Immersive Historicity in World War II Digital Games

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In this article I examine the potential feeling of time travel – historical immersion – in the World War II games Medal of Honor: Underground, Medal of Honor: Frontline, Wolfenstein 3D and Return to Castle Wolfenstein. To accomplish this, I make a semiotic analysis of visual and auditory signs based upon the three categories of space, time, and sound. I also consider the element of myth to be an influencing factor.

WWII games contribute, in their own way, to our collective memory. Nevertheless, in these games historical facts are not considered as important as excitement, heroes, villains (the dichotomy good/evil), and gothic surroundings. Thus, although they claim to have historical settings and narratives, they are rather reshaping WWII as a stereotypical event with more connections to popular films than to actual historical events.

Keywords: digital games, computer games, video games, FPS, immersion, history, representation

Over the past couple of decades, digital games have become a major cultural phenomenon in Western societies. However, academic research on these games constitutes a quite young but nevertheless rapidly growing field. In my ongoing PhD project on the Nazi German Third Reich in contemporary popular culture, I have a part where I examine ideological aspects in the flourishing genre of World War II digital games, since I am interested in how these games co-operate with films and other media in mythmaking and the shaping of our collective memory of the War. In this article, I focus on some of the means by which a specific type of immersion, namely what I call *immersive histori-*

city, or an atmosphere of being personally involved in a re-enactment of history, could be accomplished. Digital media, such as computer and video games, are very interesting to study in this respect, since they offer several clues to an understanding of contemporary popular apprehension of ideology, history, and myth – with connections to what we call collective memory – in this case of WWII, including the Third Reich and National Socialism. As noticed by Bolter and Grusin (2002/1999) in their book *Remediation*, representation is best understood if put in a historical perspective comparing different media, since "refashioning one's predecessors is key to understanding representation in earlier media" (49). Comparing WWII digital games to films and books on the same topic shows how excerpts and elements from history are being represented in a new medium. I believe that by examining these games you may trace those elements – symbols, myths, stereotypes – that today seem to be most important to use and re-use in the popular representation of the War and the Third Reich. A study of both games and gamers also offers insights into the different uses of history in contemporary society; this is an issue that I address in my PhD project but leave aside in this article, which focuses on the games as media texts.

Digital games dealing with WWII can be divided into two main categories: strategy and action-based adventure. In strategy games, the objectives focus on creation (of successful military strategies), while the action-based adventure – of which the First Person Shooter (FPS) is a representative – is built on exploration (of the world in the game and its inhabitants). While digital WWII strategy games have their origins in tabletop board games and might be compared to chess, the FPS is more like entering a parallel world in real time where continuous analysis of the situation is important. Basically, this concerns where to go, who to kill and when. In this study, I look at some of the most internationally successful WWII FPS's: the classic *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992), its sequel *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* (2001), and *Underground* (2000) and *Frontline* (2002) from the *Medal of Honor* series.[1] An old game is included as I believe that limitations in software would demand a greater emphasis on creative strategies in achieving effects of immersion and "time travel" than in the newer games, where the overwhelming graphics quite easily do the work.[2]

In the process of remediation, immediacy and hypermediation are two interacting logics. Here, I will focus on the former. Bolter and Grusin (2002/1999), as well as Ryan (2001), discuss immediacy and its part in creating a feeling of reality, of the reader/spectator/gamer being virtually transported into another world. Through the use of virtual media, and including its connections to representations in other media as well as the culturally determined expectations of the audience, a reality is created that in some cases is even considered to be reforming reality (Bolter & Grusin 2002/1999, 61).[3] I will look at the devices for creating immersive historicity according to three categories: Spatial and Temporal Location, and Sound. In these categories, I will also examine correspondences to the function of narrative and myth in our understanding of the world.

Background: Narrative, Myth and Our Understanding of the World – and WWII Games

Our understanding of the world is to a large extent of a narrative character, that is, we make sense of the world around us as if it was a story, with beginning, a sequence of events and – at least theoretically – an end. From childhood and onwards we have learned certain types of narratives that begin, go on and end in certain ways; this makes it possible for us to fill in gaps in stories and combine even scattered pieces of information into a coherent whole (Chatman 1980/1978, 28-31). One category of narratives which to a large extent is characterised by the use and re-use of certain familiar patterns is that of myths, legends and fairy tales. Myth in its everyday meaning is something that has been made up – perhaps based upon real events, perhaps not – and turned into a legend. But there is also a second meaning that has been established within academia by Roland Barthes (1970; 1977/1964), Stuart Hall (1997) and others, who have explored the importance of myth to our interpretation of pictures or combinations of images and text. Myth in this sense forms a naturalised source of knowledge about the world, which we use as a means to derive meaning in our interpretation of events around us. The big difference from myths in the everyday sense is that this kind of myth is something that we have come to believe is true.

One important aspect of myth is identity. National identities, as well as ethnical, are constructed in relation to other identities. In many

nationalistic myths you find the birth of the nation in a painful *rite de passage* where it is forced to fight its enemy: the Other. Here, ethnicity plays an important role, as does Evil, which also serves as justification for the use of violence (Eriksen 1993, 9ff.). Stereotypes and cultural myths obviously play an important role not only in our daily management of the world around us, but also as a tool for further construction and reproduction of ideologies. The dichotomic structure of good guys and bad guys fills an important function in both myth and narrative, confirming "our" community as something good and defining the enemy as not only evil but also as inhuman by nature, a threat to mankind. Accordingly, the extinction of the enemy becomes something of a moral obligation (cf. Bauman 1994/1992, 193ff.). This mythical scheme provides us with a plausible explanation for the events of war and aggression that take place, in stories as well as in real life (cf. Branigan 2001/1992; Campbell 1993/1949; Cassirer 1953/1946; Eliade 1975/1957). This is of course familiar from anthropology, psychoanalysis and social theory (cf. Douglas 1997/1966; Freud 1995/1944; Hall 1997), where dealing with the Other, as well as with other anomalies that diverge from normality and order, takes the form of dealing with a (deadly) threat and the struggle for the survival of the community.[4]

First Person Shooters: Immediacy, Hypermediacy and Hyperreality

The ability of pictures to influence us and at an emotional level transfer us in time and space is, of course, not at all a new thing. Through the invention of linear perspective during the Renaissance, painting took a naturalistic turn, offering new possibilities of realistic representation. A good example of the longing for recreating reality is of course the illusive *trompe-l'oeil* during the Baroque period, and in the 19th century we find not only the debate on how far reality could go in painting, but also the sensational experience of the first moving images on film, creating popular myths about horrified audiences rushing out of the cinema when the train on the silver screen started moving towards them (Bolter & Grusin 2002/1999, 24ff.; Ryan 2001, 2ff.; Scharf 1986/1968; cf. Bottomore 1999). Today, it is the virtual reality of digital worlds that is the successor in this search for the ultimate experience of immediacy in the

work of art. Ryan (2001, 20f.) even proposes that we should read VR "as a metaphor for total art", since "[w]hat is at stake in the synthesis of immersion and interactivity is […] nothing less than the participation of the whole of the individual in the artistic experience".

Characteristic for the games called First Person Shooters (FPS) is that they are set in a player perspective, which means that you as a gamer are theoretically being located inside the virtual world created in the game. You see "your" hands on the bottom of the screen, handling different weapons or just using your fists. But you are also partly outside, as there are visual devices on the screen that for example show your current health status and the present weapon in use. Thus, in playing digital games the borders between subject and object, between body and soul, reality and virtual reality are blurred, but at the same time the medium shows a low level of transparency. Bolter and Grusin describe this as the double logic of remediation: "[o]ur culture wants both to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation" (2002/1999, 5).

> *Hypermedia and transparent media are opposite manifestations of the same desire: desire to get past the limits of representation and to achieve the real. They are not striving for the real in any metaphysical sense. Instead, the real is defined in terms of the viewer's experience; it is that which would evoke an immediate (and therefore authentic) emotional response. Transparent digital applications seek to get to the real by bravely denying the fact of mediation; digital hypermedia seek the real by multiplying mediation so as to create a feeling of fullness, a satiety of experience, which can be taken as reality.* (Bolter & Grusin 2002/1999, 53)

Thus, what has become the most important evidence for what is real and what is not is the gamer's *feeling* of immediacy, authenticity and reality. When put into the context of WWII FPS's, the basic presumption would be that these games offer you the impression of having travelled in time so that you ideally should find yourself actually being and acting in a virtual version of the Nazi German Third Reich, including occupied territories, during WWII (cf. Jönsson 2004a, 3f.). According to Bolter and Grusin, the combination of immediacy and hypermediacy in the games is an attempt to achieve this impression. In this study of immer-

sive historicity, I will use semiotic analysis to investigate the combination of immediacy and hypermediacy in the games.

Hypermediacy is characterised by its heterogeneous and fragmented character, with process, performance and interactivity as typical components. Hypermedia combine media technologies using the raw ingredients of "images, sound, text, animation and video" (Cotton & Oliver 1993, 8; cited in Bolter & Grusin 2002/1999, 31), thereby multiplying the sensory input (Bolter & Grusin 2002/1999, 31, 53). In hypermediacy, the medium is highly visible, but – as for example in many digital games – combined with a high level of immediacy, this might paradoxically result in an experience of authenticity and media transparency. A related concept is that of *hyperreality*. Baudrillard describes this as the stage where real reality, as we used to know it, has vanished and is replaced by a *simulacrum*: a copy without original, as the copy does not need a comparison to anything to achieve its ontological status. The hyperreal is entirely independent; it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own reality, a pure simulacrum (Baudrillard 1994/1981, 1f., 6). Similarly, Bolter and Grusin write about digital hypermedia that "[t]he excess of media becomes an authentic experience, not in the sense that it corresponds to an external reality, but rather precisely because it […] does not feel compelled to refer to anything beyond itself" (2002/1999, 53f.).

The games in this study illustrate two stages in hypermediation in digital games. The *Medal of Honor* games and *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* are all on a high level of hypermediacy, fully exploiting all of the basic ingredients mentioned. In these games you are being sent onto different missions in occupied Europe, and the games depend on creating illusive environments. The much older *Wolfenstein 3D* – which in fact carries the reputation of being the very first FPS – is a simplistic maze game which only makes use of images, sound and animation.[5] Here you are an allied agent whose mission is to break out of the fictional Nazi stronghold Castle Wolfenstein, killing as many Nazis as possible in the process. In the two following sections, I will look at how spatial and temporal location are represented in the games through the use of visual elements and concepts taken from what both in Barthes' terms and in the everyday meaning of the word may be called present myths about

WWII. In the third section, I focus on the use and importance of sound in the games, and suggest a way of analysing sounds as symbols.

One: Spatial Location

When comparing the four games in this study, it becomes obvious that visually connecting the game world to the real one is of varying importance, and it is also accomplished in different ways. Simulations and representations of actual geographic locations are not to be found in *Wolfenstein 3D*, as the only thing the visual signs tell us is that we are in "a very Nazi-infested place" – for all that matters, it might just as well be located on the moon. The endless corridors and halls of Castle Wolfenstein are filled with items signalling "Nazi-ness", to paraphrase Roland Barthes' (1977/1964) expression: portraits of the Führer, Nazi swastikas, Reich eagles and so on. This is to some extent also applicable to *Return to Castle Wolfenstein.* Here, the advanced graphics are lightyears away from the crude design of the old game, but when you are inside Castle Wolfenstein, the basics are the same. Deprived of its Nazi-related paraphernalia and inhabitants, this could be any gothic castle in any adventure game. But there are other parts of *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* that *do* work with creating the illusion of being in a defined geographic environment, as for example those of the game's missions that are taking place in Egypt or in German villages and towns. The strategies here are the same as in *Medal of Honor: Underground*, to which I will turn shortly. Establishing a feeling of being in a certain geographically defined location seems to be less important in *Medal of Honor: Frontline*, the one of the four games which is most representative of today's WWII FPS's.[6] Here, you are playing as a US soldier and the campaigns are explicitly based on historic events such as D-day. You know from the beginning where you are and as long as the surroundings are similar to those seen in WWII films and photographs, the scenario is credible. It seems that the important signs here are those that verbally tell you where you are, as without these you could be in almost any countryside landscape or in any small town. There are, for example, occasionally shop signs in French to be found in the French towns, and sometimes a windmill in the Dutch countryside, but due to the scarcity of these types of signs it seems that the important thing here is not to create the feeling that you are in

France or in Holland. The emphasis lies on creating a feeling of taking part in a military operation, not on "virtual tourism".

Neither *Underground* nor *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* have this connection to certain well-known military operations but are more like WWII adventures in the spirit of the *Indiana Jones* films, or why not classics such as *Where Eagles Dare* or *The Guns of Navarone*.[7] The presumption that spatial location is of importance here builds on the large number of signs carrying geographic connotations in these games compared to for example in *Frontline*. In both *Underground* and *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* you are a top agent being sent on dangerous missions in different parts of occupied Europe and Northern Africa. These locations are identified through a number of visual signs that together with connotations to other mediated visual representations, such as film and photography, establish a feeling of being in a certain place but also, I would argue, of being in an adventure *just like* for example *Indiana Jones*. In both *Underground* and *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, the environments in Europe are signifying "Old Europe-ness", building on the notion of European culture as older than (white) American, through the use of for example old style shop signs in French and half-timber houses. Typical (or rather stereotypical) signifiers are used in the same way to create a feeling of for example being in Egypt or at an archaeological site at Knossos. These signifiers presumably achieve their functionality through intertextuality and recognition from popular films, such as the *Indiana Jones* adventures, rather than from any likeness to real life; here the influence of myth in its fictional sense becomes obvious. For example, Nazi interest in archaeological excavations and ancient mythical artefacts is a concept that is familiar from two of the three *Indiana Jones* films: *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. The mission in *Underground*, where you are in Himmler's SS castle Wewelsburg, is built upon the idea of the Nazis having connections to occultism, myth and medieval lore (cf. Cook & Russell 2000; Hüser 1987/1982). This theme is also at the foundation of the whole game *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, where Himmler's castle does not carry its historical name but, just as in reality, is situated near the village of Paderborn. From these examples, the connotations to certain spatial locations in *Underground* might perhaps better be considered as basically building on associations to

certain popular films and/or popular myths, as I would expect knowledge about these rather specific spatial locations in the real world to be rather limited among most people, including gamers. The settings in the game are not reproductions of the settings in the films, but the context and the visual imagery are the same. The connections to popular films become very clear in *Medal of Honor: Frontline* (and *Allied Assault*), where there are direct visual references to especially *Saving Private Ryan* but also indirectly to *Band of Brothers*.[8] *Saving Private Ryan* has, in turn, to a large extent reproduced well-known documentary footage, which takes the intertextuality even further (Jönsson 2004a, 183, 188-192). A good example of this is the well-known sequence with the Allied troops D-day landing on Omaha Beach. In the games you are there in a double – or even tripartite – sense: you are in the game, participating in the simulation of the historical scenario and you are at the same time in a simulation of *Saving Private Ryan*. There are also other sceneries that may not be exactly the same in the film as in the games, although you do get the feeling that they are. I would propose that in *Frontline* (and *Allied Assault)* it is primarily a simulation of Spielberg's film that we are experiencing, not one of occupied Europe – although in popular memory this may account to just about the same.

To conclude this section, I would say that spatial historicity seems either to be used to create an atmosphere of being inside a WWII adventure just like the ones we can experience on film, or, as in the case of *Frontline*, to confirm the geographic site of the historical narrative. In the first case, the virtual world gives us an aesthetic illusion of having entered "Old Europe", where spectacular adventures await. The high graphic quality of newer games such as *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* even offers the possibility of a tourist gaze – although you have to kill some people and zombies every now and then to stay alive and to advance, you may also choose to walk around a bit, forget about your present state of health (shown by a meter in the corner of the screen) and just admire the nice surroundings. In the second case, we already know where we are and what awaits us there; an aesthetic experience of the surroundings is not really important to the soldier. Here it is possible to walk around a bit as well, but the environment is neither as exciting nor as inviting as in *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*. It does not really matter where you are – the

primary (and only) task is clearly to fight the enemy. The old *Wolfenstein 3D* game lacks every kind of allusion to a location that exists in reality, and given the limited set of "hypermedia ingredients" as well as the graphical crudeness in this game, it would be quite difficult to accomplish a simulation of anything other than what it actually is: a "cartoonish" action game. Here, the transparency of the medium is on a very low level, while in *Medal of Honor* it is reaching much higher, enabling a feeling of immersion and even time-travel.

In the next section, I will discuss how an orientation in time is being handled in the games.

Two: Temporal Location. Creating Historical Authenticity

One immediate way of signifying historicity in a WWII game that is giving a signal to the gamer that he/she has now been transported into a certain place in past times is to explicitly announce the date on which the game's narrative begins. Another way is through creating a feeling of historical authenticity, thus making the imaginary shift in temporal location not only theoretically but also emotionally credible. In other words, the presence of authentic elements in the games would provide another key to the feeling of time travel: we know that these things, people and events had their actual existence during the certain time period announced in the game and thus they function as signifiers of this temporal location. A time long gone is called back through the virtual replicas of these elements; perhaps we could call them virtual relics (cf. Stewart 1993, 140). All games in this study except *Wolfenstein 3D* use documentary film clips to establish a time frame for the game. The *Medal of Honor* games also to some extent claim to have educational purposes. Accordingly, under "Gallery" in the manual to *Underground* we are told that

> *You unlock each Mission Gallery after successfully completing the previous mission. The best OSS agents are the best-educated OSS agents. Enter the Gallery to view actual footage from WWII, highlighting events mirrored in each of Medal of Honor Underground's missions, as well as a slide show on the making of Medal of Honor Underground.* (*Medal of Honor: Underground manual*, 7)

It should be noted that *historic characters* are only represented in these documentary excerpts and not in the games themselves, with the exception of Hitler in *Wolfenstein 3D* and Himmler, who makes a brief appearance in the film sequence that appears at the very end of *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*. The most common *material objects* that function as signifiers of temporal location are the weapons, but there are also swastika flags and other Nazi banners, and, in *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, such things as replicas of the front page of the SS newspaper *Das Schwarze Korps* and SS men's obituaries being hung on the notice boards in different locations run by the Nazis.

I have already mentioned the importance of the *historic events*. As signifiers these connect to both a temporal and spatial location through creating a narrative frame that signals authenticity, an important concept with regard to the games, and one which deserves further discussion. Authenticity is a main feature in the promotion texts for many (most?) of the WWII games: authentic weapons, mission sites and military operations that actually took place are familiar to the gamer from books and documentary films on the War, as well as from popular movies. The slogan for the *Medal of Honor* games accordingly reads "You don't play – you volunteer" (EA Games 2004b). But authenticity might here be considered as being reduced to virtual replicas of artefacts and a familiar context; as mentioned earlier, it is the viewer's ideas and expectations that determine the scale on which the degree of reality is measured.[9] These do not, of course, have to be in accordance with historical reality in a strictly academic sense. Rather, I would say that this might be seen as an example of hyperreality and of simulacra. The hyperreal quality is produced by the extremely detailed simulation which, combined with the high levels of hypermediacy and immediacy, results in more impact on our perception than reality itself ever provides. In Baudrillard's words, the real has been substituted by an overwhelming multitude of signs for the real, not needing to be rationally compared to reality because *it is a reality in itself* (Baudrillard 1994/1981, 2; cf. Jönsson 2004a, 182, 184). Following Baudrillard's ideas, the simulation of reality in the games can be considered to be a copy without an original, since the original is not the actual historic event but our mythical conception of it, especially since hardly any of today's gamers have actual memories of the war years

(cf. Jönsson 2004a, 1). One could argue that the Omaha beach scenario that appears in *Medal of Honor: Frontline* (and in *Allied Assault)* actually *has* an original, namely the famous scene in *Saving Private Ryan*. This is certainly true in one respect, which is what gives the games a quality of what might be described as a hybrid type of simulacrum, where multiple versions of represented reality on different levels of simulation are mixed and work together. This comes close to film scholar Vivian Sobchack's concept *palimpsest of historical consciousness,* with which she describes how layers of fact and fiction about history are accumulated and assembled, thus making up a dialogic and intertextual conception of history (Sobchack 1997; cf. Jönsson 2004a, 13). In the virtual palimpsest made up in the games, some elements, for instance those with close connections to their historical counterparts (the weapons and such graphic symbols as the Nazi swastika), are in essence closer to reflecting an original reality, albeit filtered through media representations. Others are more or less lacking this kind of connection, such as uniforms only vaguely suggestive of the original designs and especially objects entirely based on fantasy, thus masking the absence of a reality or even being their own simulacra (cf. Baudrillard 1994/1981, 6). The similarity is mainly experienced through the use of visual elements: you can see the same things that appear in the film and, most importantly, in the same hyperrealistic way. I would say that this shared hyperreal quality is what makes the game scenario connote the *Saving Private Ryan* version of Omaha beach rather than the well-known documentary images that are almost exactly replicated in the film (cf. Jönsson 2004a, 176, 183f.; 2004b, 46). At work is a most intriguing process where our audiovisual conception of history seems to be subject to change.

A useful idea about how this is possible might be found in the semiotics of Roland Barthes (1977/1964, 39f.) and his notion of *anchorage*, a concept that I here use in a somewhat different sense. Being polysemous, containing several possible ways of interpretation, the image requires something that can fix the floating chain of signifiers that is to guide the reader to the "correct" meaning. The linguistic message is one such technique by which an anchorage is achieved, for example in advertisements and press photos. Although in this case there is no linguistic message, I suggest that certain visual and auditory elements in the

scenario could be seen as performing the same function as a linguistic anchorage by guiding our associations directly to *Saving Private Ryan* and not to the old documentaries – the latter not even being able to compete in degree of realistic representation due to the black-and-white footage. A good example of such visual elements is the replication – or remediation – of certain scenes in the film: you see the same things (objects, events) in the game as you do in the film, and from the same angle. Then there are of course the sounds of battle. If you have seen the film, you may even get a similar auditory experience as when listening to the film (cf. Palmer 2002). Needless to say, a person unfamiliar with the imagery of *Saving Private Ryan* would not be guided to this film and instead perhaps recognise angles and motifs from the classic documentary pictures. The interesting thing here, as I see it, is the remediation of certain specific visual material and how this might lead the viewer's associations to another source than the original. In my view, this adds important aspects to be considered about our perception of historic events, as original footage here actually becomes secondary to simulacra.

The feeling of time travel is not very important in *Wolfenstein 3D*. Instead, I would propose that in this game we have a purely mythical conception of the stereotype "Evil Nazis" found within many parts of popular culture, completely detached from its historical location in time and space. The virtual presence of "Adolf Hitler" in the game is not a signifier of the Nazi German Führer himself but, so to say, his mythical essence. Neither is it, as compared to the presence of Himmler in *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, a signifier about the period of time in which the game's narrative takes place. I would claim that although the introduction to *Wolfenstein 3D* tells us that it takes place during WWII, the lack of temporal as well as spatial signifiers in the game renders it a purely liminal quality; here, absolutely nothing is for real, anything may happen, and the rules and structures of the world outside are not applicable. There are obvious carnivalesque traits to be found, not least considering the game's emphasis on the grotesque and on culturally non-acceptable practices, that is, killing and enjoying it (cf. Bakhtin 1991/1965). The carnivalesque is also an obvious component of *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* (as in many games of this kind), but in this case signifiers of historicity are important. However, they are not important in the

same way as in the *Medal of Honor* games – it is rather the fantastic fictional world of for example the Indiana Jones films (like *Raiders of the Lost Ark*) that we are experiencing parts of. The background story of *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* tells us that Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler has an evil plan to create a new breed of invincible German super soldiers by using occult forces. The task is being carried out at Castle Wolfenstein by his occult SS elite guard and led by his faithful companion in the Dark Arts, Marianna Blavatsky. You have to stop them before it is too late. This fantastic representation of the Third Reich has its place in a long tradition of more or less bizarre speculations and elaborations focusing on Nazi interest in the occult and the esoteric, especially represented by Himmler and parts of the SS. Although not being very mainstream – with *Indiana Jones* as the obvious exception – this is nevertheless a flourishing theme within many parts of popular culture. This makes the sometimes rather obscure references in *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* to historic persons and events just as valid to those who understand them as those in the *Medal of Honor* games, although they are referring to entirely different kinds of mediated worlds. The events are taking place in the past, within a certain historical time frame, but it is not the real past – it is rather a fantastic version of it, built upon a mix of elements that have components both from reality and from popular myths. From this follows that the games to a high degree seem to share the characteristics of the palimpsest of historical consciousness, the mixing and blurring of historical and mythical authenticity, that Sobchack (1997) finds in film.

To conclude, temporal location is defined in terms of authenticity, which in turn is defined by the use of "authentic" signifiers whose impact depends on the level of familiarity: the weapons that are said to be authentic (and which, of course, are also recognised by the initiate), for example, and all the other signs that are familiar from our previously mediated experience of the War, including popular films. Thus, in this case, what is considered to be historical authenticity is to a large extent dependent on the gamer's/viewer's conception of WWII, which is mostly created by popular media, which in turn means that authenticity in the games has less to do with the factual historical reality than with the mythic conception of the War. However, there is not one mythic con-

ception but a number of them. Looking at the games in the study, there is an obvious division between those who claim to simulate historical reality and those who offer more or less fictional adventures within a historical time frame. So, on the one hand, we have a focus on action and warfare, battle and the experience of the soldiers as exemplified by *Frontline*, which is also representative for several other WWII games of the same kind, such as for example *Call of Duty* and *Brothers in Arms*. In these games, emphasis lies on offering a high level of authenticity and accordingly they use several signifiers of the authentic, such as virtual replicas of weapons used in WWII and narrative settings of historic military campaigns, battles etc. The accuracy of these can easily be confirmed by the gamer if he/she is not already familiar with them, as there is an abundance of literature on this topic.[10] There are also references to popular WWII films like *Saving Private Ryan*; whether this actually adds to the gamer's experience of authenticity or not can be debated, but nevertheless, the films provide an extra dimension to the claims of realism in the game. On the other hand, we have the games whose focus is on action, (fantastic) adventure and the experience of the daring elite agent. *Underground* and most explicitly *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* are good examples of this category, where we also can place *Wolfenstein 3D*. Outside this study there are similar games such as the likewise fantastic *BloodRayne*, but this category does not seem to be as large as that of the aforementioned war games. These WWII adventure-type games define their position in time by the use of some of the same signifiers as *Frontline,* mainly the establishing of a specific historical time frame through calendar references and the use of authentic weapons from WWII. But then there is an emphasis on elements from other kinds of popular media that function as signifiers of historicity, or rather historicity as experienced in certain films or connected to the more mythical parts of WWII and the history of Nazi Germany, in the sense of legends and stories that might be more or (often) less true. These are of course not meaningful to those who are not familiar with, for example, the *Indiana Jones* films or ideas about the Nazis constructing secret wonder weapons and/or engaging in practices of black magic and the occult. The games function as adventures even without these connotations having to be made. Nevertheless, the elements are there,

and at least for some gamers they contribute to a (re)construction of what one could call a mythical epoch, in which anything (factual or fictive) connected to WWII or to the Third Reich can be expected to be found.

Especially concerning the last category of games there is a considerable amount of inherited material from the Third Reich that can be traced in the games. It is well known that the Nazi regime to a large extent based its cultural ideology and the new national identity of the Reich on myths and symbols, manifested in aesthetic representations and suggestive spectacles. When it comes to the representation of Nazi Germany and elements connected to it, especially the more fantastic games are to a large extent recycling a mixture of contemporary and post-war mythical elements – albeit in a context where it is always very clear that the Nazis are the bad guys. The good guys are, of course, the Allies, or often more explicitly, the Americans.[11] I will now continue to the third part of this study, where I more specifically look at the concept of immersion and examine auditory strategies for symbolically simulating a feeling of being inside the world of the game and of virtual time travel.

Three: Soundtracks and Soundscapes. Sound as Icon and Index

The use of sound is important in creating atmosphere in the games, thus adding to the notion of immediacy. In many digital games this can be divided into two categories that I here call *soundtrack* and *soundscape*.[12] When you have, for example, pieces of music that accompany you on your way through the different levels (which is the case in many, but not all games), it can be considered as the *soundtrack*. This could be compared to a pianist accompanying a silent movie, as the music of the soundtrack is often different on different levels of the game, thus enhancing the experience of passing through stages. To the soundtrack are added real-time sound effects, such as gun shots, explosions, the sound of "you" opening a door etc. Consequently, the use of soundtrack music and sound effects could be seen as part of the heritage from film and brings to mind the notion of digital games as interactive movies (cf. Bolter & Grusin 2002/1999, 47, 94ff.).

Another effective means to create atmosphere is to keep the sound effects but skip the music and instead elaborate on the continuous sound

of events: the sounds of people and objects moving, changing, making noise, the beginning or ending of sounds or even the silence of non-events. This enhances the transparency of the experience, since the "film music" in a soundtrack functions as an obvious sign of the mediated state – usually there is no music accompanying events in real life. These "natural" sound components form the *soundscapes* of a digital game, which are crucial for immersion and the "real" experience of the virtual world.[13] In van Leeuwen's (1999, 15ff.) discussion on soundscapes he uses Schafer's notions of *figure, ground* and *field*. Figure is the signal itself, equivalent to the sound effect and the focus of our interest, while ground is the context, and field the environment where the observation of the sound takes place. To take the example of the creaking door, this would have its primary function as figure, as it warns us that something important has just happened. But it could also be part of ground, as when the sound originates from your avatar opening a door (which happens quite often in these games). Hypothetically, there could also be a field version of the creaking door, in for example a haunted house full of old doors being opened every now and then without anyone ever passing.

Sounds, of course, carry meanings, as any other types of signs. The fact that sounds and music affect us emotionally in a number of different ways is well-known. However, in the games this is an important issue in the structure of immersion. As with visual signs, sound signs may be analysed on different levels of meaning in a Barthes-like scheme, and they may also have iconic or indexical functions, as the following examples from the games will show.[14] The games in this study represent the two different categories of sound use, although there is a common notion in the use of the German language, which in all of the games actually seems to be the major – or even the only – auditory signifier used for indicating a WWII-ish atmosphere. *Wolfenstein 3D* has a soundtrack consisting of "action-game music" with occasional sound effects, such as the aforementioned gunshots, slamming doors etc., but also shouts in German – or, at least it *sounds like* German (which seems to be quite important, at least according to some of the fan web sites, see for example Williamson 2002). In *Wolfenstein 3D* we find a sample of basic "Nazi German" language. However, this is not Nazi German in the

linguistic sense that has been discussed by for example Cassirer (1961/1946) and Klemperer (2000), but a stereotypical version, which assumingly has its origins in popular films.[15] Phrases range from the frequently heard "Achtung!" and "Halten Sie!" to more personal utterances from the different Nazi crooks that you encounter; for example, when Hitler gets to see you in episode three, he shouts "Die, Allied Schweinehund!", "Scheisse!" when you blast away his armour, and when you kill him: "Eva auf Wiedersehen!" (Williamson 2002, 2.1). Here, the stereotypical "Nazi" quotations seem to be intimately connected to the German-ness of the language. Some of these utterances are also to be found in the other games in this study, especially "Achtung!", "Scheisse!" and "Halt!" or "Halten Sie!" but also other expressions familiar from popular WWII films, such as "Raus! Raus!".

The frequent use of "Nazi German" makes it intriguing to explore the characteristics of what seems to be a kind of Germanicity, analogous to the Italianicity examined by Roland Barthes in his famous analysis of a pasta advertisement (1977/1964). I would propose that although we are here working with linguistic messages instead of pictures, the basic function of these utterances is not to be communicative in a linguistic sense but to add to the overall *symbolic adornment* as a supplement to the visual symbolism of the swastikas, the uniforms and the Hitler portraits. There is also a difference between the two types of sound use (soundtrack or soundscape). In a soundtrack the symbolic character is more evident than in a soundscape, where the sound of German is often used as part of ground or even field. In applying a Barthesian three-stage analysis one might say that the listener's own knowledge of the German language would decide whether the German-ish utterances should be on the first, denotative, or on the second, connotative, level, as what we hear is something at least *sounding like* German. Also, it would be dependent on whether the listener lives in Germany or abroad, as some of these words are part of ordinary language in German-speaking countries. The context of the games is of course important, as there is a significant difference if one hears for example "Achtung!" in present-day Germany (including German media), in another European country or in the US, or in a WWII game or film. However, if we look at "Achtung!", I would propose that, being a word in German, it should basically be considered to

denote German. Then, on the second level, "Achtung!" as well as the indistinct or linguistically dubious utterances *connote* Germanicity, something characteristic for Germans. It is not necessary to grasp what is being said, as it is the German-ness of the voices that is important, not the linguistic message. The Germanicity of the voice is also applicable on the characteristic "German-English" – well known from numerous American and British popular WWII films – that is being spoken by certain German characters in the games. Here, we denote English being spoken with a German accent, which on the connotative level adds Germanicity. The influence from films is important here, as the post-war generations in Europe and America to a large extent have come to get acquainted with Germanicity through the film industry – with Hollywood as the main actor – and documentaries on WWII. The voices of Adolf Hitler and the evil Nazis in popular films seem to have a greater cultural impact than do the printed words of Goethe and the music of Beethoven on stereotypical Germanicity. This inevitably leads to the presumption that on the third, mythical level, Germanicity to a large extent – and definitely in the games – becomes the same as what might be called *Nazi-ness*.[16] And since the meaning of myth today according to Barthes (1970, 228, 241f.) is naturalised as "common knowledge", the sound of German-like words carries the possibility of Nazi-ness. Due to context this might either be confirmed or not.

In this case, I would suggest that the utterances can belong to either of two categories with different functions. As it seems as if the "personal messages" may contain anything as long as it sounds German, this indicates an indexical and at the same time confirming function: he/she says something German-ish so he/she is a Nazi. But I would argue that the "Achtung!"-s and "Halten Sie!"-s have a double function in the games, in soundtracks as well as in soundscapes, and this double function is only partly concerned with the mythic aspects in Barthes' sense. This is important and entirely in line with the special character of games, which are not a medium in the conventional sense, but rather contain characteristics of both narrative and of gaming as a ludic activity, as play.[17] The function of, for example, "Achtung!" or the quirking door can on the one hand be labelled *indexical*: the villains are near and it is shooting time. But the same sound may also have an *iconic* function that is adding to

the atmosphere of Nazi-ness in Castle Wolfenstein in the same way as the visual icons of Führer portraits, Nazi swastikas and Reich eagles, functioning as what I earlier called symbolic adornment.

If we turn to the issue of historical immersion, it is clear that the *Medal of Honor* games as well as *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* use – very efficiently – soundscapes that highly enhance the feeling of being inside the game. For example, *field* may in a sequence of *Underground* consist of the deep silence inside Himmler's castle, and *ground* the now and then occurring remote sound of Germans casually talking to each other. *Figure* is, then, the sudden ominous sound you (might) hear from somewhere behind you just before you are attacked by an undead knight in heavy armour. Immersion here is again relying more on familiarity with popular WWII (and other) films than on simulating sounds from the 1930/1940's. Those familiar with the sounds of different weapons from WWII may of course find the virtual versions more or less accurate, but I would propose that the elements of historicity when it comes to sounds are more or less based on the cinematic legacy. For example, when you are on a mission in a factory, a laboratory or a submarine base, the sounds belonging to field and ground are, not surprisingly, the same as in film scenes from such places. Put together with certain visual signifiers and with the narrative time frame of WWII, sounds that in themselves do not signify anything other than the dripping of water or heavy machinery at work may in the games receive a connotative function of – again – being in an adventure just like those in *The Heroes of Telemark* or *The Guns at Navarone*. Regarding the German language you find the same double iconic/indexical function in all games, although in the three newer ones the actual words do not seem to be as significant as the more or less distant sound of the language itself. In fact, it is often rather difficult to grasp what is being said. Hearing a forceful "Achtung!" every now and then does not really add more to the feeling of historicity than the ambient use of "something that sounds German". The indexical function of language is more elaborate in the later games than in *Wolfenstein 3D* and not only confined to the use of German. Apart from the obvious connection German-speaking – Nazi – villain (including English-speaking with German accent) in *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* and in *Underground,* there is also that of English with French accent – member

of *la résistance* – friend, and that of American accent – US intelligence or US Army – your superiors. This is obviously another connection to the legacy of Hollywood. Not surprisingly, the use of sound in the games seems to primarily add to the feeling of participating in a WWII film rather than to historical immersion in a more general sense.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this article I have examined the use of visual and auditory signifiers contributing to create potential immersive historicity, or a feeling of time-travel, in the *Wolfenstein* and *Medal of Honor* games. This is accomplished through analysing the concepts of space, time and sound.

Wolfenstein 3D is on a low level of immersive historicity, showing no ambitions of simulating reality, thus rather "floating" in time and space. *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* as well as the *Medal of Honor* games *Underground* and *Frontline* can be considered to reach a high level of immersive historicity through their ambitions of simulating reality, relying on the creation of an image of authenticity achieved by addressing the gamers' familiarity with other representations of the events and using strategies of remediation. Pastiche is created and a feeling of time-travel accomplished, but the journey is to a large extent mediated through the representation of WWII in popular films and myths. So the journey is not into any realistic simulation of WWII but rather into different WWII simulacra, copies of the historic events that do not have these events as originals. What they depict is a palimpsestic historical consciousness where reality and fiction are mixed. In *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* there is no doubt about the reality in the game being of a fantastic sort, even though there are several elements in the game that anchor it in a historical reality. It could be claimed that it is recreating history in a more fantastic fashion, adding elements from post-war elaborations on mythical and fantastic themes originating from the Third Reich. Although *Underground* is more of an adventure than *Frontline*, it nevertheless shares the ambitions of the latter to offer a realistic simulation of a historic period in time. The mythical aspects are thus put in the background, although they are still there and function in the way Barthes calls ideological.

In the games in this study, as in many – most? – FPS games, the classic structure of heroes versus villains is of fundamental importance. But here the bad guys are not *any* bad guys: they are Nazis. This is something that seems to be one of the main attractions with WWII FPS's and is frequently quoted both in gaming magazines and by gamers themselves: "evil Nazis are something special!" One reason for this might be that Nazis in many forms of popular culture – films, novels, comics, digital games – are represented as being on the same ontological level as zombies and monsters, thus non-human. Killing them does not become morally problematic – you are even free to enjoy it.[18] Although different in many ways, all games seem to share one basic mythic function, which is also that of narratives: they offer simple *explanations* of the world and teach us how to live in it (cf. Branigan 2001/1992; Campbell 1993/1949; Cassirer 1953/1946; Eliade 1975/1957). One such simple lesson is that those who are evil and non-human, thus a threat to society (and mankind), must be destroyed; as Bauman suggests, this can even be symbolically regarded as conquering death itself (Bauman 1994/1992, 196; cf. Douglas 1997/1966). In the games there are Good Guys and Bad Guys. The latter (the Nazis) are extremely evil and must be destroyed at all costs, otherwise the whole world is threatened. However, this becomes problematic when put into another, wider perspective. Who is to decide who is evil and thus potentially subject to rightful extermination? Extending the dichotomy heroes–villains, *Medal of Honor* goes even further in its explicative function. Here, the hierarchy among the good guys is clear and not surprisingly the US, represented by your boss, are superior. If you are American or working for the US, it is always right to kill those whom your superiors have classified as evil. If one is looking for myths in Barthes' sense of the word, this is a rather familiar candidate: whenever world peace is threatened, the US can and will save it – and in accomplishing this, all true Americans must do their duty.

The use of "Nazi-German" language seems to be important in all of the games, as a sign used for creating pastiche in the same way as the visual signifiers, but also as a sign of who is evil, that is, the enemy. There are implications in this that I consider quite problematic. One is that evil is something connected to ethnicity. Another follows from the use of Nazi-ness as a means for creating a pastiche feeling of the war years,

which also implies a distancing from our own time. In this way, the racist philosophy and the brutality performed by the Nazis becomes something connected to the, today, almost mythic inhabitants of the Third Reich, and not to similar actions performed by others in contemporary society.

However, I would propose that these ethical problems arise in particular in connection to a high level of presumed realism and historical immersion. It is difficult to see how the two *Wolfenstein* games would have any ideological impact of this kind. Both are in this respect rather harmless due to their extreme stereotyping, which turns into black humour or something of a parody of popular films featuring Nazi villains. The distance to the real world is particularly long in *Wolfenstein 3D*, as there are no connections to a historically familiar place in time; I would rather compare it to a brutal comic strip. It is also interesting that in the fantastic *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* – but not in the "realistic" *Medal of Honor* – some Germans are actually Good and must not be harmed. In their mythical conceptualisation of the world the *Medal of Honor* games appear more troublesome as they mix pretensions of authenticity and reality with the traditional explicatory function of a familiar narrative based on a simplified black-and-white morality and the concepts of Us and Them. The problem, as I see it, is not in the classic "Good Guys–Bad Guys"-scheme (which of course is often considered fundamental to our conception of the world). Here we have a classic fantasy adventure story with the Hero whose apocalyptic quest is to save the world from the forces of Evil. But what is different here is the combination of seriousness, immersive potential – this "is" reality – and an ideology celebrating a simplistic, authoritarian world. In these games the Bad Guys are Evil by nature, thus they must be exterminated – and ethnicity is the signal that differentiates between Good and Bad, us and them.

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Notes

1. *Medal of Honor: Underground* is of course more up-to-date compared to *Wolfenstein 3D*, although being a PlayStation 1 game, it is not as graphically advanced as the sequels made for PlayStation 2 and Xbox. Nevertheless, the strategies for creating immersive historicity used in *Underground* remain the same in more recent *Medal of Honor* games such as *Frontline*. It should also be said that all of these games appear in somewhat different versions depending on platform, but as I am examining design strategies on a metalevel, the choice of game version is not of any great importance. *Frontline*, for example, shares many similarities with the PC version *Allied Assault*.
2. This could also be seen as remediation or refashioning within the medium, especially in the *Wolfenstein 3D* case which is very different from the more recent games (cf. Bolter & Grusin 2002/1999, 49). This adds to my idea that investigation of an old game like *Wolfenstein 3D* could give important clues also to the new generation of WWII games.
3. The relation to "real reality" among gamers is frequently discussed: could the gamers be confused about the relation between reality and game and, consequently, could there be potential danger involved in playing digital games? Ryan (2001), who in her book *Narrative and Virtual Reality* applies the technological terms of immersion and interactivity on literary texts, reminds us that this has been a topic of discussion at least since the days of Cervantes – his hero Don Quixote's pitiful state of mental disorder clearly being derived from immense reading of fiction novels (10). Although this is another interesting field of investigation I will not go further into it here.
4. Philosophically, the question of the Other is not as simple as that – compare for example the quite differing views of Sartre and Lévinas.
5. The Wolfenstein concept was originally used in a much simpler Apple II game by Silas Warner called *Castle Wolfenstein* (1981) and its sequel *Beyond Castle Wolfenstein* (1984) (Kushner 2004/2003, 92; see also Moby Games 1999-2006).
6. There are several WWII FPS's using the same concept, which is basically about being a US elite soldier in Europe on and after D-day, mainly taking part in historic military campaigns. *Medal of Honor: Frontline* (as well as the PC version *Allied Assault*) is in this respect not very different from for example *Call of Duty* and *Brothers in Arms*.

7. The *Medal of Honor* games are produced by Steven Spielberg's company DreamWorks Interactive, a fact that offers an interesting dimension to the interplay between Spielberg's films and these games.
8. Steven Spielberg is the director of *Saving Private Ryan* and together with Tom Hanks – who is playing the main character in *Saving Private Ryan* – executive producer of *Band of Brothers*.
9. See interesting comments from *Medal of Honor* game designers on for example EA Games (2004a; 2006).
10. For example, the British publishing company Osprey has a large selection of books on military history and warfare ranging from ancient history to the most recent conflicts. When it comes to weapons and military equipment, the documentation of WWII is very detailed.
11. It should be noted that I have only looked at the singleplayer versions of the games where the gamer is not given a choice; you are American or French, and the enemies are Germans. In some cases, such as in the first missions of *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* (Xbox version *Tides of War*), there are also German-friendly Arabs on the enemy side.
12. On soundscapes, see van Leeuwen (1999) and Forrester (2001), who both refer to Schafer's notion.
13. It is important to notice that the use of soundtracks or soundscapes belongs to different kinds of games, the soundtrack kind being closer to the old arcade games and even pinball, while soundscapes are being used in games that aim to simulate reality. Therefore, the sound of a certain event may be used either as a sound effect in a soundtrack *or* as a part of the soundscape, depending on the type of game.
14. Following Peirce, there would of course also be the symbolic. However, although many of the signs examined in this study are mere symbols of Nazi ideology, their perceptive status today is rather that of icons.
15. German philosopher Ernst Cassirer wrote in exile in 1945: "If nowadays I happen to read a German book, published in these last ten years, not a political but a theoretical book, a work dealing with philosophical, historical, or economic problems – I find to my amazement that I no longer understand the German language. New words have been coined; and even the old ones are used in a new sense; they have undergone a deep change of meaning. […] Our ordinary words are charged with meanings; but these new-fangled words are charged with feelings and violent passions." (Cassirer 1961/1946, 283) He also gives an example of how a single syllable changes the emotional impact of a word by adding new connotations (284).
16. Although "Nazicity" would be more in line with Germanicity, I find "Nazi-ness" more suitable.
17. On this, see for example Gonzalo Frasca (2003).
18. When *Wolfenstein 3D* was first released in the US, people were mainly upset by the overwhelming amount of blood and violence as well as by the motion sickness that some experienced while playing the game. The Anti-Defamation League protested against the inclusion of swastikas and Nazis in the game, which was banned in

Germany for the same reason. But "[m]ost people weren't protesting much about shooting human beings; they were upset that players could shoot dogs." (Kushner 2004/2003, 114f.)

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