slides shown on a canvas while a mission is explained. The male voice introduces the briefing by “Lieutenant Powell, I’m Colonel Hargrove”.

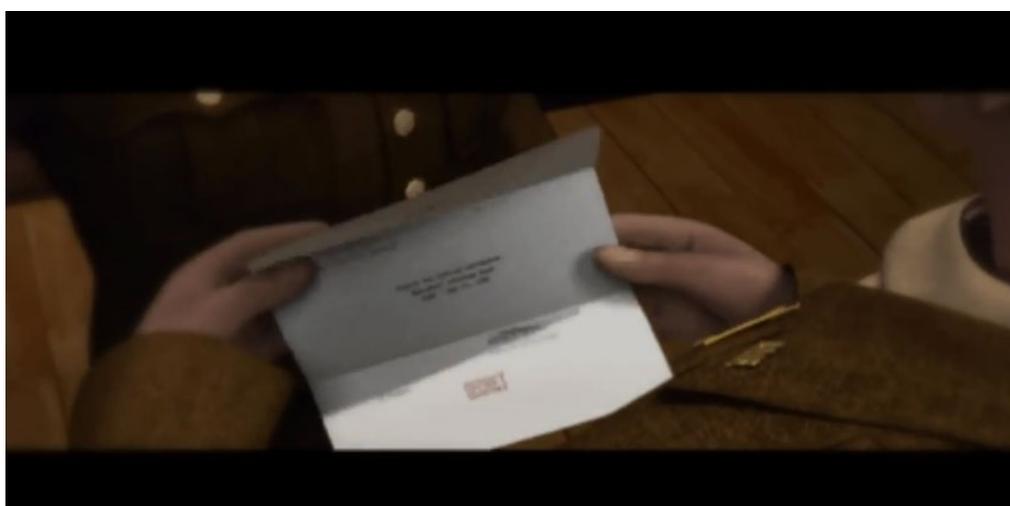


Figure 5: *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* (2015, Inc. 2002), ‘Lighting the Torch’, introductory video. © Electronic Arts.

The introductory video offered the player the position of a distant spectator of a *historical WWII*, and the personal presentation invited her to get emotionally involved by caring for the game character, the latter being directly addressed as “you” in the mission briefings. At the same time, the situation becomes blurred as to whether the character on the screen (“Lieutenant Powell”) or the player sitting in front of the monitor is addressed. This blurring unfolds through the almost complete merging of the character’s and the player/viewer’s points of view. The player is invited to feel (almost) addressed by Colonel Hargrove. The duality of player and role, which all theorists of play have emphasized (e.g., Huizinga 1971; Winnicot 2005), is thus introduced.

In the mission briefings, the character—and the player—are given orders by a superior military person. The player is thus invited to take the position of a subject. She is subjected to the officer’s commands, which at the same time subjugate her and grant her agency. For the first time in the game she is addressed as a subject involved in the unfolding events. For this reason, we identify this categorization as a *WWII of subjects*.

The objects shown at this point in the game are typically maps, flags, military and national symbols, pin-up girls, guns, radios, headphones, telephones, cigars,

compasses, and so forth. (cf. Figure 4 and Figure 7), all recognizably similar to the style of the introductory videos (cf. Figure 6). The media, quality, genre and style of the information the player receives in the mission briefings, also point back to the introductory videos: radio-transmitted voices, crumpled maps, and so on. These “references to the overarching conflict as a closed event, albeit brief, provide an historical basis for the ensuing missions and incorporate the individual game’s forthcoming play within a genuine past occurrence” (Gish 2010, p. 170). As Salvati and Bullinger (2013) point out referring to the *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty* series, such visuals and sounds indicate a continuation of the *historical WWII*, even though the player is now offered to participate differently.

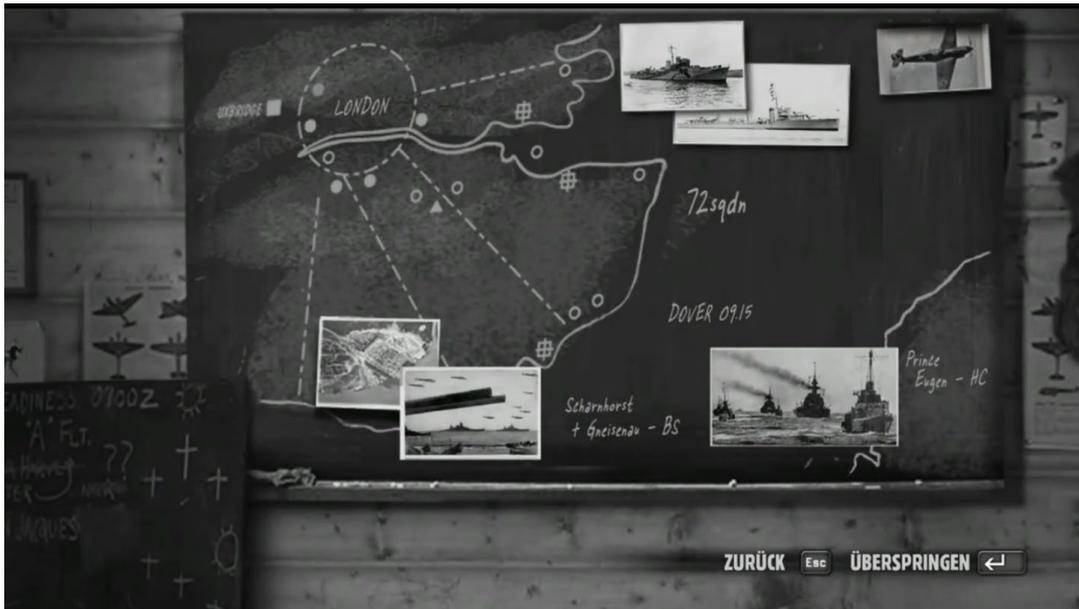


Figure 6: *Heroes Over Europe* (Transmission Games 2009), mission briefing.
© Ubisoft.



Figure 7: *Sudden Strike* (Fireglow Games 2000), Allied Campaign, tutorial mission briefing. © CDV Software Entertainment.

Thus, the *WWII of subjects* functions as a bridge from the non-playing to the playing part of the game. Furthermore, the tension between being interpellated as an active subject and the inability to interfere actively with the course of the game, leads the player to expect an imminent dissolution of this tension, probably by providing the player with this ability.

The Sequence of WWII Categorizations in the Non-Playing Part

The flow diagram below (Figure 8) illustrates how the player in the non-playing part of the game generally moves through a sequence of the three categorizations of WWII discussed. *Emotional WWII* is bracketed in the figure because some strategy games move directly from *historical WWII* in the introductory videos to the *WWII of subjects* in the mission briefings. The diagram displays the sequence of the narrative, i.e., the way in which the categorizations are ordered in the story told in the non-playing part. This differs from the narrated sequence, which is the order in which they appear on the screen.

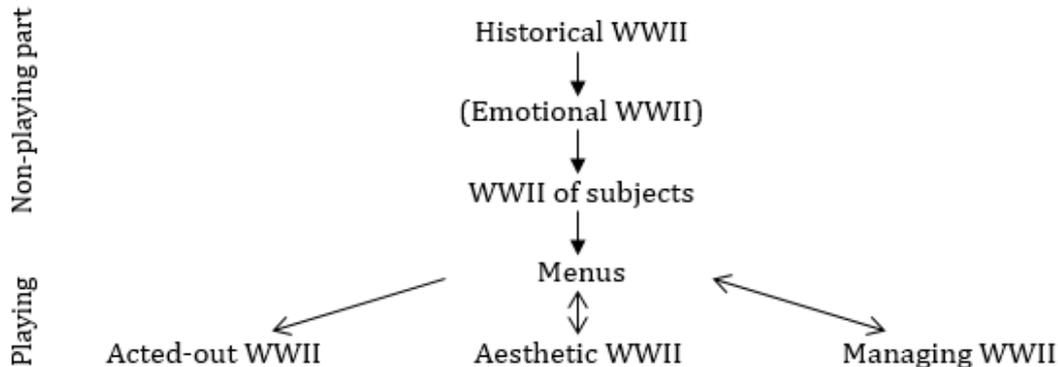


Figure 8: Sequences of WWII categorizations throughout a game.

The sequence through which the categorizations of WWII are presented one after the other, provides the player with cues to solve the problem of categorization and thus to accomplish the game. It offers the player a guide through the (non-playing part of the) game. First, the player is offered a position at a safe distance from which they can observe war at second hand. At this point the player is not encouraged to do more than sympathize with the morally preferable side. Second, they are introduced to a named person and now invited to care for a person from the morally preferred side. Third, the player is addressed as a subject actively involved in military activities.

In their sequential order, the categorizations work as practical tools for the stepwise interactive accomplishment of the development of the (non-playing part of the) game. The sequence of categorizations gently guides the player through three stages from a distant spectator's perspective to close involvement with the war. Hess (2007) discusses a similar logic of player involvement in *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun* (EA Los Angeles 2003), albeit with some variation in the sequence of categorizations. In this case, the categorization as *historical WWII* is still achieved mainly in and through the

non-playing parts (newsreel images and interviews with veterans), but follows upon the levels just played. Aside from this slight variation, however, Hess also shows how historical narrative and gameplay are bridged by the main character's personal narrative, adding personal to patriotic legitimacy for the fighting and creating a double moral obligation to fight back against the aggressors.

Playing Part of the Game

The playing parts of all games start with a menu. Here, the player can select a mission and, depending on the genre, configure her aircraft and pilot, decide on the industries, weapons and infrastructures to prioritize, or similar. Menus present knobs, slides, buttons, etc. that seem to be made of metal or wood, or sited on instruments resembling objects presented in the non-playing part of the game (Figure 9). Thereby, the menus create a visual continuity throughout the game, reminding the player that the categorizations introduced through the non-playing part of the game are still partially in place.



Figure 9: Medal of Honor: Allied Assault (2015, Inc. 2002), menu. © Electronic Arts.

Acting-Out WWII – First Person Shooters

Our task is to attack a church. The others start running. I run after them. They go in various directions. Explosions. Shouting and growling all around me. I'm hit, my vision is blurring. I stumble down a slope. All is grey. Gunshots. My vision is restoring. I look around. More gunshots, shouting: "Back, Back!". A soldier falls to the ground next to me. I rush back. (*Red Orchestra 2: Heroes of Stalingrad* [Tripwire Interactive 2011], game opening.)

After the game has loaded, the player of an FPS finds themselves in the here-and-now of the heat of action of WWII. The *historical WWII* sets the moral order of the game narrative, the *emotional WWII* provides the reasons for going to war, and the *WWII of subjects* encourages the player to take upon himself the role of a military person. Now, in the FPS's playing part, the larger or smaller distances from the course of events and degrees of involvement of the player in the non-playing parts have collapsed entirely. He is in the midst of the videogame WWII, a hectic, feverish place under continuous threat of bodily harm. This is the WWII FPS's answer to the player's question of "what is this?"

Bender (2010) notes that in FPSs, soldiers most often act from an inferior position. They are left to themselves with no one to turn to, and in this situation, the only thing left to do is to act. In the confusing scenes of WWII FPSs, the player may not know exactly what to do, but the continuous attacks create a pressure to do something, to move on. What the avatar in FPSs can do is centred on the armed human body: walk, run, jump, turn, climb, hide, flee, load and change weapons, target, shoot, bomb, and die (cf. Deterding 2008). An urgent pressure to act is almost permanent in the playing parts of FPSs. There is no time to plan, think about or dwell on strategy or logics of war, or in other ways consider and reflect upon events or experiences (cf. Hess 2007). The categorization of WWII thus accomplished is a WWII of the body, of actions. Or as Allison (2010, p. 192) puts it "the World War II game attempts to be a visceral immersion in the activity of history". In the words of Gish (2010, p. 172), "the narrative of historical progress during game play is presented from a first-person perspective, experienced through a realistic temporality, and participated with interactively". We label it *acting-out WWII*.

The moral economy in the *acting-out WWII* is not about sympathizing or antipathizing as in *historical* and *emotional WWII*, it is about *acting*. The morality of *historical WWII* of differentiating between good and evil, in *acting-out WWII* is replaced by an economy of performance. Actions must be executed and the values of *acting-out WWII* are measured in terms of success and failure of action. Tactics are developed through drilling and through continuously repeating missions until excellence is achieved (cf. Reeves, Brown, and Laurier 2009).

Because the actions of the avatar/player are so much in focus in the playing parts of WWII FPSs, the answer to the question "what is this?" overlaps with the answer to "how can I take part?" The player can take part by acting (virtually) bodily through the avatar in a WWII that is hectic, intense and threatening. The missing time to consider what is going on is not simply a lack, it is defining for the moral order of *acting-out WWII*. A good player/soldier does not hesitate to consider what they do, and they do not dwell on his emotional experiences.

These findings square nicely with Rejack's (2007) diagnosis that (in particular shooter) games, in their playing parts, are rather limited in their ability to realistically model human interaction, and thus to create sympathy for the characters. Also resonating with our findings concerning *historical* and *emotional WWII*, he then points out that it is other "elements [that] contribute to the game's narrative and increase the potential for the player to engage with the history being explored" (p. 415). Significantly, these elements are found in the *non-playing parts*, specifically in the cut-scenes between levels and the extra materials included with the game.

The Aesthetic WWII – Flight Simulation games



Figure 10: *Birds of Steel* (Gaijin Entertainment 2012), 'Battle of the Santa Cruz', game opening. © Konami.

I am alone in the cockpit of a small aircraft. In front of me are an instrument panel and a pair of leather gloves holding the control column (Figure 10). The gloves are in strong colours and extreme detail, as are the instruments and nuts and bolts of the aircraft cockpit. With the soft sound of the rotating propeller filling the space, I let the aircraft roll down the runway ahead of me. Shortly after, I float in the large, open and tranquil space of a beautiful sunny sky. The moving shadows of the cockpit's metal frame stroke across the aircraft, while bolts and instruments gleam in the changing angles of the light (*Birds of Steel* [Gaijin Entertainment 2012], Battle of the Santa Cruz, game opening).

What the player sees on her screen when entering the playing part of FSs is an artfully composed scene. In *Birds of Steel* (Gaijin Entertainment 2012), the edges of the image are smoothly faded, like a framed picture. The game answers the player's question of "what is this?" with well-composed pictures, hyper-realistic renderings of the artefacts, a seeming obsession with details and an altogether high degree of aestheticized imagery. WWII is categorized as an *aesthetic WWII*. The prior non-playing steps she has gone through have prepared the player for a mission and a battle to complete the mission. Now she finds herself in an environment that is above all aesthetically oriented in the sense of offering pleasant experiences purely for the sake of their pleasure and beauty. Whenever the aircraft is directed slightly southwards, the sun appears in the picture, most often at the margins where rays shine benignly across the 'airscape'.

When hit, aircrafts fall to the ground burning in beautiful yellow and orange nuances. This "carnavalesque death" (Kingsepp 2007) is brought to its extreme in *IL-2 Sturmovik*:

Wings of Prey (Gaijin Entertainment 2009). Whenever the player has hit another plane, a small window opens showing the burning aircraft on its long descent to the ground, allowing the player to move on while still enjoying the vision of the burning aircraft she just destroyed (Figure 11).



Figure 11: IL-2 Sturmovik: Wings of Prey (Gaijin Entertainment 2009). © 505 Games.

The aestheticized imagery suggests an answer to the player's question "how can I take part?" by inviting her to pay attention to the material character of the metal, the wood, the leather, etc. It invites—maybe even seduces—the player to feel (virtually) corporeally intimate with these materials, while immersed in the clear blue sky and the soft sound of the propeller. The game suggests the player takes part by relaxing and feeling good. She is addressed by the game as someone enjoying herself and paying attention to her own experiences of perceptual aesthetic pleasure.

There are also periods of *acting-out WWII* in FSs, but contrary to FPSs these are not permanent, but often interrupted by longer periods of smooth calmness.¹⁰ While the periods of *acting-out* require the player to forget herself and to direct her attention fully to the activities in the game, the aesthetic periods of FSs invite the player to submit herself to the experiences of the game—to 'take in', so to say, rather than 'act out'. Jenkins (2015) describes what he calls the "economy" between these two poles as follows:

[P]layers expect realism from games, to encourage immersion into the game-action, predictability in response, and identification with characters. However, they want spectacular feats, astounding scenes, and breathtaking visuals. (p. 15)

WWII FSs offer ample experiences of the latter kind.

Managing WWII – Strategy Games

The country's industrial production is running and demands further raw materials, diplomatic relations insist on meetings and agreements, intelligence must be organized, governmental decisions are urgently needed and continuous research and education must be ensured, while the necessity to mobilize the military is pressing and unbroken recruitment must be guaranteed along with ongoing production of consumer goods and the control of political developments. These processes are interdependent, and changes in one area will change developments in others. All this while the country is under increasing threat (*Hearts of Iron 2* [Paradox Entertainment 2005], game opening).

This plethora of needs and demands presents itself as the answer to the player's question "what is this?". It suggests it to be a WWII in urgent need of organisation and management, in military as well as in all manner of other societal terms. In Apperley's (2006) words, players of SGs are urged to mobilize "a constant engagement with overwhelming amounts of information" (p. 14). Menus play a crucial role in the playing part of SGs, providing the player with a vast range of parameters to regulate. They are the main tools through which the game is played. The player needs to keep a cool head to consider the effects of regulating parameters. Deterding (2008) gets to the heart of the matter when describing SGs:

You stare at the maps. You reason, calculate. You relocate units, hesitate, pull back again. You speculate, exchange ideas and congratulate one another on the clever move. You wait for new data on the screen about enemy movements and about the effects of your decisions. (p. 108, our translation)

Compared to the rather (virtually) bodily acts of FPSs and the aesthetic undertakings of FSs, SGs emphasize cognitive tasks. The degree to which the game offers the player resources to actually control the tasks they encounter in SGs vary with the temporal structures of SGs. The pressure on action is higher in conventional real-time SGs (such as *Company of Heroes*) than in a grand strategy game (such as *Hearts of Iron*) wherein the player has more control over the temporal flow of the game and of their actions and decisions.

Taking part in a WWII of multiple events and variables that are to be managed, suggests that the player maintains an overview over war activities and thus keeps a distant relation to the acts of combat. When the player issues orders to his troops in *Sudden Strike* (Fireglow Games 2000), a voice announces, "ready to attack", "let's go", and the like as verbal expressions of his adjustments. Because these utterances are bound to the player's adjustments, they may interpret them as responses to their own (or their avatar's) commands, addressing soldiers, pilots and troops, etc. The suggestion is that they act from a superior position (cf. Deterding, 2008). The replies of the troops to orders often sound as if communicated through the radio, emphasizing not only the hierarchical but also a physical distance between the player giving the orders and the units carrying them out.

The distant relation to acts of combat is also suggested graphically. In general, strategy WWII games are graphically less exciting than FPSs and FSs. Vehicles are seen from far above, infantry troops are stylized, and the resolution and colour palette reduced (cf. Figure 12). The player may take these visual components to indicate that this WWII

is not about experiencing details and the perceptual pleasure of individual units, landscapes or events, as in FSs. Rather, it is about the cool overview and rationality of the task at hand. These various aspects answer the player's question of "how can I take part?" with "manage WWII, take the perspective of a general, keep a distanced overview and keep your mind cool".



Figure 12: Sudden Strike (Fireglow Games 2000), Allied Campaign, tutorial mission.
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Recurrent Categorizations of WWII

In this section we turn to two categorizations of WWII that are accomplished throughout both the playing and the non-playing parts of the games, and very similarly in all three genres (for graphical clarity these are not included in Figure 8).

Technological WWII

In a seemingly endless, forward-moving stream, tanks, planes and troops rush ahead scene after scene. The mechanical sound of soldiers marching in columns blends into the rumble of the passing airplane turbines in a seamless continuity of humans and machines (*Call of Duty 2* [Infinity Ward 2005], Moscow 1941, introductory video).

Similar to the machinic character of WWII conveyed by the *Call of Duty 2* (Infinity Ward 2005) introductory video, all the games in our sample have a strong focus on technological aspects of warfare from the beginning. *Blitzkrieg* (Nival Interactive 2003) foreshadows technology with its close-up imagery of steelworks and the forging of metal (Figure 13). In FSs boats and planes are destroyed, not pilots and sailors. Even in FPSs and SGs, in which human figures are killed, the focus is not on the killed human, but the reduction in the number of opponents and on enemy casualties as repositories for weapons and ammunitions that can be picked up and used by the player-character. In these various ways, the games draw the attention of the players

to technology and suggest a *technological WWII* to be the answer to the problem of categorization.



Figure 13: Blitzkrieg (Nival Interactive 2003), introductory video.

© CDV Software Entertainment.

Technological WWII is often accomplished in parallel with other categorizations. Even when a diary excerpt is in focus and providing cues for the categorization of *emotional WWII* in *Call of Duty 2* (Infinity Ward 2005) (Figure 4), weapons, ammunition and navigational tools are littered around the diary page, providing cues for categorizing *WWII* as *technological*. Similarly, as discussed above, the categorization of *aesthetic WWII* is often accomplished through drawing attention to visual and acoustic details of weaponry, vehicles and other technologies. The aesthetics introduced through representations of equipment and other artefacts in the playing parts, as well as the documentary-style video footage in the introductory parts, thus reinforce the categorization of *historical WWII* (cf. Salvati and Bullinger 2013).

Already the attention on enemy casualties as technological repositories provides the player with an answer to the question of “how can I participate?” Other participation cues are provided. In the FS *Birds of Steel* (Gaijin Entertainment 2012), more than one hundred aircraft are available to choose from, and in strategy games the decision as to which units to deploy must often be taken on the basis of their technical capabilities. The excess availability of technological artefacts and the necessity of engaging with these in order to progress with the game, calls upon players to participate in the game as knowledgeable about the technical details of WWII warfare: the speed of vehicles, the handling and firing rate of weapons, their firing range and power, how many hits specific units can take, about the altitude of aircrafts and colourings which fit the war practice, and so forth. Similar to *historical WWII*, *technological WWII* makes available an extra layer to the player, to engage with military technology not only within, but also beyond the game, in internet communities and the like. Indeed, representations of technological artefacts in the games are often referred to in players’ discussions of the games’ historical merits, as Salvati and Bullinger (2013), among others, report.

Heroic WWII

You have been assigned to a mission few would qualify for... A mission only few would survive. (*Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* [2015, Inc. 2002], 'Lighting the Torch', introductory video)

Better to fight for something than live for nothing. (*Call of Duty* [Infinity Ward 2003], 'Pathfinder', end of mission [quote of General George S. Patton])

You have all it takes to become a real ace. (*Birds of Steel* [Gaijin Entertainment 2012], end of tutorial mission)

Excellent job, men. (*Company of Heroes* [Relic Entertainment 2006], 'Omaha Beach', end of mission)

Utterances like the ones above are often heard in WWII games. Introductions inform the player about the difficulty of missions and the superior skill of the soldiers and pilots chosen to complete the missions. Pointing to the activity as one "only few would survive" turns whole missions into a test of the individual. During the playing parts of the games the player is invited to experience herself as a hero. In *Company of Heroes* (Relic Entertainment 2006), badges are gained for accomplishing additional mission goals. In FSs, battles are not concluded with relief over the end of suffering, but by awarding the pilot a trophy or advancing his rank. "The eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and prayers of liberty loving people everywhere march with you" (*Medal of Honor: Allied Assault*, 2015, Inc. 2002). This quote of President Eisenhower paints an image of the individual visible to the whole world and illustrates particularly well how the games elevate soldiers, pilots and players to the dimension of heroes through recognition from a distance.

And so the games answer the player's question of "what is this?" by proposing the categorization of the war as a *heroic WWII*. It comes with a moral obligation—and pleasure—to participate by winning the admiration of (virtual) others. Power (2007) notes that: "Games [...] can provide a (heroic) experience of winning a war single-handedly" (p. 268). *Heroic WWII* is also categorized by way of continuous glorious background music and encourages the player to feel good about her past achievements.

The categorization of *heroic WWII* is closely linked to other categorizations of WWII, as has also been pointed out by Hess (2007) when he describes the intertwining of heroism, historical accuracy, and personal involvement in *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun* (EA Los Angeles 2003). The *emotional WWII* categorization of soldiers or pilots as vulnerable and of high morality, forms a ground for the categorization of *heroic WWII*. *Heroic WWII* furthermore supports *acting-out WWII*, categorizing WWII as being about achievement and victory.

Conclusion: The Complex Moral Orders of Videogame War

The aim of this paper was to inquire how WWII is categorized in and through videogames as an accomplishment of players and games. We did so by looking at which participation cues the games provide for the player to answer the questions "what WWII is this?" and "how can I participate?". Our analysis pointed to eight different

categorizations of WWII in our sample of WWII FPSs, FSs and SGs: *Historical WWII*, *emotional WWII*, *WWII of subjects*, *acting-out WWII*, *aesthetic WWII*, *managing WWII*, *technological WWII*, and *heroic WWII*. As discussed throughout the paper, several aspects of these categorizations have already been identified in the literature as characteristics of WWII games and of wargames more generally. Similar to the works of Gish (2010) and Salvati and Bullinger (2013), the contribution of this paper has been to identify where cues for these categorizations appear in the games and how the categorizations are accomplished through imagery, sound, dialogue, menus, etc. While we have not analysed specific ludic structures in detail (mainly owing to constraints of space), the concept of ‘genre’ used here combines both narrative and ludic conventions. The conventional game rules of FPSs, for example, play a large part in accomplishing what we have termed *acting-out WWII*, even if they do not do so by themselves. We are confident that the framework proposed here will lend itself to further, more detailed analyses of ludic structures alongside narrative elements. The specification of where and how particular categorizations of WWII are accomplished in and through WWII games provides grounds for discussing design solutions at particular points in the games rather than accepting or rejecting these games *in toto*, due to their general depiction of WWII. Moreover, our analysis has shown that many different moral orders are at play in WWII games that cannot be easily subsumed under a single general rubric such as ‘historical accuracy’ or ‘military logic’ etc.

Discussions of specific design solutions and thus of specific cues for categorizations of WWII in the games are important because they relate to moral judgements about them. Each different categorization of WWII described in this paper implies a different moral order of engagement with WWII in the videogame. The appropriate way of participating in *historical WWII* is as a distant observer, deciding upon the truth or falsity of representations. In *emotional WWII* players are supposed to mobilize care and empathy for a particular person. The *WWII of subjects* expects of the player (and/or the role he plays) to take military tasks upon himself. In *acting-out WWII*, a good player is one who efficiently executes given tasks without further reflection, and who focuses on tactics, not on strategy. Appropriate participation in *aesthetic WWII* requires appreciation for the beauty of destruction and engagement in one’s own individual pleasure of immersion. *Managed WWII* requires rational, distant and composed involvement. Finally, *technological WWII* urges the player to focus on the technical, non-human aspects of war, while *heroic WWII* expects players to focus on their own achievements and those of others. These results are helpful as resources in the current discussions of the ethics of computer games (e.g., Sicart 2009; Zagal 2012; Pötzsch 2017), to look in more detail at how we would like players to engage with WWII in and through games, or, in Pötzsch’s (2017) terms, how we would want players’ experiences of war (games) to be “filtered”.

This paper has emphasized the importance of the sequentiality of categorizations of WWII within a game for such discussions, and thus of the moral orders of games. Our analysis has pointed out that the categorizations of WWII suggested by the games, do not simply convey several different ideas of WWII, nor ideas about moral orders. These are not only ideas about WWII, but are also *practical tools* for progressing in the game. We showed how the cues provided by the games help players eventually accept orders from a military officer to carry out armed acts, by gently leading the player through a specific sequence of categorizations of WWII. *Historical WWII*, *emotional WWII*, and *WWII of subjects* provide important resources for the activity of play. They establish a

moral order and personal legitimization, and offer the player a position as a subject who is morally prepared for the military and violent activities in the playing parts. The combination of *aesthetic WWII* and *technological WWII* also creates what Kingsepp (2007) calls the “extremely clean and sanitized media representations” of death (p. 371). The specific sequential combination of different categorizations of WWII draws the attention of the players away from human victims. Together, the categorization of WWII in the computer games makes up a specific sequence that offers the player cues as to how to accomplish the acts of the game smoothly. Allison (2010, p. 190) describes beautifully how action is the core of WWII FPS and even in these games, “the meaning *is* the action”. Comparing WWII FPS with WWII movies, she notes that “[p]roducing a sixteen-hour film of pure combat would be a piece of avant-garde cinema, not a popular narrative film, but this is exactly what a combat video game aims to do” (p. 190). As we mentioned above, Rejack (2007) points out a structural dilemma in WWII shooters. In their playing parts, their ability to achieve authenticity and sympathy is severely limited, providing a need for constant negotiation between gameplay on the one hand and authenticity and sympathy on the other. Our analysis has shown something different. Even though *acting-out WWII* is dominating in WWII FPSs, their accomplishment also depends on the categorizations in the non-playing parts of FPSs. By sequencing the categorizations over the playing and non-playing parts, they achieve the negotiation of the different moral orders involved. These *historical*, *emotional*, and *subjective* categorizations of WWII are crucially preparing for and framing *acting-out WWII*. Also, the other genres analyzed offered particular sequences of cues for specific and varying categorizations of WWII. The games do not only offer cues for multiple different ideas and categories of WWII and their accompanying narrative and moral orders. Due to the sequential arrangement of these cues, the categorizations also provide players with cues as to how to practically accomplish the game. The cues do not only suggest ideas about WWII, they also shape how the game is played and experienced.

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Notes

- ¹ Julian Meyer has contributed to parts of the analyses and co-authored previous versions of this text. We gratefully acknowledge his contribution.
- ² For the analysis of games, we have modified membership categorization analysis to apply to the categorization of WWII. Usually, membership categorization analysis is only applied to analyze the categorizations of humans.
- ³ Modding means that players create new levels or import new weapons into an existing videogame. With regards to WWII mods, Crabtree describes this practice “as a significant opportunity for players to act in a creative and fertile space for the imagining of war” (Crabtree 2013, p. 205).
- ⁴ The most prominent example is the online shooter *America’s Army* (MOVES Institute 2002) designed with and published by the US Army.
- ⁵ Sales figures available online are not directly comparable, just as their reliability is questionable, their source being most often commercial. For this reason, they only constitute one of our means of identifying relevant titles for analysis.
- ⁶ These participation cues were found in all genres. Yet, for the purpose of clarity, we present the categorizations in relation to the genres in which they most often appeared, i.e., the preferred categorizations.
- ⁷ An exception is provided by the first campaign of *Red Orchestra 2*. Here, the player starts as a German soldier who has the task of invading the Soviet Union to end the communist plague that “threatens all of Europe” (*Red Orchestra 2* [Tripwire Interactive 2011], German Campaign introductory video). As in the other FPS’s historical narrative, the German Army is described as very well-equipped and very well-trained and therefore superior to their enemies. The longer the campaign as well as the battle of Stalingrad last, the more the German soldiers are described as disillusioned in order to illustrate their own strength. At the point where the German Army has conquered most parts of the city, the German Campaign ends and the Soviet Campaign starts. Now the player has to fight against the Germans and “will remind every single one of them that they are going to die trying to take Stalingrad” (*Red Orchestra 2* [Tripwire Interactive 2011], Soviet Campaign introductory video). And here we are back to the classical narration of WWII FPS.

- ⁸ Incidentally, Rejack (2007) reports on the very interesting case of the History Channel documentary *Dogfights*, which uses a reverse version of this technique. Here, classical techniques of documentary historiography (interview and archival footage) supplement the more immediate visual experience provided by computer graphics.
- ⁹ Rejack (2007) also discusses a very interesting example from the game's unlockable extra materials, which fuse computer graphics and historical pictures of the very spot where (in-game) the main character's friend is killed in the same image. Although we have found nothing immediately similar in our sample, this is a very neat device intertwining *historical* and *emotional WWII*. More relevant to our argument here is the placing of this device in the game's extra features, which must be unlocked and can therefore only be accessed after playing the entire game. This seems to indicate that the sequencing of the categorizations is indeed necessary to get players 'into the game' in the first place.
- ¹⁰ See, however, Hess (2013, p. 352) who describes similar alternations between what we have termed *acting-out* and *aesthetic WWII* in *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun* (EA Los Angeles 2003).