

<http://www.eludamos.org>

---

**Digital Historicism: Archival Footage, Digital Interface, and Historiographic  
Effects in *Call of Duty: World at War***

Jaimie Baron

*Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture.* 2010; 4 (2), p. 303-314

---

# Digital Historicism: Archival Footage, Digital Interface, and Historiographic Effects in *Call of Duty: World at War*

JAIMIE BARON

Videogames are defined to a large extent by their interactivity, and historical videogames offer the promise of a new relationship between the reader of history and the account of an historical event. Such games have the potential to transform the “reader” of history into the active “user” or even “maker” of history. Indeed, the very concept of historical videogames implies that the user may play an active part in the construction of historical narratives and, thereby, in the implications of these historical events for the present. In this paper, I examine the appropriation of indexical archival footage into the videogame *Call of Duty: World at War* (Activision, 2008) and the historiographic effects of this appropriation. I argue that the particular ways in which documentary archival footage is used in this game have a powerful potential to shape how users experience and think about the past events represented. Indeed, the appropriation of indexical archival footage into any videogame may produce in the user a phenomenological experience of what Vivian Sobchack (2006, p. 269) refers to as “the charge of the real” or a “documentary consciousness charged with a sense of the world, existence, bodily mortification and mortality, and all of the rest of the real that is in excess of fiction.” We recognize and experience these images as more “real” than the rest of the game. At the same time, however, the formal strategies deployed “around” the archival footage actively shape and limit the historical meanings that may be attributed to this footage, producing a particular, ideologically charged version of the past as if it were the only possible account. Indeed, I argue that while *Call of Duty* is at the cutting edge of game design, its use of archival footage imports and reinforces a conservative and even reactionary historiographic model into the emergent genre of digital history, or what I refer to here as “digital historicism.” However, through an analysis of the database narrative *Tracing the Decay of Fiction: Encounters with a Film by Pat O’Neill* (O’Neill, Comella, and Kang, 2002), I also suggest that other models of digital historicism are emerging to challenge this static, teleological paradigm.

## The Archive Effect, Historical Inevitability, and the Rhythm of War

*Call of Duty: World at War* (henceforth referred to as *CoD*) is a first-person shooter videogame set in World War II. The user is positioned as either an American or Russian soldier, and each level is a battle against either the Nazis or the Japanese. One of the most striking and unusual aspects of the game is the incorporation of indexical archival footage from World War II into its otherwise iconic, animated digital interface. The appearance of indexical documentary images of historical figures like Adolph Hitler and Emperor Hirohito, of planes dropping bombs on their targets, and of anonymous individuals being executed within the context of a game that employs

realistic but still clearly non-indexical imagery has a powerful effect. It produces a sense that the “real” has suddenly exceeded the “realism” of the rest of the game as the user is confronted with images of actual bodies, living, dying, and dead, rather than just simulations thereof.

These archival images and sounds, however, appear only in the cut-scenes that tie the different levels of the game together into a narrative of World War II. Indeed, the cut-scenes and the archival footage within them are positioned as entirely outside the interactive gameplay. During gameplay, the user is given a first-person point of view through which her avatar’s arms and weapons are visible. The player’s avatar can be made to run, jump, climb, hide, shoot, and so on. However, when it comes to the construction of an historical narrative, the player’s agency is strictly excluded. The user encounters cut-scenes containing archival footage at the beginning of each new level, but they occur in a strictly linear order, one historical event represented after the next, level by level. Moreover, the meanings of the archival footage are tightly circumscribed by the contexts in which the footage is placed. Indeed, *CoD* reasserts the traditional linear, singular, and teleological conception of history within a digital interface even as it introduces interactivity into the spaces “around” this history.

The presence of archival footage in the game produces what I call “the archive effect,” an experience of the viewer that certain elements of a given text are “archival.” This experience is generated through the text’s production of what I call “temporal disparity” and “intentional disparity.” Temporal disparity is produced through the viewer/user’s phenomenological experience of a difference between the “then” of the original production of the archival footage and the “now” of the production of the text that incorporates this footage. For instance, when we see a photographic image – or, at least, an image that was originally photographic – of Hitler in *CoD*, we are likely both to recognize Hitler and to be aware that he died long before the game was produced. Thus, the passage of real, historical time is made tangible through the incorporation of Hitler’s photographic image into the game. Intentional disparity, by contrast, is produced through the viewer/user’s phenomenological experience of a difference between what we read as the original intended purpose of the footage and its later actual use. For instance, an indexical image of two men being executed by gunshot during World War II is unlikely to have been made for the contemporary game we are playing. The experiences of temporal disparity and intentional disparity often occur in tandem with one another, and the production of the archive effect results in a sense that the footage we are seeing is more “real” and “authentic” because it comes from another context, whether temporal, intentional, or both. At the same time, however, archival images are inevitably unruly and polysemic, their particular meanings dependent upon the contexts in which they appear. Moreover, if a given viewer/user does not experience the archive effect then it does not occur and the “archival footage” is not constituted – for this viewer or user – as such.

Temporal disparity plays an important part in the experience of playing *CoD*. Most of the imagery in *CoD* in both cut-scenes and gameplay consists of iconic, animated representations rather than indexical, photographic ones. For instance, during the gameplay the user’s comrades and enemies and the space within which the user fights are all rendered graphically rather than photographically. Moreover, in the cut-scenes, most of the images of tanks, guns, soldiers, and so on, are also graphic

rather than photographic. The crucial exception is the archival footage from World War II included only in the cut-scenes. We read these images as sounds and images produced in a previous era, sounds and images that the game designers did not create for the game but, rather, appropriated. The experience of a temporal disparity between the “then” of production of the World War II footage and the “now” of the 2008 production of the videogame authenticates the game’s narrative and gives it the authority of both the “real” and the “past.” At the same time, the use of indexical archival footage in the cut-scenes also results in a powerful sense of intentional disparity, an awareness that “real” historical footage ostensibly intended as a documentary record to be used in nonfiction historical representations has been introduced into an “unreal” although highly “realistic” videogame.

The sudden appearance of indexical images within an iconic videogame may be experienced by the user as a disruption of the “world” of the videogame. Because of this, theorist Will Brooker (2009, pp.125-126) has noted, the use of cinematic, live-action footage in videogames has become a rarity when once it was common. He writes:

Games from the mid-90s onwards attempted to incorporate this “cinematic” sense in a range of ways.... Ironically, this incorporation of high-quality, “filmic” visuals tended to disrupt the player’s immersion in the diegesis, breaking the flow between cut-scene and gameplay. Cut-scenes therefore improved, paradoxically, by becoming less smooth and polished; bridging scenes were increasingly created “in-engine,” created on the fly by the console, with no discrepancy in visual quality.

Thus, the inclusion of indexical archival footage in *CoD* is a daring challenge to the trend away from using filmic images in videogames. Moreover, the game’s use of documentary footage of World War II does generate both a gap between the iconic and indexical imagery and between the representation of the fictionalized world of the videogame and of the historical or “real” world. As a result, the archival footage simultaneously “authenticates” the game’s historical status through the production of the archive effect and the “charge of the real” and undermines the user’s immersion in the narrative world of the game.

Indeed, the danger of disrupting the user’s involvement in the game is likely part of the reason that the archival footage in *CoD* appears only in the cut-scenes. At the same time, however, the cut-scenes are the parts of the game in which the historical narrative is most clearly established, and the archival footage serves to bolster this narrative. As videogame theorist Daniel Punday (2004, p. 83) points out, cut-scenes reveal the tension between narrative and interactivity in videogames. He writes:

The contrasting appeals of the interactive elements of a text and its individual lexias [brief narratives]...is [sic] one of the fundamental tensions within interactive narrative. In particular, textual interactivity – the fact that the players may do one of several things at particular junctures within the game – seems naturally at odds with a sense of narrative inevitability or teleology.... The games that are the most open-ended and allow for the widest range of possible strategies tend to have the least narrative content.

While the user of *CoD* can make choices within the gameplay, the narrative is closed rather than open-ended. During the gameplay, the user can interact with and affect what is onscreen, but at no time can she affect the outcome of the overarching historical narrative. Indeed, Punday (2004, p. 87) further suggests that moments of interactivity are, in fact, peripheral to narrative inevitability or teleology. He writes that the videogame

creates a predetermined story that it pauses at certain moments in order to hail the player into an active role. What the player does at this point has no effect on the outcome of the story, but rather functions as an aside in which emotional involvement is heightened. Essential to enjoying the play in these games is knowing that eventually the game will return to a predetermined narrative teleology.

This structure also applies to *CoD* in which the user must follow a predetermined historical script. Although the user must make certain choices within each level in order to accomplish specific tasks – for instance, kill the Japanese soldiers or the Nazis, get to the target destination on time – and can do so in a variety of ways, the narrative of the game is already solidly in place, and the cut-scenes, with their incorporation of indexical archival footage, serve to reinforce this set narrative within which the user may make her limited choices. The narrative established in the cut-scenes and the structures of the missions never change. The gameplay is simply a space in which the user becomes active and may succeed or fail in her mission but cannot actually change the course of the narrative – or of historical events. As a result, *CoD* offers an historical narrative of inevitability, a teleological version of the events of World War II.

Crucial to *CoD*'s teleological vision of the past, the archival footage – and its unruly potential for polysemy – is not allowed to interfere with the game's version of historical events, which may account for the intense way in which this indexical footage is presented. Within the cut-scenes, the archival footage is heavily edited and sutured within a sequence of animated graphics. The game uses the World War II footage only as brief, jarring signifiers of "reality" whose meaning is limited as much as possible by the images and sounds around it. Moreover, the pace of the cut-scenes is relentless, moving inexorably forward. Rather than simply appearing as a stream of archival images in the cut-scenes, the indexical shots are tightly woven into a complex structure of iconic elements including animated maps, planes, tanks and soldiers as well as onscreen text and voiceover. Indeed, the indexical archival images of explosions, executions, ruins, and so on sutured into an iconic space, move by so quickly that it is barely possible to ascribe to them a meaning except in a general form, a sense of "World War II" or a sudden, truncated emotional response: horror, anger, or pride.

For instance, the opening cut-scene begins with an animated and stylized map of Europe in which Nazism is represented as a swastika and a blood red stain spreading across Europe, over which we hear a repeated mass shout of "Sieg Heil!" Next, the "camera" zooms across Asia on the map to show a red sun labeled "Japan" and then the words "Territorial Expansion." Another blood-red stain pours across the East China Sea and sweeps over coastal China. Next, a group of animated airplanes zoom through the air. Then, suddenly, an archival moving image of Japanese Emperor Hirohito appears, followed by a montage of archival images of Japanese

soldiers marching under the Japanese flag, gunboats taking aim, airplanes flying in formation above Japanese flag, and then an explosion labeled “1937 Indochina.” This label remains onscreen as we are confronted with a close-up of an Asian man shooting a gun, then two men being executed by gunshots to the backs of their heads, a group of civilians falling into a mass grave surrounded by soldiers, and finally a low-angle close-up of an Asian man holding up the Japanese flag and screaming out a battle cry.

The “camera” then zooms backwards between two rows of animated trees and stops in front of a composite image of the White House, the US flag, and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt labeled “US Demands Withdrawal of Japanese Troops from Indochina. We then hear an archival sound recording of Roosevelt saying:

Members of the Senate and the House of Representatives, yesterday, December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941, a date which will live in infamy, the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the empire of Japan.

The “camera” then whips through rows of animated oil derricks with the label: “Japan Loses 90% Oil Supply Due to Embargo.” Next, animated Japanese airplanes zoom towards the camera in formation, dropping bombs onto the indexical moving image of Pearl Harbor being bombed. The “camera” then moves out to show that this moving image is part of the front page of a newspaper whose headline reads “Pearl Harbor Attacked.” Next, we see indexical images of Pearl Harbor being bombed from the point of view of a Japanese bomber plane followed by an indexical explosion, suddenly in color, and we witness American soldiers running around in the ruin amidst a variety of other explosions. After this, we see archival footage of Roosevelt reading the speech that we have been hearing, his voice reunited with his body. Immediately, indexical images of people reading newspapers about the US declaration of war appear followed by a label that reads, “War Production Drive.” We see indexical images of women working, a label that reads, “Military Manufacturing” followed by a brief animated sequence of airplanes being assembled labeled “Aviation Production.” Then animated arrows, airplane parts, and numbers appear over generic indexical images of war preparation. Animated tanks are assembled step by step. Next, indexical images of Americans marching, signing papers in order to join the military, raising their hands to swear in as soldiers, and being given physical examinations whiz by. Finally, an indexical image of a young man is isolated and transformed into an iconic, animated image labeled, “Private Miller.” He looks like an action figure and he is outfitted as a soldier through a series of quick steps just as the airplanes and tanks were assembled. The “camera” zooms into his face and the screen goes to white.

This barrage of sounds and images takes place in one minute and twenty-four seconds. Each of the archival images appears only for the briefest instant before it gives way to either another archival image or an animated image. I would argue that the speed of editing and the constant shifting back and forth from iconic animated images to indexical archival images serves to limit the potential meanings one might attribute to the otherwise unruly indexical image. Any contemplation of the archival footage is disallowed by the sheer speed at which the archival images and sounds – as well as all the other images and sounds – go by.

The overall rhythm of this sequence – and of the other cut-scenes – is that of a machine, of an army marching inexorably forward, or of a soldier performing military exercises, locking each piece of his weapon into place. This particular rhythm has both experiential and ideological consequences. Every element is so carefully controlled and orchestrated that the progression of sounds and images feels almost automatic. This is an archival montage set to the rhythm of war, but this approach to montage gives the user – now returned to the position of reader or viewer – little or no time to think, connect, or question. Indeed, the indexical images of actual human beings being executed at gunpoint or falling into mass graves serves only to startle before the sequence barrels on.

The relentless speed and progression of the cutscenes along with the overall structure of the game promote a sense that history is teleological and can happen – could have happened – only one way. Moreover, the visceral indexical images of violence in the game and its highly simplified conception of World War II serve primarily to legitimate the violence the user is meant to commit against the iconic Nazis and the Japanese during the gameplay. Indeed, not only the content but also the editing calls for a particular kind of embodied viewer response. Because these images are so truncated, they ultimately become part of a rhythm that is fundamentally militaristic: the music of weapons locking into place in preparation for battle. Thus, despite the fact that the user may make certain choices within the gameplay, the background of “history” and “the real” provided in the cut-scenes is coded as predetermined and inevitable, as having a single direction, a single narrative, and a single meaning.

### **From Reflex to Reflection: Tracing the Decay of Fiction**

The tension between the control of the designers and the agency allowed the user is perhaps the fundamental epistemological problem raised by digital historicism, by digital media works – games and otherwise – that attempt to represent or engage with historical subjects. Thus, *CoD*'s use of archival documents may be further illuminated in relation to another kind digital media work that often incorporates archival documents and thereby produces the archive effect, but in a very different way. *Tracing the Decay of Fiction: Encounters with a Film by Pat O'Neill* (henceforth referred to as *Tracing*) is a 2002 “database narrative” made by the Labyrinth Project, a digital media production group located within the Annenberg Center for Communication at the University of Southern California, that is at the forefront of the practice of incorporating archival documents into nonlinear, interactive, computer-based narratives. In this work, the artists (Pat O'Neill, Rosemary Comella, and Kristy H.A. Kang) have combined footage from O'Neill's experimental but linear film, *The Decay of Fiction* (produced simultaneously with *Tracing*), about the famous Hotel Ambassador in Los Angeles with additional contemporary footage shot of or around the hotel, footage from old newsreels, 20<sup>th</sup> century photographs, spoken recollections from people who spent time in the Ambassador, and commentary by contemporary scholars reflecting on the significance of the hotel, which was torn down just after *Tracing* and *Decay* were made. The user, who must access *Tracing* through a computer, may navigate around the hotel, encountering sounds and images as she “moves” through the rooms and outdoor areas. What makes it a “database narrative,”

however, is not only that the user directs her own movement through the hotel. Marsha Kinder (2003, p.113), director of the Labyrinth Project, explains database narratives as

narratives whose structure exposes or thematizes the dual processes of selection and combination that lie at the heart of all stories and that are crucial to language: the selection of particular data (characters, objects, settings, sounds, events) from a series of databases or paradigms, which are then combined to generate specific tales. Such narratives reveal the possibility of making other combinations, which would create alternative stories, and they encourage us to question the choice of categories and of what is included and omitted.

Kinder notes that what makes *Tracing* a database narrative is not the fact that the user must interact with the text through a computer but, rather, the fact that the user is made constantly aware of her path through the text as one among many.

Writing more specifically about different types of interactivity in videogames, Mark J.P. Wolf (2006, p. 81) has distinguished between different kinds of player choices. He writes, "The time pressure under which a player must play determines whether the player's choices are made as a result of reflex action or reflection." In contrast to the gameplay of *CoD*, which requires immediate reflexes in order to stay alive (and its rapid-fire cut-scenes that allow for no choice or reflection), the interactivity of *Tracing* is decidedly reflective since there is no time limit for any decision. The user of this database narrative may think as much as she likes before deciding what to do next and can reflect on the fact that she has chosen one path among many.

In order to engage with *Tracing*, the user must navigate the space of the hotel either by clicking on different parts of the floor plan in order to "go" to a particular part of the hotel or, once she is "in" a particular room, by clicking up, down, left, or right arrows in order to either "look" in a different direction within the room or "go" to an adjacent room.<sup>1</sup> These two forms of navigation allow the user to choose from many different possible routes through the hotel, many possible narratives. As the user moves through the hotel, she passes through color images of the hotel shot after it was emptied of all furniture and décor and just before it was torn down. In these empty rooms, she encounters various instances of the archive effect. When she enters a room, her entrance (or, once inside, her act of clicking on a particular part of the room) triggers the appearance of sounds and images in different rooms in the hotel.

In some rooms, semi-transparent black-and-white images of a person or a group of people suddenly appear superimposed over the color space of a particular hotel room. When the user clicks on the lobby space next to the elevator, for instance, a man in 1940s or 50s dress walks down the hall with a girl in similar period dress on each arm. In the room behind a stage, a similarly semi-transparent juggler practices his act. In another room, a male voice that seems to belong to a narrator from a film noir speaks while a man and woman wait in a bedroom, not speaking to one another. None of these ghosts seems to actually come from the past – the images look too clean, too perfectly fitted to the spaces in the color footage – but, rather, they look like reenactments of moments that might have transpired in these rooms. These sequences may not generate archive effect, because these black-and-white images may have been staged for the text. Yet they do generate an uncanny and compelling atmosphere in which documentary images of the past seem as if they might emerge.

In other parts of the hotel, the archive effect is much more likely to occur. In some instances, as the user navigates into a new room, an archival photograph appears and serves as an interface that allows the user to access more details about the past. The user can click on different parts of the photograph in order to call up more archival images and recorded stories. For instance, when the user enters The Coconut Grove, the hotel's fancy lounge and restaurant, at first, she may see only a color photograph of an empty room over which she hears the sounds of an old jazz melody. She can make the "camera" (her first-person point of view) pan to the right or left to see more of the room but it is uninhabited. If she clicks on the image, however, an archival black-and-white photograph of the room filled with people in an earlier era appears and acts as a map that allows her to call up and navigate different stories. That is, when the user clicks on a particular part of the photograph, the image of the lounge is replaced by another archival image over which someone on the soundtrack (often unidentified) reminisces about an event that took place there. For instance, if the user clicks on one part of the image of the lounge, an image of actress Gloria Grahame appears as an unidentified woman's voice tells an anecdote about Grahame visiting The Coconut Grove. If the user clicks on another part, a photograph of Frank Sinatra appears as a different voice relates a story about Sinatra singing in The Coconut Grove. In other parts of the hotel, the archive effect becomes even more intensified. For instance, in the ballroom where Robert Kennedy was shot, the user encounters documentary images of Kennedy giving his last speech as well as voice recordings and images that were taken just after he was shot. When she returns to the contemporary image of the ballroom, there are no ghost-like figures here, but after she has just watched archival footage of Kennedy's death, the empty space feels like the most truly haunted room of the hotel.

By moving through the hotel, the user determines the order in which she encounters such archival documents and their consequent "charges of the real." She actively shapes her encounter with the historical "real." Although the designers clearly have a hand in what images may appear, as well as when and where, the user can put together her own sequence of events within the space of the hotel. One might say that the archival photographs and film footage have already been appropriated and organized by the designers but that to a large degree the user determines what historiographic theorist Hayden White (1973, p.7) calls the "emplotment" of the story or history.

Also crucial to the way in which *Tracing* functions, however, is the element of chance. The same space can offer a very different experience each time the user comes back to it. Indeed, while certain archival sequences always appear in the same room, others appear in different parts of the hotel at different times. Each time the user visits a room, the "ghosts" whose images and voices haunt it may change. Kinder (2003, p.102) refers to these spaces in which different textual events may be triggered as "hot spots." She writes that, "each time a user returns to one of the hot spots, they find a different event, for all of our interfaces are built on a combination of three determinants: our design, the user's choice, and random unpredictability." An additional level of unpredictability is added by the fact that, from time to time, there is an "earthquake" that summons a random jumble of images that appears wherever in the hotel the user happens to be. This element of randomness and chance makes *Tracing* a much more complex work than it would be if each room always presented the same "inhabitants" and archival fragments. The many pathways to choose from

combined with the aspect of chance guarantees that no two users will have exactly the same experience and that no single user will have exactly the same experience twice. Moreover, it attests to the fact that not even the designers control how the user will experience the work, not only because the user makes her own choices but also because the algorithms underlying the structure of the work, once created, operate according to their own logic. Of course, it might be said that when an author publishes a history book, she no longer controls how it will be read. In this sense, *Tracing* simply emphasizes this fact but also, once programmed to allow for chance, it also creates a work in excess of the authors.

The archive effect in *Tracing* is based mainly on the user's experience of temporal disparity (although intentional disparity is also in effect). There is a clear temporal break, for instance, between footage taken the day Kennedy was shot in the ballroom and the color footage of the empty ballroom just before the Hotel Ambassador was torn down. By literally laying archival images and sounds of a past moment over the images taken for *Tracing* (and *Decay*) before the hotel was destroyed, *Tracing* crystallizes the experience of temporal disparity within a single space, suggesting that any space has its own history, or, to put it differently, that each space can be temporally layered with many different histories. Indeed, Kinder (2002, p. 347) suggests that a number of the Labyrinth Project works can each be viewed as

an archeological exploration of a specific location through layers of time, be this location a famous cultural Los Angeles landmark like the Hotel Ambassador now threatened with destruction, or a mobile Los Angeles cityscape mythologized as a "murder zone" by Hollywood crime movies, or a historic river like the Danube whose rippling currents have interwoven many cultures and periods throughout Central Europe's stormy history.

In contrast to a conception of history as a single trajectory from past to present to future, *Tracing* works according to the logic of the archaeological excavation, emphasizing the fact that histories take *place* and are inseparable from the places in which and through which they occur.

This archaeological paradigm of history as layers of time laid over a particular space working in tandem with the reflective interactivity and chance elements of *Tracing* points to two conceptions of or about history that digital historicism is uniquely suited to enact. First, it asserts the multiplicity of stories that inhabit a single space, and, second, it insists that our encounter with traces of the past is unstable, constantly shifting, a matter of chance and construction as much as a matter of fact. *Tracing*, as well as other Labyrinth Project works, insists that the *reader* of history may become the *user* of archival documents, participating in the construction of narratives about the past through her choices, ordering and reordering appropriated documents into a variety of possible narratives. In short, the reader of history may become, at least in some sense, the historian. The possibility of an active, reflective user who is aware of all of the pressures that come to bear on how we think the past through its archival traces is the promise of *Tracing* and of this form of digital history.

## The Future of Digital Historicism

While the works made by the Labyrinth Project perhaps point the way to a utopian and seemingly agentic vision of a participatory historiographic process, it may be unrealistic to posit their model of digital historicism as the historiographic future. Although many artists and academics have delighted in works like *Tracing*, the audience for such works is still very limited. *CoD* is significantly more influential at least in terms of the number of users who have purchased and used it. Indeed, according to the official website for the game, by June 15, 2009, sales had surpassed 11 million since it became available in November 2008 (*Call of Duty: World at War Headquarters*, 2009). Moreover, it is perhaps precisely the *lack* of narrative teleology that makes *Tracing* a much less popular text than *CoD*. Paradoxically, by refusing to establish narrative teleology, an historical text may undermine the reader or user's sense of agency. Discussing an early hypertext novel, Punday (2004, p. 95) might well be describing the experience of *Tracing*:

The story of loss is echoed in the reader's own sense of frustration with the story and its inability to come to a conclusion.... The reader is pulled into the story emotionally through a very different form of narrative inevitability – the inevitability of failure. It is clear, after all, that there is no single story to reconstruct in the course of the novel.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, although *Tracing* avoids a determinist construction of history through archival documents, it also fails to generate the level of desire that a game like *CoD*, with its preestablished linear narrative and clear goals, seems to do, and it may even leave the user feeling disempowered, uncertain of what she has accomplished. In *CoD*, it is clear what you must do in order to ascend to the next game level and, thereby, to encounter new images of the “real” and find out the rest of the story. In *Tracing*, the archival fragments never seem to add up to anything in particular except perhaps an atmosphere. If the rhythm of the editing in *CoD* is of the preparation for an inevitable battle, the rhythm in *Tracing* is barely present except in a few snatches of melody that, disappointingly, never come together. Indeed, after exploring the Hotel Ambassador for a while, encountering various cutscenes that include archival footage, uncertain if I have seen everything or not, my desire to engage with *Tracing* begins to wane.

It seems to me, however, that *Tracing* – while it is not itself a videogame – points toward the possibility of historical videogames that *both* open archival footage up to a variety of possible meanings and orders while *also* stirring the user's desire in such a way that she will keep wanting to learn from and engage more with the text. A combination of *CoD*'s riveting gameplay based mainly on reflex might be combined with instances of a more reflective interactivity like that of *Tracing* which allows for thoughtful choice. In future World War II-themed videogames, the cut-scenes containing archival footage might be dependent on the user's actions within the gameplay, proposing other possible histories that might have occurred if certain battles had not been won. The same indexical images might be used in quite different and even contradictory historical narratives within the same game, emphasizing the polysemic nature of all visual evidence. By establishing multiple possible historical trajectories and/or archival meanings, historical videogames have the potential to produce greater reflection not only about what happened or what might have happened but also about how history is written, who decides what is

remembered and what is forgotten, and who determines what a given image “means” in relation to the past. As a result, the user may come to a more nuanced and skeptical understanding what becomes established and accepted as “history.” While there should be no prescription for how an historical videogame should be constructed, the notions of multiple histories or divergent understandings of history based on indexical archival evidence have great creative potential for game design.

Of course, the field of “digital historicism” is very young and there are bound to be many more experiments in this vein. Digital histories that appropriate archival footage may use the “charge of the real” for very different ends: to simply replicate conservative notions of a static, determinist historical narrative or to confront users with the impossibility of encompassing the past in any single narrative. In either case, however, the notion of the archive effect allows us to think through the experiential and historiographic effects archival documents may have as they are appropriated and used within digital interfaces and, thus, to think through the ways these documents – combined with digital technologies – are shaping and reshaping our conceptions of the past.

## References

- Brooker, W. (2009) Camera-Eye, CG-Eye: Videogames and the “Cinematic.” *Cinema Journal* Vol. 48 (3), p. 122-128.
- Call of Duty: World at War Headquarters* (2009) CoD:WaW Surpasses 11 Million Units! [Online]. Available at: <http://www.callofduty.com/CoDWW/intel/230> [Accessed: 12 October 2010].
- Kinder, M. (2002) Designing a Database Cinema. In J. Shaw and P. Weibel (eds.) *Future Cinema: The Cinematic Imaginary after Film*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, p. 346-353.
- Kinder, M. (2003) Honoring the Past and Creating the Future in Cyberspace: New Technologies and Cultural Specificity. *The Contemporary Pacific* Vol.15 (1), p. 93-115.
- Punday, D. (2004) Involvement, Interruption, and Inevitability: Melancholy as an Aesthetic Principal in Game Narratives. *SubStance* Vol. 33 (3), p. 80-107.
- Sobchack, V. (2004) The Charge of the Real: Embodied Knowledge and Cinematic Consciousness. In Sobchack, V. (ed.) *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 258-285.
- White, H. (1973) *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973.
- Wolf, M.J.P. (2006) Assessing Interactivity in Video Game Design. *Mechademia*, Vol. 1, p. 78-85.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> While both *Call of Duty: World at War* and *Tracing the Decay of Fiction* employ a first-person point of view, the view in *CoD* includes the user's avatar's hands and weapons while the "body" of the user of *Tracing* is invisible, represented only by a mobile gaze that is reconstituted in each new "space."
- <sup>2</sup> Punday is discussing Michael Joyce's *Afternoon* (1987).