



# ACHIEVEMENT UNLOCKED

## The Americanness of Video Games



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## **Introduction**

On June 27, 2011, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against California District Court case 5:05-cv-04188-RMW, a previously blocked 2005 law prohibiting the sale of violent video games to minors.<sup>1</sup> The original law was struck down on the grounds that even children and teenagers enjoy free speech rights that are protected by the First Amendment (McCullagh). What the Supreme Court determined was whether or not video games, as a medium, should fall under the free speech protection of First Amendment. A norm for this is the Miller Test, or Three Pronged Obscenity Test, formulated in 1973's Miller vs. California case. The part of this test most relevant to video games is the third one: a medium is deemed to be obscene – and thus, not part of the First Amendment's protection – if 'the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value'.<sup>2</sup> This would suggest that video games have more in common with drugs, pornography and graffiti than novels, plays or movies.

Video game designer and writer James Portnow argues that 'if this law passes, it really could mean the end of the medium as a means of artistic expression. Games really will be a child's plaything, and nothing more' (Portnow and Floyd, Free Speech). Even when ignoring the politics of Portnow's statement, it shows a fundamental belief in the merits of video games as a means to produce and experience art, instead of as glorified toys. Now that it has officially been ruled that video games are a form of cultural expression, the legal system has arrived at the point that academia reached long ago. Nevertheless, this ruling alerts us to an opportunity for the American public to re-evaluate the cultural significance of the medium.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://i.n.com.com/pdf/ne/2005/california\\_ruling.pdf](http://i.n.com.com/pdf/ne/2005/california_ruling.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <http://laws.findlaw.com/us/413/15.html>

This thesis will take one of those opportunities and will ‘unlock the achievement’ – a common way of setting goals within a game – of introducing video games in the field of American Studies. Specifically, it will look at canonical American video games and the ways in which they reflect essential American cultural values.

This thesis will try to find ‘Americanness’ in video games and the relationship between the two. In other words: just how American are American video games? It is important that this is researched, since in the few decades of its existence, the cultural impact and influence of video games has been almost constantly growing. Assuming a similar growth in the next few decades, video games could very well become one of the most important denominators for cultural expression in the future. Video games could become a substantial part of American culture, greatly influencing the way the world and the U.S. itself views America.

Since its conception, the United States of America have expressively been trying to define themselves. From the moment De Crevecoeur asked himself ‘What, then, is the American?’ in 1782, many have tried to answer that question. From Tocqueville to Turner, most of them agreed that America was something special. In the words of Puritan leader John Winthrop in 1630: America is as a ‘City on a Hill upon with the eyes of the world upon it’ (Campbell and Kean 109-110). What exactly set the nation, its people and its culture and society apart, largely remained elusive.

American Studies too, has been described as a ‘search for American exceptionalism, for some sense of the differences between American culture and other cultures, [coming] out of a deep-seated preoccupation with national self-definition’ (Campbell and Kean 2). This, of course, is an extremely complex issue, touching upon the core of the discipline. From the older ideas of the American Creed, more recently linked to

people like Seymour Lipset and Samuel Huntington, to the current consensus of America's dynamic-discursive identity, American Studies scholars have problematized these issues in an open-ended debate. The theoretical framework for this research will be the interdisciplinary method used in American Studies, with an emphasis on using video games as primary sources. For the purposes of this study, the following working definition of 'Americanness' will be used: discussion about core concepts, such as freedom, individualism, treatment of minorities, capitalism, exceptionalism, change and mobility, expression, empowerment, self-improvement, and the position of these concepts in American society. Specifically, this thesis will show with concrete examples how these concepts are handled in video games.

Over time, scholars have looked at a wide variety of texts to determine, question and examine 'Americanness'. In recent years, more and more different forms of cultural expression have been included in these analyses. Popular culture and mass media, formerly neglected because they were regarded as 'low' culture, have been included in a 'fuller definition of the concept of text' (Campbell and Kean 13). Most of this new research includes forms of culture and media that had never before been analyzed properly, like television and comic books. However, American Studies has not fully engaged in the study of the emerging 'new media.'

Not only the United States are often seen as exceptional; video games, especially while they are still developing, are sometimes talked about with similar tones of uniqueness and specialness, and as a consequence, people have been trying to define their identity. In the foreword to an overview of video game history, game designer Peter Molyneux muses that 'our industry's greatest problem has been one of identity – where, culturally, do video games fit?' (Kent vii). On the other hand, Joost Raessens warns that new digital media should not be approached with the 'modernistic novelty myth': the idea that just because a

type of media is new and therefore unexplored, it must be special and unique. According to Raessens, computer games build upon a long tradition of participatory media. ‘Computer games have to be defined based on specific combinations of technical, social and economic characteristics and not on exclusive, essential ones’ (Raessens 373). He argues that video games form a specific, elaborate type of participatory media culture. They offer a combination of multimediality (video games are static and moving images, written text, music and sound effects, all created with the same digital code), virtuality (being an explorable virtual world), interactivity (the user is able to influence and/or control the proceedings, as well as (de)construct and interpret them) and connectivity (the ability to play with or against others and exchange ideas or even gameplay modifications, primarily through the internet) (Raessens 374). Even while considering Raessens’ warning, however, one could make the case, as Molyneux does, that video games are as exceptional as America sees itself – which makes the aim of this thesis to find the exceptional within the exceptional, as it were.

Another reason to study video games is that the medium is having an immense impact on the American public. Since the release of *Pong* in 1972, video games have been present as an almost constantly growing industry. Ever since the second half of the 1980s, video games have been one of the fastest growing types of medium in the world, leaving its mark on the American economy, entertainment industry, politics and popular culture: in 2003, sixty percent of all Americans over age six played interactive games on a regular basis, and over ninety percent of all games purchased were bought by adults over the age of eighteen (Raessens xii).

There has not been much research on the subject of narrative in video games in the field of American Studies. This thesis will try to do what scholars of American culture have been doing in regards to other forms of cultural expression for years: find the

‘Americanness’ of video games. As said, the main question this thesis will try to answer is in which ways essential cultural values from American culture are present in canonical American video games.

In the past decades, scholars have been reasonably extensive in their study of video games reasonably extensively. Yet these studies mostly take on a different character than those regarding more traditional media, such as cinema or novels. Many scholarly works on video games take the form of studies exploring the video game phenomenon and its influence on society. One example is the much debated relationship between violence in video games and violence in real life practiced by the adolescents playing them. Scholars ask, for example, if ‘an almost universal behavior (can) truly predict a rare behavior’ like a high school shooting (Ferguson 310). Others, especially journalists, look at the economical aspects of the industry, capitalizing on the Hollywood-level revenues of big-budget titles, such as 2007’s *Halo 3*. For instance, when ‘Microsoft rang up \$330 million in sales of the game in (its first) week,’ it was turning heads in the stock market (Greene).

Also rapidly emerging are works concentrating on video games themselves from other fields of study than cultural studies. These take a technological or design viewpoint, for example on how to create a believable world or how to guide a typical player in the desired direction. For example, in *Rules of Play*, Katie Salen and Mark Zimmerman aim to ‘outline not only the concepts behind the creation of meaningful play, but also concrete methods for putting these concepts to use’ (Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play* 2). In this case, narrative is only one of the treated concepts. Likewise, quite a few studies do treat video games as traditional texts, but from a psychological point of view. For example, Rebecca Tews has applied classic Jungian archetypes to various video games, such as likening the titular character in *Pac-Man* (1980) to ‘the animus or male presence on a quest to survive various trials’ (Tews 177). While these studies are perhaps more useful if one

desires to analyze video games as cultural texts, as they largely underline what makes video games different from traditional media, they do not address the actual narrative content of the games. While this thesis looks at the entire cultural side of the medium, it places more emphasis on narrative than traditionally is the case in analyses of video games.

One view predominant to the general public that needs to be addressed before continuing is that video games are modern toys: nothing more than children's playthings or playground time-wasters. The Supreme Court case mentioned above is a good example of this: proponents of the bill wanted to ban violent and sexually explicit games specifically to protect minors. But even if video games are not that far removed from hide-and-seek or tic-tac-toe, they are very interesting to look into. As Johan Huizinga wrote in his groundbreaking *Homo Ludens*, published in 1955, well before the dawn of the digital age: 'play and games, which have been maligned in recent history as trivial and frivolous, are in fact at the very center of what makes us human.' (in Salen and Zimmerman, *Game Design* 59) Nevertheless, the research in this thesis is based on the assumption that video games are an artistic medium, albeit one that is still growing into maturity. In fact, the likelihood of its growth is a major reason to research video games right now.

While novels, stage plays, movies and other narrative media are analyzed on their narrative elements, like plot, dialogue and premise, video game studies tend to stay rather superficial. If a film scholar would base his work on sexuality solely on whether male and female characters are portrayed dominantly or submissively on DVD covers, while drawing conclusions about the entire content of the work and not just that one aspect, they would not be taken seriously. As recently as 2007, however, academic work has been published with exactly these criteria regarding video game box covers (Burgess, Stermer and Burgess 3).

As evidenced above, there has not been much research on the subject of narrative in video games in the field of American Studies. This thesis will try to change this.



Not every video game is viable for cultural analysis. Moreover, the last thirty years have produced a vast library of games too extensive to analyze. For this research, some criteria are needed to choose which games to use and which not to use. The following section will explain which criteria will be used to determine if a certain game will be part of the research.

1. Richness. For some games, it would only be natural to exclude them. One important criterion on whether to include a title is the richness of the cultural expression within. Puzzle games, ranging from the simple, immensely popular, internet browser-based *Bejeweled* (2001) to more elaborate puzzle titles like *Angry Birds* (2009) simply do not have a story or narrative element to speak of – other than ‘match the colors’ or ‘build a tower’, and therefore do not lend themselves very well to this kind of research. The same goes for sports games like the *Madden NFL* series (1988-present), racing games or multiplayer shooting games like *Quake III Arena* (1999). The games simply rely too much on gameplay – the activities one performs while playing the game – as the sole form of experience.

2. Popularity (reception and sales figures). One of the most important criteria will be whether a game is canonical: the more impact a game has had on society, the video game industry itself or other games, the more interesting it is to analyze. This means that even if a game is not extremely successful commercially, its uniqueness or notability will likely make it canonical enough to be referenced anyway.

It should be noted that the case studies used in this thesis to provide an in-depth example of the way a certain aspect of American culture is present in video games are all fairly modern. The reason for this is that video games have become increasingly more complex, improving on themselves as time went by. As a result, these titles are some of the

most popular in the history of the medium, with high sales figures and positive critical reception. Because these numbers constantly change, they will not be recorded in this thesis, however they can be found online. For sales numbers [vgsales.wikia.com](http://vgsales.wikia.com) has been consulted and for critical reception, review aggregate websites such as [metacritic.com](http://metacritic.com) have been used.

3. Americanness. The danger of creating a circular argument with this criterion should be immediately obvious – of course American games are American. At first glance, looking only at American video games seems to artificially reduce the subject pool to fit a hypothesis. This is, however, not the case. By using this criterion, all examples are American by definition. This is a set variable, leaving the vastly more interesting question of why and in what manner their Americanness shapes their content in relation the core values mentioned above.

If a game depicts American culture or society in a manner fitting the American tradition, it matters less whether a game is actually produced in the United States or not. This is because the video game industry is a global industry and placing restrictions based on location is actually likely to give a less clear view on the subject. Of course, Japan is a major player in the video game industry, but it should speak for itself that however popular they are in the United States, titles like *The Legend of Zelda* (1986) or *Metal Gear Solid* (1998) are generally not considered American games, even though the latter takes place in the United States. These titles have a completely different cultural background.

To determine if a video game is distinctly ‘American,’ first a major issue needs to be defined: what exactly is ‘American?’ Of course, this touches upon one of the most fundamental and most heavily debated questions in the field of American Studies. There is no clear consensus on what makes a cultural text typically American. However, there are a number of themes visible throughout American cultural studies that have been more or less

accepted as being a typical expression of American culture: gender and sexuality, individuality and economy, race and diversity, and empire and expansionism. Note that this does not mean these themes encompass ‘American culture’ as a whole. Instead, they should be seen as representative of that culture and therefore usable as relative indicators of ‘Americanness.’

‘American’ video games will be classified for the purposes of this study as being made for (primarily) an American audience, touching upon the themes in American identity outlined above and being especially popular in the United States. Because video games are a global industry, this means that the developer and publisher do not have to be American for their product to be ‘American,’ as long as the cultural identity of their game is.

Two more important aspects determine the type of video game included in this thesis: genre and player agency. Genre is a common way to categorize video games, for example shooting games or exploration games. A modern trend in game development is to blend various genres in a title, creating an ‘action/adventure’ title or a ‘racing game with roleplaying elements’. Even though this makes it difficult to pigeonhole them, genre is still a useful way to categorize video games, as when using genres, most examples can be used to represent a large group of similar games. The aim of this study is to look at a broad spectrum of games throughout the entire medium, so most genres – excluding those who are not culturally rich enough for analysis – will be represented.

Agency is another aspect that needs to be addressed. Although it has been said that ‘film and television theories examining the use of moving imagery and sound are fairly well suited for analyzing video games,’ (Wolf 14) it is important to note that video games are a very different medium from traditional media like novels and films and therefore require a slightly different course of action when analyzing them. Most of this stems from the fact

that a player is both active participant and passive viewer: he has a certain amount of freedom and control, but at the same time he is limited by the developer's choices.

Because both the player and the creator have a degree of agency, it is increasingly difficult to settle on a dominant reading (Benshoff and Griffin 17) when discussing a video game. It is especially difficult to determine a dominant reading when a game can be played in a completely different way from how its creators likely intended it to be played, thus possibly significantly altering its cultural reading. This can also occur when the creators of a video game deliberately encourage the player influencing the narrative, or when the content and playing experience changes over time, like in the Massive Multiplayer Online game *World of Warcraft* (2004). Consequently, these types of games are mostly excluded in the research for this thesis.

This thesis will start with a brief overview of the history of video games and the relationship between video games and the United States. An extension of the introductory part of this thesis, such an overview will provide necessary background information and serve as a reference point for the rest of the research. For the most part, this chapter will draw from the work of video game journalist Stephen L. Kent.

After this overview, one chapter will be devoted to one of four typically American video game genres: (Western) *Role Playing Games*, *First Person Shooters*, *Open World Games* and *Management Sim(ulation Game)s*. The start of each chapter will describe what makes this genre so typically American, in its broadest sense. After that, one or more aspects of American culture and their presence in American video games in general will be discussed. At the end of each chapter, the scope will be narrowed and both earlier sections will be combined in a more extensive look at a specific game within one of these genres in

which these aspects are especially visible. These in-depth case studies are used to solidify the points made in the preceding text.

The first chapter of this thesis will look at gender representation and sexuality, with the Role Playing Game *Mass Effect 2* (2010) as a more in-depth example. Individualism, combined with related issues like capitalism and the American Dream, will be examined next. The video game serving as a case study will be Management Sim *The Sims* (2000). Third, the way America's cultural diversity is represented will be analyzed, looking closer at *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004), an Open World Game. The fourth, final aspect this thesis will observe is America as the above-mentioned 'city upon a hill': feelings of cultural superiority and a need for expansion to the rest of the world. The case study for this chapter will be a First Person Shooter: *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (2009). The conclusion of this thesis will summarize and connect the main findings and points made, and will thus answer the research question.

### **America and video games: a short history**

The research in this thesis is based on the assumption that the U.S. has a complicated relationship with the medium, one that makes examining the Americanness of video games a worthwhile subject of study. Before breaking down the research into themes, genres and specific examples, a broader perspective can be helpful. By looking at the history of video games, from its origins to today, this chapter will explore the relationship between American society and video games.

The title most credited as the first commercially available video game is Atari's *Pong* from 1972. Businessman Nolan Bushnell had asked programmer Allan Alcorn to create a table tennis-like electronic game 'featuring two paddles swatting a ball back and forth across a television screen' as a training exercise (Kent 37). The result was a runaway hit: Atari had sold eight thousand units by the end of 1974. In the following years, more games were created – most of them *Pong* derivatives – and other businesses, most notably pinball machine company Midway Manufacturing, entered the video game arena (Kent 39-40). Soon, video game machines were found everywhere across the United States, from bars and restaurants to convenience stores and even specially purposed 'arcades': venues filled with video game, pinball and slot machines. These machines were large, bulky, coin-operated cabinets that could only play one specific game. In addition to these machines, so-called 'home consoles' were created. Hooked up to an ordinary television, Atari's VCS (or 2600) and Mattel's Intellivision, among others, could play versions of the popular arcade games in consumers' own home. In a few short years, an entirely new, entirely American entertainment industry had been created. The U.S. being the country of origin of video games, this became an aspect of American national identity.

After an initial explosive growth the home console market took a brutal beating in 1983, caused by an overflow of games that were poorly received by the general public. The most striking examples are the dull and hard to play *E.T.* (1982) and the badly programmed VCS version of arcade hit *Pac-Man* (1983). Millions of copies were crushed with a steamroller and buried under cement in a landfill in the New Mexico desert by Atari, racking up 536 million dollar in losses (Kent 240). After a two-year slump, the Japanese company Nintendo's NES console – bundled with the iconic *Super Mario Bros.* (1986) – revitalized America's video game industry and culture. This time, however, the playing field was determined not by American corporations, but by Japanese: Nintendo, Sega and later Sony's PlayStation. Only with the release of Microsoft's Xbox in 2001 did it become possible to play games on American hardware, excluding the ever-present PC. By then, the industry had already changed considerably.

Of course, American game developers were still developing a very large part of the video games available to the American public, but the market was no longer dominated by them. Video games had become a global industry, and virtually all games were made with an international market in mind. This is true for American-made games that were not aimed exclusively at America, as well as foreign games published in America that more or less catered to a U.S. audience. For example, the American version of Nintendo's *The Legend of Zelda* (1986) famously included a thick instruction booklet listing all of the monsters and weapons in the game. The original Japanese audience wouldn't have needed this, because most of the game's content was inspired by Asian folklore (Kent 354).

As mentioned earlier, amid the Japanese-dominated console market, game development on the open platform of the personal computer did not require collaboration with hardware manufacturers and American developers therefore had considerably more freedom in choosing the thematic and narrative content of their products. In the 1980s and

1990s, this resulted in new game genres that were more-or-less deemed ‘American’ by video game journalists and players. Examples include the *First Person Shooter* (in which the player looks through the eyes of their avatar over the barrel of a gun, such as *Doom* (1993)), and *Graphic Adventure Games* (elaborate stories driven by dialog and puzzle solving, for example *King’s Quest* (1984)). Other examples are the American take on genres also used in Asian game development, like *Management Simulations* (where the player attempts to successfully build and run a business, like *Theme Park* (1994), created by the aforementioned Peter Molyneux), and *Open World Games* (like *World of Warcraft*, see below) and *Role Playing Games* emphasizing player choice and exploration over a linear narrative, like *Diablo* (1996) (Wolf 118-9, 126, 131). *Open World Games* and *Role Playing Games* can have a lot in common and many current games are a hybrid of the two, but for the purposes of this study, they will be viewed as separate genres.

Since the 2000s, with the help of the internet, video gaming has become more and more a global community. So-called *Massive Multiplayer Online* games, with *World of Warcraft* (2004) as its flagship, attempt to bind people from over the entire world together in what one player calls a ‘forum in which we give our lives meaning by entangling them in projects we undertake with others’ (Golub 39). In other words, this type of video game emphasizes the power the players have in sculpting their experience with it. The developers create a virtual world – or, as it is sometimes put, a ‘sandbox’ – with a few goals put in, like monsters to defeat or treasure to discover, but encourage the players themselves to form the social communities to reach these goals. Because of this, video games are becoming more multinational and multicultural.

So what exactly is the relationship between the U.S. and video games? As evidenced above, the relationship is a complicated one. Video games have started out as one of the few forms



of cultural expressions specifically originating in America. As its country of origin, many of the conventions surrounding video games have been dictated by American morals and values, both purposefully and subconsciously, as can be seen in later chapters. At the same time, it has been difficult for America to keep a grip on further developments. The video game market has been global from a few years after its outset, so America has had competitors for cultural dominance in the medium for decades.

When looking at ‘American’ video games – that is, games made with the American market in mind –, a pattern can be noticed. When the medium first arrived on the scene in the late 1970s, it was dominated by American culture. After recovering from the video game crash of 1983, the American video game industry took a backseat to the Japanese industry, and the games themselves took on a more Eastern flavor, having, for example, character designs inspired by Japanese comics or ninjas becoming an ordinary enemy not needing any introduction. With the help of the PC, U.S. video game developers were able to make their own culture more distinct in the games made in the mid-1990s. The last few years, however, we can notice a return to the culturally hybrid games, due to everyone being able to play with anyone over the internet.

On the whole, because U.S. culture has strongly influenced the invention of many basic video game principles, many games have taken on distinctly American cultural aspects and many more are painted in an American light. Examples of these aspects can be found in the following chapters.

## **Chapter 1: Role Playing Games, gender & sexuality**

This chapter will aim to explain a number of things. First, the genre of Role Playing Games will be analyzed in-depth. Specifically, it will be shown that one of the schools of thought on designing role playing games stems from quintessential American ideals. Second, it will give an overview of how gender and sexuality have been handled in iconic American video games, and how this relates to the general U.S. culture regarding these themes. Third, these two aspects will come together in the example *Mass Effect 2*, a role playing game with an emphasis on gender and sexuality.

### **Role playing games**

In every video game, you play a role. This is a necessity of the medium: the user is as much a participant as they are an observer. While in some games the role can be implicit, unseen or even the role of yourself as you play the game, it simply cannot be absent. For example, you can see your role in *Super Breakout* (1978) as an astronaut in a one-man space shuttle trying to break down layers of a force field, as the program instructions suggest (Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play* 377), or as yourself enjoying a purely abstract activity, much as you would fill out a crossword (Ryan 13). Most video games give their player some kind of backstory through opening titles, loading screens or even the back of the game's packaging, but others rely on the player to fill in the possible gaps in the narrative themselves. A narrative will always be present; even, ironically, if it is deliberately absent, because the player's paradigm expects it to be there (Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play* 378, 380).

No genre in video games emphasizes the notion that the player plays a role in the game's narrative as much as the aptly named *Role Playing Games* (RPGs). However, the way that role is filled can differ tremendously. On one side of the spectrum, the player's

character can be an almost-blank slate: its personality, appearance and skills can be determined by the player and while their adventures can be quite linear, almost nothing is set in stone. For example, in *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* (2002), one plays the role of a prisoner headed to the titular region of their world. Not only can the player choose how their character looks and what they can do, even their alleged crime is not specified. On the other side of the spectrum, RPGs can cast the player in the role of a rounded, defined person, like *Final Fantasy VII* (1997)'s Cloud Strife, a stoic and amnesiac ex-soldier. These two characters represent diametrically opposed design choices in RPGs; one (*Morrowind*'s character) is featured in an American game, the other (Cloud) in a Japanese game, and this is no coincidence.

In the U.S., RPGs were initially developed along the lines of tabletop role-playing games, like *Dungeons & Dragons*: the computer would take the role of the Dungeon Master (storyteller, rules referee and player of monsters). Tabletop role-playing games, and therefore American RPGs, have been built on the quintessential American ideas of personal freedom and success through effort. As *Dungeons & Dragons*' Player's Handbook notes: 'You can be and do anything you want (and) your character grows as the game continues' (Heinsoo 6). This is remarkably similar to many of the traits used in this thesis to provide a working definition of 'Americanness': freedom, individualism, change and mobility, expression, empowerment, and self-improvement. Thus, American role playing games embody the ideal of the American Dream in a nutshell: if you put your mind to it and work hard, you will be successful in any endeavor, even unlikely ones.

Japanese RPGs, on the other hand, found their inspiration in tactical board games and the visual stories of *manga* and *anime*. Instead of freedom, most stories were based on fate, duty and discipline. As a result, the storyline and characters became the primary focus of the game, instead of the game's world, its rules and the player within it (Kent 541).

As a result, although both Eastern and Western RPGs work with the same elements and mechanics, they represent different ways to use these. As a last example, when Cloud Strife gains a level and thus becomes stronger, all his abilities rise by one point, but his magic power and luck rise by two, as he is a magically inclined character who easily gets out of difficult situations. *Morrowind*'s character gets three points to be freely distributed among their statistics as the player sees fit. In other words: the Eastern RPG character develops along a path set by the game's developers, while its Western counterpart's development is the responsibility of its player.

This shows that Western Role Playing Games offer a genre of video games that is culturally very much American – or rather, a very American version of a genre with many other variations. The American RPG places its emphasis on freedom of choice: when playing a role, it is important in these games to make that role your own. However, because a video game needs to be programmed, the options for each choice will always be limited, resulting in something that can perhaps be more accurately described as 'illusion of choice' than 'freedom of choice'. Consequently, as will be evidenced in the case study below, the various options that are presented to the player show the embedded cultural values of the creators.

### **Gender & sexuality**

After a fifteen year development cycle – as opposed to a standard two to four years (Thompson) – first person shooter *Duke Nukem Forever* (2011) was finally released in June 2011. In those twelve years, the game went from being one of the most highly anticipated games ever – sequel to the very successful *Duke Nukem 3D* (1996) and flagship title for its developer 3D Realms – to laughing stock of the video game industry and press: *Duke*

*Nukem Forever* (or, pejoratively, *Duke Nukem Taking Forever*) became a cautionary tale of how not to develop a video game. Reasons for its failure were cited as having too large a budget, perfectionism regarding irrelevant details and a desire to be very innovative and subsequently starting over any time another developer innovated so as not to fall behind (Idem).

When, after 3D Realms' bankruptcy and completion by another developer, *Duke Nukem Forever* did see the light of day, reception was fairly lackluster. Reviewer Russ Pitts stated that the game felt like 'a 1997 game cryo-frozen for more than a decade.' One of the most notorious and controversial (non-technical) examples of its datedness was the game's handling of gender roles and sexuality. In one of the earliest scenes, the macho main character is being fellated by twins in schoolgirl outfits, while its spin on the 'capture the flag' multiplayer mode called 'capture the babe' involved carrying protesting women dressed as strippers over the shoulder while slapping their behind (Pitts). Pitts' argument is that *Duke Nukem Forever's* mentality regarding gender roles is one firmly rooted in the culture of the times it was conceived, which is now outdated.

Since the relatively early days of gaming in 1996, the medium has progressed with leaps and bound regarding gender roles. Even though it can be said that the role of women in video games is problematic, as shown below, it used to be far worse. *Duke Nukem 3D* was just as – if not more – offensive as *Duke Nukem Forever*, but the latter's controversy stems from a shift in expectation and general maturation of the medium and its players. Part of the explanation for this are the technical limitations of the very first video games setting a precedent: 'the princess has been kidnapped and Mario has to save her' was nothing more than an afterthought; a bare-bones excuse for the gameplay of *Super Mario Bros.*, but in one of their more recent outings, *Super Mario Galaxy* (2007), the princess is still nothing more than a damsel in distress for Mario to save.

Another reason is that video games have generally been seen as boy's toys. According to recent research data, this is getting less true each year. A 2010 survey shows that 'women age 18 or older represent a significantly greater portion of the game-playing population (33%) than boys age 17 or younger (20%)' (Entertainment Software Association). Jo Bryce and Jason Rutter argue that this paradox – that video games are seen as something for young males even though adult females play them more – can be explained because female gamers are marginalized and underrepresented and therefore overlooked (Bryce and Rutter 300).

Even so, with the potential for narrative complexity compared to the medium's earlier days and a widening target demographic, female game characters have been changing in the last few years. A good example is what Jeroen Jansz and Raynel G. Martis call 'the Lara phenomenon', the emergence of a new archetype: 'a tough and competent female character in a dominant position', named after the heroine of *Tomb Raider* (1996) video game icon Lara Croft (Jansz and Martis 142). This type of character is, as Birgit Richard puts it 'absolutely autonomous. Neither a man nor a family support her or take any responsibility; she is an independent individual, like a lone wolf, self-conscious, strong and clever' (Richard and Zaremba 285). These can be regarded as masculine traits.

On the other hand, Richard realizes that these characters are very polarizing, because they are still catering to, and essentially created for, a male audience, employing what the video game industry calls 'fanservice'. She points out that their bodies are very sexualized – i.e. big breasts, narrow waist, etcetera – their clothing is almost always revealing and often the camera employs the so-called male gaze. Video game heroines 'unite a tough killer instinct with pin-up style, aggression with fragility' – they offer 'an oscillation between genders' (ibidem 288). These aspects of female game characters take an even bigger place in their characterization when they aren't the hero of the game, but rather a sidekick, prize

or villain. Bryce writes that '[these] female characters in computer games fulfill roles linked to stereotypes of 'feminine' skills and characteristics, (...) emphasis[ing] gendered passivity of the female characters against male action,' not unlike gender roles in children's books (Bryce and Rutter 303). Characters that more or less break this mold are still the exception rather than the rule like *Half-Life 2* (2004)'s Alyx Vance and the star of the *Mass Effect* (2007) series, Commander Shepard.

One interesting example of modern-day depictions of gender roles and sexuality in gaming can be found in the self-proclaimed 'interactive drama' *Heavy Rain* (2010): the only female of the four playable characters, Madison Paige, is forced to strip at gunpoint. She is clearly not comfortable with this and the player is encouraged to outwit or overpower the man threatening her, while keeping Madison's dignity intact. If she succeeds without taking off more than one piece of clothing, the player is awarded the 'pride saved' achievement. In addition to the developers putting her in this situation, which is an example itself, this illustrates the double standard of female video game characters. On the one hand, it is entirely possible to make Madison strip naked – with little doubt a move to increase sex-appeal and fanservice. On the other hand, the character is visibly and audibly (though her thoughts, via voice-over) humiliated and frustrated at her vulnerability. The player is meant to feel this as well and is rewarded for making sure it does not get that far.

In conclusion, it's not that much of a stretch to say that video games have a complex relationship with both gender relations and depictions of sexuality. What started as, among other things, an unfortunate limitation of technology has had long-lasting consequences. For a long time, video games have told simple, stereotypical stories that catered to young male players. In recent years, both technology and player demographics have expanded, but the narrative content is only slowly adapting to this.

**Case study: *Mass Effect 2* (2010)**

From its founding in 1995, Canadian video game developer Bioware has made a name for itself in creating engaging, story- and choice-based role-playing games. Ever since its first successful title *Baldur's Gate* (1998), Bioware's games have been praised for their 'penchant for customizability (...) and fluid storylines' (Durrence). Following the Western tradition of RPG development, Bioware's titles allowed their players to create their in-game avatar the way they saw fit, and influence the narrative –to a certain programmable extent– through their own choices. Many American RPGs follow this trend, but Bioware's games have always been the pinnacle of story-based video games, priding itself on fleshed-out, realistic non-player characters (NPCs) and the ability to shape your own in-game character to your own wishes – not only from a design standpoint (e.g. appearance, skills, et cetera), but also from a narrative one (personality).

As Salen argues, most video games' important narrative is 'embedded: (...) pre-generated narrative content that exists prior to a player's interaction with the game' (Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play* 383). They take the form of 'story segments' or 'prescribed scenes' where control is taken away from the player in one form or another in order to advance the course of the game in the way the developer intended. The other way to advance a video game's narrative is more abstract and interactive –exploration of the game world, combat, puzzles etcetera. This form, called emergent narrative, Salen adds, 'arise(s) during play from the complex system of the game, often in unexpected ways. (...) The player's choices lead to unexpected narrative experiences' (idem).

Bioware's Science Fiction action RPG *Mass Effect 2* tries to minimize embedded narrative in favor of emergent narrative even in its story segments by allowing the player-controlled main character, Commander Shepard, to actively participate in conversations.



This is not that common in video games, and *Mass Effect 2* takes this even further by not only letting dialogue determine Shepard's disposition toward other characters, but also influencing whether or not to offer help, instigate a fight or forging friendships or grudges. Most of the time, the end result is the same, but the player can greatly influence the way to get there. In other words, the starting and ending points are fixed; the rest is open.

In one example, the goal in the story at this point in the game is to ensure the loyalty of Shepard's military squad mate Garrus Vakarian. Garrus carries a grudge towards Sidonis, a former friend who turned on him and got their team killed. Angry and bitter, Garrus is planning on assassinating Sidonis with a sniper rifle while Shepard keeps him busy and in Garrus's sights. If the player feels like it, Shepard can attempt to reason with Garrus, to try to solve the problem nonviolently. During the conversation with Sidonis, the player can have Garrus take the shot immediately, try to get Sidonis to tell his side of the story, or even, with a click of a button, stand in the way of Garrus's shot, saving his target's life. None of these options are presented as better than the other.<sup>3</sup>

'The role you choose to play in *Mass Effect* will have tremendous consequences on the galaxy around you. You will face moral dilemmas in which the decision you ultimately make will significantly alter the fate of civilized life in the galaxy,' (masseffect.bioware.com), Bioware's website proudly reads. In a video game promoting so much freedom, it is always interesting to look at what is not possible. Depending on the player's wishes, almost every intersection, or 'merging and mingling of multiple markers' (Ludvig 246) of Commander Shepard's identity can be determined: upper or lower class, polite or short-fused, attractive or ugly, strong or fragile, light or dark skinned, and even male or female.

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<sup>3</sup> For one example on how this scenario can play out, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ezih2ausUA4>

While both male and female Shepard have the option to flirt with or even start a relationship – and, indeed, have sex, with other characters – this is only possible with characters of the opposite gender. Some love interests are aliens – entirely different species; one of the alien romantic options could potentially kill Shepard if they would try to copulate, due to their difference in physiology. Another potential alien love interest has an extremely fragile immune system, and would risk death by simply removing her helmet. Even so, it is possible for the player to pursue them all the way to the bedroom – that is, if Shepard is of the opposite gender. Aliens in *Mass Effect* may be vastly different from humans, but even with aliens heterosexuality is the norm. Even more so than being white, for all his or her intersectional differences, every possible incarnation of Commander Shepard is, apparently, straight.

This is especially notable as in the previous game in the series, *Mass Effect*, Shepard (both male and female) could form a romantic relationship with Liara T'Soni, of the technically monogendered, but without exception commonly identified as female Asari race. A Youtube video of a brief non-revealing sex scene between the blue-skinned, but otherwise fairly anthropomorphic Liara and a female Shepard was heavily criticized by conservative bloggers and Fox News, who –falsely- claimed the game was filled with ‘full digital nudity and sex’ (Schiesel). In contrast, the most prominent Asari characters in the sequel are Morinth, a sexual predator, killing every man or woman she seduces, and her mother Samara, a religious zealot ordered to kill her for these ‘sins’. It is not that big a leap to see this as a reaction to the first game’s controversy, especially as the so-called ‘gay option’ has become no longer available in *Mass Effect 2*.

However, when an interviewer asked the developers why it was not possible for Commander Shepard to try to seduce a character of the same sex, one spokesman answered: ‘Well, the love interest is part of the story and it helps you care about the characters in a

different way. We still view it as... if you're picturing a PG-13 action movie. That's how we're trying to design it. So that's why the love interest is relatively light. (...) That's another thing we did better than we did before. We really lock you into character.' (John) Another developer explained: 'Sometimes, in some of our games, we are going to have a defined character with a more defined view. Almost like a third-person narrative. (...) For [*Mass Effect*] we've had more defined characters and sort of approaches to things, and they've had a more defined personality and a more defined approach to the way they've proceed through the game and the world' (idem).

In short, homosexuality is not part of the vision Bioware has for their main character. Virtually every part of Shepard's identity, including gender, can be influenced by the player, but changing his or her sexual orientation would change the character so fundamentally, it would supposedly disrupt the narrative. This claim suggests that (hetero)sexuality is something fundamental, something so interwoven in a character's performativity that it becomes a fixed point in their intersectional identity where almost all other points are loose. As noted feminist philosopher Judith Butler puts it: "Sex", thus, is not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is, it will be one of the norms by which the "one" becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility' (Butler 2). Her creators apparently disagree. According to them, ones gender is completely interchangeable, but ones sexuality is not. A character's gender can be written in such a way that the narrative of a story makes sense regardless, but changing his or her sexuality would, in their eyes, halt the flow too much. This may or may not be the case, but the fact stands that this choice has been made. Looking at Butler, one could say that this reflects to the heteronormative way the U.S. views sexuality.

All in all, America's current relationship with sexuality really shines through in *Mass Effect 2*. This may because of earlier controversies with a previous title in the

franchise, but this cannot account for everything. In particular, the game connects homosexuality with a certain performativity that is apparently not reconcilable with their developer's, and by extension their audience's view of how a character should act and behave.

As mentioned before, when players create their version of Commander Shepard to play as, among the options is a choice of gender. This choice is by far the most fundamental choice in character creation. The way Shepard is addressed and reacted to by other characters changes radically depending on his or her gender, much more than any other aspect of their identity. Shepard his- or herself, however, acts entirely the same, regardless of gender. The only exceptions are the romance storylines, and like mentioned above, these are restricted to heterosexual encounters. The male and female voice actors have read from exactly the same script. This suggests an interesting question: is gender that much of a construction that a male and a female version of the same fictional person can be entirely the same?

Answering this question is extremely difficult, but it can be argued that the female version of Commander Shepard is represented as considerably masculine, instead of male Shepard being portrayed as feminine. For example, many of the problems Shepard will face in *Mass Effect 2* will end in violence, even if the player tries to avoid it; diplomacy may sometimes be successful, but at other times Shepard will lose a favorable strategic position by trying to talk and will have to react in self-defense. Even the 'nice' (or 'paragon,' as the game calls it) dialogue will often sound just as tough and intimidating as the 'jerk' (or 'renegade') options. Of course, Commander Shepard is a soldier, and should be expected to act like one, but if a player would like to 'tend and befriend' their adversaries, generally seen as the feminine reaction to a threat, as opposed to the masculine 'fight or flight' (Taylor et al 411), she would find it hard to identify with a female Commander Shepard.

Even as a woman, Shepard is still very much written and characterized as a man. Shepard's voice actress Jennifer Hale has attributed the situation to the way that society perceives women in leadership positions (Bissell 48).

Although a standardized version of a gruff-looking male Shepard is present in all promotional material, ranging from box art to demos, there is also a standard female version: the one presented to a player not changing anything other than the gender of the standard character. Because of her invisibility from the public eye, however, Shepard has not fallen victim to the hypersexualized exploitation of many prominent female video game characters: her voice is lower than average and down-to-earth, her clothing covers her entire body, and her bust is fairly modest. All these things cannot be customized by the player, either. An interesting contrast is the character of Miranda Lawson, who does appear on *Mass Effect 2*'s promotional material and box art – along with male Shepard and Alien Thane Krios. Miranda has been modeled after the likeness of, and has been voiced by actress Yvonne Strahovski, and is in many ways (female) Shepard's opposite: large breasts and buttocks, emphasized by her costume, and shown by the chosen camera angles. Although Jansz suggests she is portrayed as 'strong and competent (...) in a dominant position' in a way similar to *Tomb Raider*'s Lara Croft (Jansz and Martis 147), she is evidently a male fantasy in a way the female Shepard is not.

In short, the main character of Commander Shepard is designed to be an avatar, a cipher for the player. Consequently, Shepard must be easy to identify with for the largest portion of *Mass Effect 2*'s players: young males. Ironically, not being very prominent outside of the game itself does make Shepard a more powerful female character than she perhaps would have been otherwise.

So what makes *Mass Effect 2* so distinctly American? For one, it is not only a role playing game, but uses the mechanical structure of the American style of role playing games. Secondly, it focuses a lot of its narrative on gender and sexuality, and here we see again a predominantly American flavor. For all its focus on freedom, choice and diversity, *Mass Effect 2* brings numerous limitations.

That is not to say that the many themes regarding gender roles in American culture and media are not present in this case study. A major restriction on the characters is their sexuality, for example portraying (straight) relationships between different species as more 'normal' and more acceptable than homosexuality. Furthermore, the option choosing Commander Shepard's gender is actually more like an option to turn a male character into a woman who is still represented as very masculine.

However, these limitations are remarkably in line with American conventions regarding gender and sexuality. Because this video game is marketed towards young, white, heterosexual males –the most privileged among the privileged, the limitations become even more visible than one would perhaps expect. The game tries very hard to offer a diverse experience with a lot of choice; more so than many other successful mainstream video games.

Because of this, it becomes even more apparent that the limitations and restrictions that are present are ingrained as fixed points in the public's consciousness. *Mass Effect 2* is a clear example of American culture regarding gender and sexuality. This can be contrasted to the way the U.S. regards race. It is possible in *Mass Effect 2* to pursue a relationship with alien characters (like the aforementioned Garrus Vakarian), but not with characters of the same gender as your avatar. Likewise, for example, the United States currently have a Black president, but it seems less likely to see a female or homosexual one in the near future.

## **Chapter 2: Management Sims, individuality & economy**

The focus of this chapter will be on a genre of video games that is slightly different from the other genres discussed in this thesis. Most Management Simulation Games are not driven by plot, characters and narrative in the same way that Role Playing Games, Open World Games and First Person Shooters are. The reason they are included in this thesis is simple; as explained below, most Management Sims are made in an extremely American way, focusing on important aspects of individuality and economy, like the American Dream, capitalism, and nuclear family values.

As a case study, *The Sims* is an ideal choice for two reasons. Firstly, *The Sims* is much more small-scale and narrative-driven than most other Management Sims, making it both easier to determine a dominant reading and more fitting with the rest of the in-depth examples presented in this thesis. Secondly, the aspects concerning individuality and family present in all Management Sims are more apparent in a game about managing a household than in one about managing a business.

### **Management Sims**

There are no mysteries as to why Management Sims are very American. At their core, Management Simulation Games are about working well within the rules and boundaries of a capitalist system. The game developer gives the player a business to run and the player's success is measured in things like revenue, fame, influence and defeating competing businesses. Note that the definition of 'business' can be stretched to encompass a lot of different flavors within the genre: a theme park (*Theme Park*), a soccer team (*Championship Manager* (1992)), a city (*Sim City* (1989)), a country (*Civilization* (1991)) or people (*Age of Empires*, 1997)), a household (*The Sims*) or even a religion – playing as a

literal God (*Black & White* (2001)). Variations in which the player manages an army are more focused on action and therefore have its own subgenre not covered in this chapter, called Turn-Based or Real-Time Strategy, depending on whether the player and the computer play at the same time or not.

While the type of business can differ greatly, the ‘management’ aspects of the genre, and thus the core gameplay, stays mostly the same. In his overview of ‘interactive genres for classifying video games’, Mark Wolf describes Management Sims as ‘games in which players must balance the use of limited resources to build or expand some kind of community, institution or empire, while dealing with [...] external forces, and often competition from other players as well’ (Wolf 116, 126). These external forces are mostly governed by chance, taking on a form that fits the game’s setting, like natural disasters in *Sim City* or player injuries in *Championship Manager*. The competing players (whether controlled by the computer or in actual multiplayer modes) vie for the same limited resources, be it actual natural resources in *Civilization* or religious followers in *Black & White*. It is the player’s task to guide Adam Smith’s Invisible Hand in the way that favor them the most. In any case, playing a Management Sim often comes down to the same mechanics, ingrained in the very core of capitalism: the goal, after all, is to increase one’s own wealth.

Of course, there are different ways to get these resources. One player may invest a large percentage of their money in research and development to get spectacular rollercoasters in his *Theme Park*, but if his competition has a more simple park, but can keep their prices low, the latter may still attract more visitors. Furthermore, some buildings (or football tactics, or theme park attractions) are only available if the player follows all their prerequisites in the so-called *tech tree*. Investing in a university in *Civilization* makes researching other technology faster and cheaper, but a choice to use the same resources to



strengthen your army may enable you to take technology from others by force, or stop your own country from being attacked. Because in *Civilization*, a player can pick a nation and its leader and take their fate into their own hands, frequently ahistorical scenarios happen. As one player aware of this notes: 'I was Mohandas Gandhi leading an army of tanks in my conquest of the peaceful Greeks. I was Genghis Khan building a massive railroad network to increase the yield of my farms. I was Queen Elizabeth mobilizing my entire economy in a desperate race to beat the Aztecs into space' (Butts).

The way Management Sims are controlled says a lot about the ideology behind them. Most of the time, nothing happens if the player does not act. This means that one can take as much time as needed to make a decision, even running simulations to test probable results. Also, the player has hands-off control, not commanding a single entity, but everything (or nothing, depending how you look at it) at once. The player, sitting in their chair playing the game, is playing themselves in the role of a manager, not a manager character. This can make the player feel empowered and liberated: 'we are not the passive consumer of this product of mass popular culture, we are allowed the illusion of not only 'human' but 'godly' agency', video game researcher Barry Atkins writes (Atkins 115).

The actual human characters in the game are most often one of the many variables to keep in mind. Their wellbeing is often one of the goals of the game, referred to as micro-management. In *Black & White*, villagers pray to their god – the player – that they need food, wood or protection. It is nigh impossible for the player to cater to everyone's needs, while also converting new believers to their side by performing miracles. Atkins notes that 'the need to pay attention to competing voices can be as frustrating an experience as keeping a live pet' (Atkins 119). In *Sim City*, residents do not want to live next to a chemical plant. The conflict to overcome is 'built into the game's responses [to the player's

decisions]: tax the citizens too much and they will move away, cut funding to the police station and crime will go up, and so on.’ (Wolf 15-16).

In conclusion, Management Sims present an American world. In this world, people are consumers first and foremost. They have a number of wants and needs that a clever businessperson can exploit. This person – the player – can take their time micro-managing the perfect result, but as any capitalist would predict, taking high risk produces high rewards. Ingrained into every Management Sim is the ideal of the American Dream: the player starts out with a small business, but through determination and motivation, they keep getting bigger and better. Also, there are no limitations on space and other resources. The sky is the limit.

### **Individuality & economy**

One example of a video game using economy as a theme is *BioShock* (2007). *BioShock* takes place in the underwater city of Rapture, founded in the 1950s as an objectivist utopia by a man named Andrew Ryan (a near-anagram of Ayn Rand, the creator of the objectivist ideology). As the player enters the city for the first time, he explains his ideology:

I am Andrew Ryan, and I'm here to ask you a question. 'Is a man not entitled to the sweat of his brow?' No, says the man in Washington; it belongs to the poor. No, says the man in the Vatican; it belongs to God. No, says the man in Moscow; it belongs to everyone. I rejected those answers. Instead, I chose something different. I chose the impossible. I chose Rapture! A city where the artist would not fear the censor, where the scientist would not be bound by petty morality, where the great would not be constrained by the small... and with the sweat of your brow, Rapture can become your city as well.

Throughout the game, the player is presented with objectivist moral dilemmas as well. The most important of these is how they get their resources: it can either be obtained as a reward

for saving little girls, or by killing them. The ruthlessness of the second option is rewarded by a larger amount of energy, in addition to being easier to do.

Sadly, not many video games use economic ideology to such a degree as *BioShock*: most games' relationship with economy is the way money is handled. Because money is a limited resource in most American video games, some measures are taken as to not to upset the game's economy. For example, in *World of Warcraft*, any item a player can sell, they can sell for 25% of what they would have to spend if they would buy it. Furthermore, in every shop, from the biggest town to the most remote village, prices are always the same.

Many video games use a variation of this practice, but the players are generally supposed to suspend their disbelief for this, as the intended way to make money is not by 'cheating', but by actually playing the game the way the developers intended it to be played. The exceptions are when using the player's character's skills to make money is actually a programmed option, like alchemy (making potions and poisons) or weapon crafting in *Morrowind*.

Another prevalent theme in American society is individuality. The early days of the Americas were situated in the untamed, lawless frontier lands. Every Pilgrim needed to be wary of possible threats to their personal liberty. In this setting, the first cultural expressions specifically originating in America began to emerge. Among them was the typical lone hero, the 'cowboy': 'a morally good man, fighting for justice [...], a gunslinger struggling with nature, lead[ing] a poor and lonesome life' (Savage 20). Similarly, in early video games specifically made for American audiences, like *Doom* or *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992), either the player is the only human character, or all other humans are enemies. Never does the player see friendly faces or even captured prisoners. In the early days of video games, it would have been an insurmountable challenge to design multiple players or write

reasonable artificial intelligence, so playing had to be a solitary experience by default. But even now, most multi-player games pit players against each other, instead of letting them cooperate. So even if part of this phenomenon can be traced back to technical limitations, there are other motives for emphasizing the individual in video games, even in modern ones. Part of the answer is that this enforces the frontier-era idea of the individual versus the world. It plays right into the cowboy archetype and is therefore very much American. In fact, since around the 1950s, ‘people began to see [this archetype] as an allegory for America itself’ (idem).

In fact, later games have tried to recreate a modern-day – or future – version of the frontier to evoke the same themes and esthetic: exploring and surviving the unknown, making your own rules in a lawless wilderness, and grasping opportunities. Examples are all across the board, ranging from the *Fallout* (1997) series – and especially its most recent installment, *Fallout New Vegas* (2011), an RPG set in a post-nuclear holocaust U.S., to *EVE Online* (2003), a Management Sim where the player must settle on newfound planets and protect its resources from other players through treaties, trade and piracy.

Over the years, as American society has settled down and has been regulated, the importance of the individual as a ‘discourse that [...] forms our concepts about our identity’ (Campbell and Kean 13) has become broader: it has begun to include social and cultural institutions, like the family, education, the media and religion (idem). The important concept of individuality has started to encompass more than a sole person: a modern American is also part of a family, a neighborhood, a church, a business, etcetera. All these social circles have different values and customs, and, as will be shown in the examination of *The Sims* below, it can be difficult to combine them in a video game experience.

Individuality and economy are areas in which America traditionally has tried to define its identity. From the lonesome frontier to nuclear family values, from the American Dream to political ideals like objectivism, much of what makes the United States ‘American’ can be found in these two themes. Likewise, American video games, especially Management Sims, place a substantial amount of value on the same issues.

**Case study: *The Sims* (2000)**

As explained above, most Management Sims do not have a set storyline or narrative every player experiences, which makes it a little more difficult to determine a dominant reading for this title than for the other case studies used in this thesis. This does not mean, however, that a collective experience is absent: people like Katie Salen and Jesper Juul have been trying to form a protocol for framing non-linear storytelling in video games, using quest structures, implicit goals and actions concerning conflict, pleasure and meaning to create a narrative. In addition, context provided by the game’s environment itself (from an introductory cinematic scene or simply the player’s surroundings or non-player characters) shape a narrative (Juul, *Games Telling Stories?*). In short, ‘we use narratives to make sense of our lives, and tell stories about a game we have played,’ even when it is not explicitly presented (Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play* 379-80).

For the purpose of this study, a video game with some resemblance of a clear narrative works best to demonstrate the core values within the mechanics. Therefore, most of the following examples are taken from the scripted *tutorial* (a short, interactive introductory guide for new players, explaining how to play) of the case study on economy and individuality: 2000’s hit video game *The Sims*.

The Sims has been described by its creator Will Wright as a ‘virtual doll’s house’ (McCafferty). This doll’s house would be located in modern, suburban America.

This is reflected in many ways the game is presented: the menu from which you pick your personal progress and settings is a suburban ‘neighborhood’ called ‘Sim Lane, Pleasantview, USA.’ It contains several residential lots of varying size and price, but all of them conform to certain common suburban tongue-in-cheek stereotypes. One example is that a teenager brings a newspaper to every lot each morning regardless of subscription and all other public service-type non-player characters like maids, firemen and burglars are always dressed in their ‘uniform’ even when they are off-duty. Also, every Sim (the ‘dolls’ in the dollhouse, created by the player), even a pickpocket or musician, goes off to work at set times and is carpooled there by a coworker. Another example is the in-game descriptions of all items and furniture, which are in a mock-style of infomercials, like for example a simple couch’s:

Softness and coziness. Expression and impression. This dynamically striped couch creates a statement both in form and function that says "my couch". Brings comfort that lasts as long as the endless harmony of the beautiful homestead. Nylon shell. Foam cushions. Durable plastic legs. Color: Nicotine.

All this is presented in a serious but slightly mocking style, as much an homage to stereotypical suburbia as it is a parody.

Furthermore, illustrating both the simplicity of a dollhouse and the morals of a 1950s family television comedy series, a number of things are entirely absent from *The Sims*: alcohol, religion and sex (one Sim will suggest ‘having a baby’ after extensive kissing, who then magically appears among a shower of sparks), and, strikingly, heteronormativity (every Sim is bisexual). Sequels and expansions to *The Sims* have added pets, vacations and visitable stores and bars, but alcohol, religion and sex have remained absent, suggesting a deliberate choice to exclude them.

As a final example, every career a Sim can have gives options to climb a corporate ladder. For some careers, this is logical, like serving in the military, business or politics, but

even a Sim in the ‘Slacker’ career, specifically created for the unambitious, with comparatively low working hours and small pay, can work his way up from ‘convenience store clerk’ to ‘professional party guest’. The American Dream is integrated so deeply in *The Sims*’s core mechanics, that its developers have made it impossible to waver from it.

New players are encouraged to start playing at Sim Lane 7. This is the home of Bob and Betty Newbie, who serve as an introduction to the world of *The Sims*. Both are unemployed, and one of the first things the player is asked to do is to find Bob a job. Nothing is mentioned about Betty in this regard, implicitly casting her as a housewife. Even though the Newbies are poor, Sim Lane 7 is a single detached house with a garden – albeit fairly small compared to the rest of the available lots. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that there simply are no single-room inner city apartments in *The Sims*. Furthermore, the Newbies live next door to the wealthy Goth family’s two-story mansion. This serves both as a indication of a different playing style for players and an implicit goal for the Newbie household; it is possible to keep up with the Joneses – or in this case, the Goths – but this takes much effort and dedication. Apart from that effort and dedication, nothing about the social standing they start with will stand in the way of Bob or Betty becoming a senator, theoretical physicist or surgeon. In true American fashion, anything is possible for anyone.

Before thinking of long-term goals, all Sims need to take care of their immediate needs first. Every Sim has a personality, composed by the player at their creation or a combination of their parents’, consisting of varying degrees of five traits: neat, outgoing, active, playful and nice. This personality dictates the immediate wants and needs of a Sim, represented in eight bars: hunger, comfort, hygiene, bladder, energy, fun, social and ‘room’ (whether they find their current environment aesthetically pleasing). An outgoing Sim’s ‘social’ bar drops more quickly than an introverted one’s, and a nice Sim will have an easier time filling it than a grumpy one. Likewise, different actions will fill or empty bars at

a different rate: a night of sleep will almost fill up the 'energy' and 'comfort' bars, but a cup of coffee will also give energy, at the cost of a fuller bladder. In this way, the player is constantly micromanaging *The Sims*'s most coveted resource: time. Do Bob and Betty hire a gardener and a maid to save time on housekeeping, allowing them to learn how to cook better or throw a party, or do they clean and garden themselves, having to work fewer days to afford a more comfortable couch?

This last example is especially striking, because a more comfortable couch will always, without exception, be more expensive than a less comfortable one. This makes aiming for more money and a higher social standing not a personal preference, but the only logical choice. In the world of *The Sims*, consumerist capitalism is at the core of everything a character does: working hard to fulfill your needs will always mean a promotion in your career; that promotion means you have more money; more money means the ability to buy more expensive stuff; and having more expensive stuff means you will become a happier person. Thus, while presented as a game where anything is possible and players can do whatever they want, succumbing to consumerist capitalism is a necessity for the player as well, making *The Sims* almost like a form of propaganda.

While the paragraph above already demonstrates *The Sims*'s Americanness, both as an example of the American genre of Management Sims and a video game in its own right, as a final argument it will be compared to its closest non-American example, Nintendo's *Animal Crossing* (2001).

Superficially, *Animal Crossing* and *The Sims* offer the same experience: living an ordinary life in a community, building and furnishing a house, forming relationships with other characters and trying to become as happy as possible. In execution, however, the two games are very different. Where *The Sims* is built around making money through work and



dedication and using that money to buy better, more expensive possessions, *Animal Crossing* is set in a different kind of escapist utopia: a rustic forest filled with anthropomorphic animals. The player earns money by participating in leisure activities like fishing and painting, and become happier by arranging their possessions in a pleasing way, combining colors, patterns and sizes. Their 'score' is not represented by numbers or graphs, but by an abstraction, using feng shui as one of its main determinants. Furthermore, in *Animal Crossing* the player controls only one character directly, as opposed to the more detached Management Sim-styled *The Sims*, where the player has absolute control over every character and its motivations. *Animal Crossing* and *The Sims* are two very different takes on the same genre: one is Japanese and one is American. Both take similar ideas and make them into video games that play in very different ways, because they incorporate very different cultural ideals regarding economy and individuality.

In conclusion, economy and individuality can shape a video game in such a way, that a particular game in a certain genre will play completely differently from another, depending on its country of origin. As seen in *The Sims*, many of the core values this thesis uses to determine Americanness are not only prevalent, but actually shape the way the game feels and plays. The entire genre of Management Sims, originating in the United States, would – and does – be extremely different stripped of its American elements.

### **Chapter 3: Open World Games, race & diversity**

This chapter will take one of the most recent arrivals on the stage of video games, the genre of Open World Games, and will combine it with one of the oldest themes in American history: race and diversity. This dynamic between old and new will bring to light some of the more prevalent examples of American culture in both. In the case study, *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, will answer the question in what manner the Americanness of Open World Games and the American stance on diversity and race in popular culture can be found in American video games.

#### **Open World Games**

Richard Garriott, the creator of the successful Role Playing Game *Ultima* (1982) and its sequels, had always dreamed of creating ‘a fantasy game involving several thousand people who can all play in a shared fantasy world’ (Gunther). On September 24, 1997, one of the most ambitious video games of its time saw the light: the online servers for Garriott’s *Ultima Online* (1997) went live. *Ultima Online* was the first successful mainstream video game that was played solely over the internet by over a hundred thousand people at once. It proved so popular, and so ambitious, that less than two years later, *Ultima Online* accounts – all progress of a single player’s character – were auctioned off for thousands of dollars (Branscum).

Because *Ultima* is a series of Role Playing Games, the new genre *Ultima Online* pioneered was called Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games, or MMORPGs. Since then however, other genres, like the recent shooter *Borderlands* (2009) have picked up the idea of an open, shared world, so most online variants have simply been called MMOs. The MMO playing style has also seeped into single-player and offline video games

– the focus of this thesis, but the genre does not (yet) have a specific, all-encompassing name. Some developers and journalists call them ‘sandbox games’, comparing the feeling of being able to go anywhere and do anything they want to playing in a sandbox, but as this term underplays the narrative drive and clearly-defined themes most of these games have, in this thesis the genre will be referred to as ‘Open World Games’.

The reason that OWGs have only been around for little more than a decade is more of a technical than an artistic one. Not only did internet connections need to be fast, reliable and widely available enough to support the kind of traffic associated with playing video games with thousands of people at the same time, the games themselves also needed to accommodate players who had a lot more agency and expressive freedom than was traditional in a video game – after all, being able to ‘do whatever you want’ is one of the main attractions of playing an OWG.

Both main elements of Open World Games – expressive freedom and player agency – have been used before *Ultima Online* combined them. Interestingly, both games in which expressive freedom the main concern and games focusing on expressive freedom originated and became popular in the United States. In the case of expressive freedom, ‘networked game software known as MUDs (Multi-User Domains) enabled people from all over the world to join online virtual communities,’ Sherry Turkle writes. ‘The key element of MUDing [is] the creation and projection of a persona into virtual space.’ MUDs were mostly about meeting and talking to other people though extremely customizable avatars. Some players Turkle interviewed in 1995 created an online persona that represented (a certain aspect of) their own personality, or a character that embodied their fantasies (Turkle 207-273). Part chatroom, part roleplaying, MUDs allowed players to create an expressive, anonymous version of the self. As pointed out in the chapter on *Mass Effect 2*, this has traveled over to other games as well, OWGs in particular.

The increased player agency in Open World Games brought along various problems of its own. These also needed a level of processing power and other resources that have only become available to video game developers in recent years. It is considerably easier to only give a player the ability to run, jump and maybe shoot – like in *Super Mario Bros.* – than to enable them to go anywhere in a three-dimensional world, interacting with non-player characters in ways they see fit (e.g. strike up a conversation, hit them in the face, or simply ignore them) and formulating their own priorities. As all these options need to be programmed in, most of this heightened agency and choice is an illusion. Tanya Krzywinska notes that while a player in *World of Warcraft* may be able to choose to create their character from a great number of appearances and abilities, all available actions are structured around ‘quests’ that may or may not be accomplished in any order. An OWG ‘facilitates a balance between player agency and restriction,’ but ‘in many respects [...] follow the model set by *Everquest*’ ((1999), an early MMORPG, akin to *Ultima Online*), she concludes (Krzywinska 101).

### **Race & diversity**

2008’s *Mirror’s Edge* was a video game that tried many different things that were out of the mainstream at the time. It was based on acrobatics and reflexes, but was presented in a first-person view – while this might not seem that unorthodox, many players experienced a form of motion sickness upon playing for the first time, only becoming comfortable after some time. It also had a distinctive red and white color scheme, while many of its competitors were using more realistic tones, i.e. brown, grey and orange. The feature that made *Mirror’s Edge* stand out the most by far, however, was its choice in protagonist and player character: Faith Connors, an Asian-American woman.

When *Mirror's Edge* sold poorly, all of the above features were mentioned to be a factor in the game's failure. These features, even the last one, were considered major risks, and to a degree, failed experiments. The vast majority of modern American video games star dark-haired, stubbly-cheeked white males in their thirties. While a rise in video game heroines can be seen (as seen in chapter one), and occasionally an ethnic protagonist shows up, it is practically unheard of for an American game to be starring, for example, a non-white woman. Shamus Young asks himself why this is, as 'all gruff white guys may start to look and sound alike after a while. With the industry increasingly being driven by sequels, branding, and name recognition, why does everyone insist on making their signature characters look the same?' The answer: 'The reason we're usually given as to why characters are so shockingly homogeneous [...] is this: Gamers need to have a character they can relate to' (Young). As with gender, racial diversity is a factor that does not gel well with the perceived dominant video game playing demographic, making American video game protagonists very homogeneous.

The earlier-discussed *Mass Effect 2* puts another spin on race in video games. The player's character, Commander Shepard, is in many ways customizable, including skin color. As *Mass Effect 2* is a fully voiced game, the character is depicted by two different voice actors. Note that a Shepard with non-white skin is still voiced by an actor audibly identifiable as Caucasian. As is normally the case in American popular culture, whiteness is the norm. In every case, the voices stay 'white' and the player is always subconsciously reminded that their choice deviates from the standard. It is possible to create a non-white character cosmetically, but not ethnically. One could say that the game thereby contributes to the 'working fabric whereby America, explicitly or subliminally, has projected itself as overwhelmingly a white cultural edifice' (Lee 254).

This is why *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, is such a great case study for examining race and diversity in American video games. In addition to being an Open World Game, it stars a black main character dealing with the social and racial issues surrounding him. Plus, unlike *Mirror's Edge*, the game has been a huge success, being the highest-selling video game for the Playstation 2 (Video Game Sales Wiki).

In conclusion, Open World Games provide a sometimes uneasy alliance between fulfilling the player's desires to express themselves and having the freedom to do whatever they want on the one side – both on the list of core concepts of what makes something 'American' – and telling a coherent story with the additional problem that not every player wants the same things on the other.

One of these issues is the way race and diversity is represented. As mentioned before, many video games try to appeal to as broad an audience as possible. This, combined with young, white males being the most sought after demographic, means that video game player characters are extremely homogeneous: every intersection of the character is whatever the norm is. This makes it interesting to look at the times when that norm is broken, like in *GTA: San Andreas*.

#### **Case study: *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004)**

For the past decade, video game developer Rockstar has been steadily releasing new entries into its *Grand Theft Auto* (GTA) series. In every iteration, the player controls a low-ranking criminal trying to survive in Rockstar's version of a major city in the United States. This character will climb the ranks of a criminal organization, work for different rivaling factions and eventually live out the American Dream and end up the unrivaled underworld crime boss of that city.

This calls to mind Daniel Bell's assessment of organized crime for immigrant groups coming to the U.S.: because the American business system is difficult to break into, 'for the young criminal, hunting in the asphalt jungle of the crowded city, it was not the businessman with his wily manipulation of numbers but the "man with the gun" [the gangster] who was the American hero' (Bell 111). As time went by, 'American society became more "organized," as the American businessman became more "civilized" and less "buccaneering," [and] so did the American racketeer. And just as there were important changes in the structure of business enterprise, so the "institutionalized" criminal enterprise was transformed too' (ibidem 114). In other words, as the possibility of climbing the social ladder came closer, American organized crime started to resemble American businesses though becoming 'legitimate' and shedding their shady image – while still committing illegal acts.

Especially since *Grand Theft Auto III* (2001), which was released on the then-new Playstation 2 and Xbox, and took full advantage of their technological improvements, the series has incorporated increasingly elaborate storylines. Although *GTA III*'s nameless, mute protagonist 'usually just listens to other characters talking' where 'the only communicative action left to the player is sound the horn of a car,' (Lankosi, Heliö and Ekman 7) his world is filled with characters and places with a defined personality. Its sequel – and *San Andreas*'s predecessor – *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (2002) places Italian American ex-convict Tommy Vercetti in a version of Miami in the 1980s. Its storyline draws heavily from gangster films from that time period, *Scarface* being the most obvious, and borders on being an homage.

*San Andreas*, meanwhile, casts the player into the role of a black man called Carl Johnson and places them in 1990s California. Carl, or CJ, is not only defined by his (and

therefore the player's) actions and choices, but maybe even more so by his social class, economical status and, most importantly, his race. Having grown up in Rockstar's version of the street gang-dominated Compton neighborhood of Los Angeles, CJ will agree to the many petty crimes and morally ambiguous propositions of his friends (presented as 'quests' in a free to explore city, like many OWGs) mainly because of a skewed sense of loyalty and desire to be accepted into a group. Although CJ is fundamentally a morally just person and frequently opposes the more outlandish quests, he needs to go along grudgingly because he initially has no way to escape the 'black macho criminal-capitalist ethic and often violently sexist and homophobic' ghetto filled with 'trigger-happy, foul-mouthed, sex-oriented violent gangsters quarreling amongst themselves' (Benshoff and Griffin 92). Likewise, the player needs to go along as well. Operating on the wrong side of the law is not a choice for CJ and anyone playing *San Andreas*: it is a necessity.

Being an Open World Game, this game encourages agency. Players can ignore the quests in *San Andreas* and focus on their own optional goals, be it exploration, customizing CJ's look, practicing skills or even going on a murderous rampage (Juul, Without A Goal 195-6). If they want to open up the rest of the game's environment, however, they simply need to go along with their friend's quests; only when a certain number of these are completed, do the other areas of *San Andreas* (its versions of San Francisco and Las Vegas) become accessible to the player. Not coincidentally, during the time CJ spends in these cities, away from the influence of his history and socio-economical background, he grows and flourishes as a person. Slowly but steadily he replaces drive-by shootings and armed robbery with setting up multiple businesses, taking on human traffickers, drug cartels and corrupt law enforcement before returning home a changed man and setting things right, culminating in a parallel to the 1992 South Central riots, but not before realizing he does not belong there anymore.



Just because Carl and the player can escape the harsh reality of being a poor black youth in a dead-end neighborhood in a rags-to-riches story based on the American Dream, the city's many inhabitants cannot. They will always live in a place where you need to eat to stay alive (which goes for CJ as well), but the only available nourishment comes from fast food restaurants. Video game designer and critic Ian Bogost points out that 'the dietary features of *San Andreas* are rudimentary, but the fact that the player must feed his character to continue playing does draw attention to limited material conditions the game provides for satisfying that need, subtly exposing the fact that problems of obesity and malnutrition in poor communities can partly be attributed to the limited ease and affordability of fast food' (Bogost, *Persuasive Games* 114).

Ultimately, CJ does not get the acceptance and respect he seeks with his all-black community from the ghetto: he is repeatedly betrayed, belittled, taken for granted and put into positions he dislikes out of necessity. Only when he finds his own way in the world and surrounds himself with friends and allies from all ethnicities – among others, his Hispanic brother-in-law, a Chinese businessman, a Jewish lawyer – he truly finds his place in the world as a person and an American. Taken as a metaphor for the United States as a whole, *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*'s group of protagonists represents the ultimate success of the melting pot ideology: becoming a unified whole by combining what its different ethnicities have to offer.

*Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* brings many themes and issues in American culture to the surface, both in its gameplay and its storyline. It is an Open World Game, placing much value on freedom, exploration and expression and at the same time it is thematically structured around race and diversity, complete with all its social and economic aspects. Scholars like Bogost and Juul both argue that *San Andreas* takes issues they see as typically

American, like self-improvement, change, freedom and potential to grow, but also the struggle to break free of the restraints of one's background, socio-economic standing and prejudice regarding ethnicity, and projects them into the video game equivalent of a period piece.

#### **Chapter 4: First Person Shooters, empire & expansionism**

In this final chapter, the most modern trends of video gaming will be discussed. Although it has been around for a long time, the First Person Shooter genre determines a large part of the video game landscape nowadays, especially in the U.S. This appears to be no coincidence, as First Person Shooters have the potential to embody many American cultural values, like individual freedom, the right of empowerment and the feeling of ‘us against them’.

Second, it will show how in the last few years, by situating their subject matter in modern-day international conflicts, video games in general have taken a stance in modern American expansionism, particularly the ‘war on terror’. This, and other facets of what can be categorized as ‘empire’, like Othering, cultural imperialism and international diplomacy, will be handled in the middle part of this chapter. Finally, in a deeper look at *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, this chapter will show what these themes can look like in practice.

#### **First Person Shooters**

If there is one genre in video games that is quintessentially American, it is the First Person Shooter, or FPS for short. Simply put, in an FPS the player is looking through the eyes of the protagonist, most of the time over the barrel of a gun. This way, the players feels immersed, because they become an even more active participant in the proceedings. A player might summarize a video game from a third person perspective as ‘Super Mario is having an adventure’. If this game would have had a first person perspective, they might be more inclined to say ‘I am having an adventure’. What is essentially a design choice, ‘the

movement of a virtual “camera” through a computer graphic scene’ has a fundamental impact on how a game is played (Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan xi).

American culture places much value on individuality, personal freedom and the ability to shape one’s own fate. As seen in the previous chapters, in video games, this translates into customizable avatars, influence in building a world and insight into the rules, among other things. Another element of these traits is making the player themselves the hero of the story, acting directly from the hero’s perspective, instead of letting them simply play the role of the hero – by making the game in first person. By becoming what Michael Nitsche calls the ‘focalizer’ of the action, ‘the point from which the elements are viewed’ combining the roles of storyteller, actor and audience, by literally taking matters into their own hands (Nitsche 145-6). Note that many FPSs do have predetermined characters through whose eyes the player looks: true blank slate avatars are more commonly found in (first person) RPGs and Open World Games.

Nevertheless, video games presented in first person are far more popular in the United States than elsewhere in the world. Of the best-selling video games since 1989 in the U.S., two of the top ten were first person – First Person Shooters, even – (*Halo 2*, 2004 and *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, 2007), while none in the worldwide top twenty were (Video Game Sales Wiki). Incidentally, the other games on the U.S. best-seller list were sports games (the *Madden NFL* football series), music games (the *Guitar Hero* (2005) series) and the *Grand Theft Auto* OWGs already discussed.

What makes the FPS such an American genre is not only the ‘first person’ part, but also the ‘shooter’ part. America’s relationship with firearms is a complicated one, especially its connection to the aforementioned personal liberty. America’s conceptualization of conflict stems from the enlightenment philosophies the nation was founded on and, according to game designer James Portnow, allows for the success of video games like

FPSs in the U.S. Americans ‘see the gun as symbol of independence and empowerment, [...] as a tool that enables its owner to make sure that the expression of their will is not unduly constrained’ (Portnow and Floyd, *The Myth of the Gun*). In contrast, ‘in Japanese games, the gun isn’t so much a gun as it is an extension of the self, [...] a representation of internal force, rather than external power’ and is ‘distinctly a Shinto and Buddhist conceptualization’ (idem). Examples of this are the *Mega Man* (1987) series, in which the player must absorb the powers and abilities of defeated enemies to become a unified whole and thus a better person to beat the main villain. In contrast, *Half-Life* (1998)’s hero Gordon Freeman (whose last name is probably not a coincidence) is a scrawny theoretical physicist who can easily use any gun he picks up without much weapons training.

This idea of the ‘citizen soldier’, that anyone can use a firearm to defend themselves, their property and their ideals if needed, to which Gordon Freeman also adheres, is deep-seated in the American consciousness. It calls back to the idea of the individual versus the world already mentioned in the chapter about individuality. Not only is the cowboy – the quintessentially American hero of the frontier – a loner, he is also an expert marksman. His gun, and maybe his horse, are all he needs to live his life according to his ideals.

In conclusion, the First Person Shooter is not only perfectly suited for an American audience, but it can in fact be claimed that the entire genre could not thrive without relying on American ideology, history and culture, making it one of the most American genres currently available. This also explains why the FPS genre is so much more popular and successful in America than in other parts of the world

## **Empire & expansionalism**

Video games are no stranger to controversy. Many conservative voices shouting for stricter guidelines on the content of the medium point to the violence toward human beings in modern games as proof that modern video games are ‘murder simulators’. In this section, it will be shown that while a case can certainly be made for this, much controversy also stems from the way this violence is portrayed. American video games frequently show elements of Othering, Orientalism, cultural imperialism and historical revisionism.

When U.S. Army Third Battalion First Marines returned home from the second battle of Fallujah in early 2005, they encountered a problem many other veterans before them had faced. They found that they had trouble getting people to understand what they had experienced in Iraq. Like their grandfathers who fought in Vietnam, these soldiers looked to the popular culture they loved to make their voices heard. While their grandfathers turned to music, these marines turned to video games. They approached developer studio Atomic Games, who had consulted the squad in the past for making training tools for the military, and asked them to create a game mirroring their experiences.

This game (working title: *Six Days in Fallujah*) would not primarily serve as lighthearted entertainment, but, in the words of Atomic Games president Peter Tamte, be ‘insightful. [...] Presenting players with the dilemmas the Marines saw in Fallujah and then giving them the choice of how to handle that dilemma’ (Nelson). To use a film allegory: its aim was to be more like a documentary than a blockbuster. As everyone involved expected, *Six Days in Fallujah* stirred up quite a bit of controversy. In the end, publisher Konami withdrew their support for the game and Atomic Games went bankrupt.

What is interesting is that most of the controversy surrounding *Six Days in Fallujah* was centered around the claim that it was ‘too realistic’, set during a real recent historical battle and using actual names of soldiers who died there. There are many sides to this

debate, but this thesis is not the ideal place to contribute to it. Instead, the focus will be on the fact that this type of video game is actually not an incident, but a trend. Furthermore, this trend fits American early twenty-first century culture perfectly.

Many video games revolve around conflict: in order to win, the player has to overcome opposition, be it puzzles, obstacles or enemies. In early games, the enemies consisted of monsters, wild animals, aliens, or other non-humans. Starting with games like *Wolfenstein 3D*, human antagonists were introduced, although it was made certain by the developers that they were ‘safe’ targets, like zombies or Nazi officers. Even so, as early as 1976 a national outcry against video game violence was reported. This outcry was caused specifically because of the option for the player to kill humanoid enemies (Wolf 40).

The trend of using humans as opposition has grown in the last few decades. At the same time, the criticism to violence in games has only increased. Consequently, many games fall back on relying on the ‘safe’ ‘bad guys’. Zombies and Nazis have been replaced by their apparent modern equivalents: mercenaries and terrorists. Many parts of military games set in modern times, like *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (and its sequel, used in the case study below) play out like revenge-filled power fantasies, a large part of the enemies being turban-wearing brown men shouting in Arabic.

Modern video games that do not deal with military themes do not escape this clear case of Othering – putting a specific group of people in a negative stereotypical light. *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune* (2007)'s star Nathan Drake is presented as a video game version of heroes like Indiana Jones: a wise-cracking, carefree adventurer hunting mythical treasure in exotic locales – El Dorado, for example, in *Drake's Fortune*. In his adventures, he not only unapologetically kills a large number of local people, but makes fun of their supposedly backward culture, clearly believing that his own American culture is better. At

best, this can be explained as ignorance and moral relativism; at worst, as cultural imperialism.

In games set in historical times, the opposition consists of enemy soldiers: seemingly a clear-cut ‘kill or be killed’ situation. Even so, experiencing the hardships of war as a player rather than an audience – like in books or films – can provide a different experience. In two separate works, video game expert Barry Atkins has written about video games set in historical conflict. In one work, he presents the idea of video games like *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* (2002) having, ‘positive didactic effects, just as narrative history has.’ (Atkins 91) ‘[The] representation of the chaotic and confused storming the Normandy beaches, the frequency of in-game death must have made the simple point that allows the game to evade critique for suggesting that ‘war is fun’. [...] Only a madman would see this as an attractive advertisement for actually being there on the day.’ (idem). In the other work, he juxtaposes this by noting that, however realistic, these kinds of games will always be a fantasy, and that 9/11 and the War on Terror have hit very close to home for some developer studios, even prompting some to change the setting of their projects from the Gulf War to Vietnam to create some emotional distance for both themselves and the player (Atkins and Krzywinska 79). Add to all this the undisputable fact that the player’s side – more often than not the Americans – always wins eventually, as this is the goal of the game, and a certain historical revisionism can be noticed.

Modern video games display a definite tendency to show America as better than the rest of the world. Games set in the past either glorify America’s successes, like the Second World War, or show a version of past events that casts America(ns) in a positive light, like *Call Of Juarez: Bound In Blood* (2009). Meanwhile, games set in the present have increasingly used Othering, Orientalism and cultural imperialism to promote America.



**Case study: *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (2009)**

As both a First Person Shooter and a video game portraying – no surprise – modern warfare, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* embodies most of the elements outlined above. In this section, a deeper look at the game, and one specific mission in particular, will show exactly how.

One part of *Modern Warfare 2* was extremely controversial, and made to be so: the mission called ‘No Russian’. Before the mission is started, the player is presented with a ‘disturbing content notice’, telling them that the mission ‘may be disturbing or offensive to some players’ and that they ‘may skip the mission at anytime’ and ‘will not be penalized in terms of game completion.’

As soon as the mission starts, it becomes apparent why. As U.S. Army Ranger Joseph Allen, last seen – and played as – in Afghanistan training troops, the player is undercover in Russian ultranationalist Vladimir Makarov’s terrorist cell. The only objective (which are usually quite comprehensive) the player gets is ‘follow Makarov’s lead.’ Before the player can really grasp what’s happening the group gets out of an elevator, revealing their location as a Russian airport. They are told to speak ‘no Russian’ as they start massacring unarmed innocent civilians. The player is not punished for not participating, but is expected to maintain Allen’s cover. Just before making their getaway, Makarov shoots Allen dead, revealing his true plan: the only evidence the Russian people will find will be a dead American soldier, and because nobody spoke Russian, everyone will assume this was not domestic terrorism, but an unprovoked attack by the U.S. ‘The American thought he

could deceive us,' he explains to the rest of his group. 'When they find that body... all of Russia will cry for war.'<sup>4</sup>

'No Russian' stirred up a lot of controversy. The option to skip the mission and accompanying text already were a reaction to the media outcry following the leaking of the script while the game was still in development. The mission itself was removed from the Russian version of the game and many people spoke shame of it, from political groups to the media and the video game community itself (Chalk).

What does the 'No Russian' scene mean for the rest of *Modern Warfare 2*? What motivated its developer Infinity Ward to put this in the game? To put the scene in context, a closer look at the game and the ideologies behind it is needed.

In earlier incarnations, the *Call of Duty* series have been set in various historic settings, mostly the Second World War. For its fourth installment, subtitled *Modern Warfare*, a fictional story set in the (then) very near future, the year 2011, about a Russian ultranationalist starting the Third World War by staging a coup in the Middle East and detonating a nuclear bomb in Washington D.C. *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, set five years later, in 2016, starts with the world at war. Not only is the actual War on Terror still happening, with U.S. forces present in Iraq and Afghanistan, but Makarov focuses many attacks on continental Europe. Eventually, as a retaliation for the airport massacre of 'No Russian', the Russian army even successfully invades the United States.

Throughout the game, the player controls various characters of the U.S. and British military fighting against Russian soldiers and Middle-Eastern terrorists. Most of the time, these terrorists vastly outnumber the player and his allies, but do not have the superior weaponry of the U.S. Army the player has available to them. In some missions, the player

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<sup>4</sup> For a video of 'No Russian', see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8NMnnMRWJ-0>

can even call in air strikes to kill various ant-sized enemies without much effort. The sentiment of ‘us against them’ is still present, but the heroes are not the underdogs the cowboy archetype usually is.

The fact that the brains behind the operations of the antagonists are Russian can be seen as a remnant from the Cold War, but also as another ‘safe’ group of human enemies, from an American perspective: communists. The Middle Eastern antagonists serve as the Russians’ scapegoats and are used to keep the American forces distracted. Here, another example of Othering and cultural imperialism can be noticed: the Middle Easterners are so wrapped up in their short-sighted Jihadist ideology that they neither are credible as the main threat to the West, nor have the insight to notice that they are essentially being double-crossed.

The ideology behind *Modern Warfare 2* is clearly summarized in a speech by an American general to Afghan troops in training, minutes after starting the game. Because this speech speaks volumes, it is quoted here in full:

We are the most powerful force in the history of man. Every fight is our fight. Because what happens over here, matters over there. We don’t get to sit this one out. Learning to use the tools of modern warfare is the difference between the prosperity of your people and utter destruction. We can’t give you freedom, but we can give you the know-how to acquire it. And that, my friends, is worth more than a whole army base of steel. Sure it matters who’s got the biggest stick, but it matters a helluva lot more who’s swinging it. This is a time for heroes. A time for legends. History is written by the victors. Let’s get to work.

Here, almost all themes present in the game can be found. The United States are the most powerful force in the world, and has both a moral obligation and a self-preserving need to bring their morals and values – ‘freedom’ – to the rest of the world. Not only does America carry an even bigger stick now than in Theodore Roosevelt’s time, speaking softly doesn’t cut it anymore. Americans are (or make) heroes, legends, and victors. As long as you win, it does not matter how you won.

Backing up these words are various quotes and citations on patriotism, war and vengeance by a very diverse group of famous people ranging from Confucius and Voltaire to Zora Neale Hurston and Dick Cheney.<sup>5</sup> Some of these are positive, others negative, so all they do is hammer these themes home. An interesting aspect is that the developers use these texts to appeal to the player outside the narrative. Specifically, they are shown on loading screens that appear when the player dies, sometimes giving a morale boost, while at other times pointing out the futility and bleakness of the setting. This method of conveying a theme is unique to the medium of video games.

The ‘tools of modern warfare’ the general talks about in his speech refer to the superior firepower of the players’ side – the ‘good guys’ – faithfully reproduced from real life. Although the game is a fictional story taking place in a simulated environment, *Modern Warfare*’s developer Infinity Ward has invested a lot of care in the representation of modern weapons. According to Atkins, this is because the audience demands realism from the game, but the need for realism stops there. In the narrative, ‘semi realism’ – fast paced action, big set pieces, etc – are preferred (Atkins and Krzywinska 74). In this game, the weapons look, sound and behave so realistically that Norwegian terrorist Anders Breivik calls playing *Modern Warfare 2* a ‘training-simulation’ in his manifesto (Good and McWhertor).

So how does the ‘No Russian’ mission relate to the themes and ideology of *Modern Warfare 2* as a whole? The mission shows how a good and patriotic American soldier can still be pulled down into the dirty and bleak world of modern warfare. At the same time, it shows how unquestionably evil the Russian terrorists are, paving the way for when the

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<sup>5</sup> Full list: Hamilton Fish, Albert Einstein, Edward R. Murrow, Zora Neale Hurston, John F. Kennedy, Gandhi, Stuart Chase, Norman Thomas, Mark Twain, George Bernard Shaw, John Milton, Bill Vaughan, James Baldwin, Barbara Ehrenreich, Dick Cheney, Machiavelli, Confucius, Voltaire, Edward Gibbon, Goethe, Donald Rumsfeld, Nathan Hale, The Talmud, Daniel Webster, W.R. Inge, George Santayana, Jon Jefferson, Dick Arney, Thomas More and George Jean Nathan

players kills large numbers of Russians later in the game: 'No Russian' attempts to make the human enemies the safe and acceptable targets video games need to actually generate less controversy. In other words, Infinity Ward included a shocking section in their game in an attempt to make the rest of the game less shocking overall.

Combined with the typical gameplay of First Person Shooters and the themes of patriotism, war and revenge, which are presented both in and outside of the narrative, this makes *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* an excellent example of Americanness in video games.

## Conclusion

As shown in the introduction, academic research on culture in video games could be perceived as being in its infancy, carefully testing the water, but not quite sure how to comfortably swim yet. The active debate on the subject reflects this. While people like James Portnow are openly enthusiastic about the potential they see in video games, others, like Joost Raessens, take a bit more caution and feel that video games could very well turn out to be just another blip on the radar in the grand scheme of things. Others still, like Stephen Kent, try to maintain a neutral stance and just lay the framework for further analysis.

Part of the problem of researching video games is that they are, to use the same metaphor, also just coming out of their own infancy. Many, if not most, academic work on the matter becomes outdated very quickly: an analysis of *Pac-Man*, while valuable on its own, is simply not fit anymore to say anything about the medium as a whole. *Pac-Man* is a product of the early stages of cultural development within video games, while video games themselves have started to show signs of puberty: experimenting (using motion controls and the increased role of the internet in for example Open World Games), feeling misunderstood (the media controversy over both *Mass Effect 2*'s sex scenes and *Modern Warfare*'s violence) and, most importantly, trying to find a sense of identity. Ironically, this thesis, taking most of its examples from the (mid-)2000s, can also be expected to become less relevant once video games reach metaphorical maturity.

Video games' search for identity at this point in time, however, is exactly where they cross paths American Studies as a discipline, which has always been investigating America's identity. This provides a unique opportunity to see how both treat and use certain cultural themes in finding that identity. Using America's treatment of these themes as a

baseline for ‘Americanness’, exactly how American are canonical American video games? Both in style (genre) and substance (narrative)? Has the achievement actually been unlocked? This is the question this thesis has been trying to answer.

In terms of genre, Americanness can manifest in many different ways, four of which are discussed here. First, most of the times, an existing video game genre is utilized in a typically American way. Secondly, in some instances, this is taken so far that a new, Americanized, subgenre is created. Thirdly however, some genres are so American that all games in this genre simply must be instilled with American culture for them to work. Lastly, in an inversion of the second example, when wholly American genres are de-Americanized, those games will become a new subgenre. In this thesis, all four options have been shown.

Role-playing games are a good example of the first option. On a superficial level, an American RPG plays the same way as a non-American one, but when looking deeper, the cultural differences at their core become apparent. As evidenced by the comparison between *Morrowind* and *Final Fantasy VII* in chapter one, the American spin on Role Playing Games places a lot of emphasis on freedom of choice and personal expression, sacrificing a more focused storyline and characters. The player’s character is a blank slate for them to create a role in, their development directly invoking the American Dream, while RPGs from Europe and Asia give the player a predetermined role to play. American RPGs are very American and non-American ones are not, but – even if some split them into the W(estern)RPG and J(apanese)RPG subgenres – both are still recognizable as the same genre.

With the First Person Shooter, however, there is no doubt that American culture has taken a video game genre and transformed it into its own, massively popular, subgenre.

Instead of an extension of the self, the reward for hard work and self-discipline, firearms are a way for any average person – soldier, scientist, or store clerk – to make their voice heard in the world. This is why the player sees directly through their eyes. Instead of a last resort, sparingly used for self defense, in an FPS a gun is used as a tool for empowerment, safety and freedom. This originates from the American cowboy archetype and frontier tradition.

Open World Games take the Americanness of video games even further. Any OWG is built on the principle of exploration, experimentation and nonlinearity bringing their own inherent challenges and rewards, determined by the player instead of the game itself. In addition, many Open World Games place a lot of emphasis on personal expression and interaction with others. To take these elements away would mean to not be an OWG anymore.

When an American genre is changed enough, like *Animal Crossing* replacing the American cultural values of *Management Sims* – consumerist capitalism, competitors going after the same limited resources, using the American Dream to make a business expand – with their own – with a desire to escape the hectic everyday life and arrange things in an aesthetically pleasing way, it becomes so un-American it is almost unrecognizable.

In terms of narrative, American cultural values are instilled in American video games in similar ways. Video games' treatment of gender and race has catered for a long time to what was perceived as the largest target audience – young, heterosexual white males. In the last decade, strong, empowered female characters have appeared more and more, Lara Croft at their vanguard. The reason for this development is twofold: technological progress in video game hardware made using more character archetypes possible for both player characters and non-player characters, including more diverse females; and a more diverse demographic becoming interested in video games.



However, race, diversity and sexuality, which have always been hotly debated in the field of American Studies, are still underrepresented in video games with a set narrative. When the story and characters are less important and more freedom is given to the player, however, the option to include more diverse characteristics does generally become available. This illustrates American culture in two ways. On the one hand, it shows the desire to express oneself, and freedom to do so. On the other hand, it shows the conservative, puritanical side of America, protecting Christian morality and family values where it is most visible.

Economical and social cultural themes are either very visible or barely visible in American video games. As explained above, some genres, like Management Sims, are virtually impossible to make or play without understanding and appreciating standards and values regarding American economy. The treatment of money and other resources in most video games, however, American or otherwise, conforms more to internal balance of gameplay (i.e. making it impossible to cheat) than to ideological or cultural values.

Most American video games deliberately contribute to the debate regarding empire and expansionism. American characters typically show extreme disregard towards other cultures bordering on cultural imperialism. Furthermore, American video games built around war show an extremely black-and-white view of conflict, further Othering non-American culture.

The question this thesis set out to answer is ‘exactly how American are American video games?’ Looking at the breakdown and summary above, it is clear to see that American video games generally show their country of origin very clearly. The introduction of this thesis mentioned a working definition of Americanness based on typically American themes, traits and core values encompassing ‘Americanness’: freedom, individualism,

treatment of minorities, capitalism, exceptionalism, change and mobility, expression, empowerment, self-improvement and the way these are treated in society. This thesis has shown that all these are present in American canonical video games, from *Age of Empires* to *World of Warcraft*.

As stated in the beginning of this conclusion, there is a good chance that the video game landscape will change as much in the coming decades as it has in the past. It would be interesting to see if the Americanness of video games will again change in the future. This thesis can hopefully be used as a stepping stone for future research.

But for now: achievement unlocked!

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