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Religion(s) in Videogames

Historical and Anthropological Observations¹

Alessandro Testa

Abstract

This study is an attempt to address the issue of how the religious representations used and reproduced in fantasy and historical videogames can be useful to understand “gaming” as a social practice but also to understand whether they can constitute a form of historical knowledge, as it has recently been claimed. There is overwhelming evidence regarding the social relevance of “gaming” and its impact on the shaping of popular and global imaginaries, especially for young generations. Current research in social sciences seems to validate this conclusion, although the scientific interest for videogames is relatively recent, as its object of interest, and there is still an on-going debate about research methods. As a consequence, there is a rapidly growing literature focusing on these and similar questions. Several examples of well-known and best-selling computer games will be treated as evidence to be interrogated and interpreted in order to discern the representations and poetics which are at the basis of the use and appeal of religions and religious features in videogames.

Keywords

religion; new religious movements; videogames; popular culture; fantasy

1. Introduction

As the title openly indicates, this article has no ambition of thoroughness. Instead, its main aim is to contribute to the flourishing debate about the role and the forms of religion(s) in what has been called “digital culture” (Miller 2011) through a series of rhapsodic – and sometimes provocative –

1 This article has been written in the framework of the project “Enhancement of R&D Pools of Excellence at the University of Pardubice” (CZ.1.07/2.3.00/30.0021), financially supported by the European Social Fund and the Czech Ministry of Education.

critical considerations concerning electronic games (more particularly fantasy and historical computer games) and the socio-cultural networks of which they are a part.

Scholarly literature about videogames is young but already abundant, uneven in quality and dispersed in a variety of media (academic journals, books, specialized magazines, newspapers, blogs and internet sites, etc.).¹ I will focus only on a relatively small part of this *corpus*, since this article has been conceived as a discussion on religious representations in videogames not from the perspective of digital studies, but from that of religious and anthropological studies. In other words, the reader will be offered considerations resulting not from the intellectual work of an expert of videogames, but from an anthropologist with a historian's historical background.

At this point, it is necessary to be precise that currently I am not a “video gamer” anymore, although, like many children of my generation, I have been such in the past, roughly until my twenties (with a few later incursions). This essay is therefore not based exclusively on the elaboration of personal experiences but is rather the result of a heterogeneous set of concerns, interests and reflections related to a) my memories of gaming and games I played, b) unsystematic observations and collection of data related to the current practice of gaming,² c) the study of the literature about post-modern religious forms, practices and representations.

A few other preliminary clarifications are necessary, before entering the realm of virtual religions.

First: I will not embark on a discussion about faith or faith-oriented themes, which seem to be much more appealing for American scholars. I will instead concentrate on the problems of representations, perceptions and practices of religions in videogames. I will also argue about the “regime of historicity” carried or determined by the socio-cultural aspects involved in the processes of production, dissemination and consumption of videogame religions.

Second: before deciding to write this contribution, I had the clear feeling that the topics of religiosity and religious representations in videogames had been neglected and stood underrepresented in the scholarly literature. Thus, when the call for papers for the issue in which this article appears was published, I considered its topic well-chosen and laudable – and all the more so if we consider that a monograph on the matter does not exist yet³. More generally, the study

1 The most important scholarly works about videogames – all of them published since 2000 – are quoted in Antley 2012 (footnote n. 1). Methods and disciplines involved in the study of videogames are multiple: IT, sociology, psychology, pedagogy, cultural and media studies, history, anthropology.

2 I have not carried out a long-term ethnography, but I have nevertheless collected a relevant amount of evidence for my arguments. These evidence are of a diverse nature and have been produced in different ways, which can be briefly enumerated as follows: reviews and other writings written by gamers, gamers' comments and “posts” on the Internet, interviews and informal talks, data from secondary sources.

3 Recently there have been several attempts to develop a general discourse about the role of religions in videogames, often from the explicit assumption that “the majority of scholars in game studies have ignored the religious implications of game design” (Geraci 2012: 101). However, these attempts show an almost exclusive concern for

of videogames is growing as a relevant field of social research as long as gaming is a huge, widespread, transnational, transcultural, and mass social phenomenon which deserves as much attention as more “classical” fields of study. Furthermore, it is a very popular (in all the senses of the word) phenomenon, nowadays comparable to cinema, also in terms of economic impact: “one cannot help but be impressed by the popularity of history computer games. [...] Civilization IV sold over six million copies in the six months that followed its September 2005 release” (Bachynski, Kee 2009: 1), and even: “video games make more money than Hollywood annually” (Perrault 2012: 2).

Third: my case studies and examples will be drawn from two categories of products: “fantasy” games (in the first half of the article) and “historical” games (in the second half), and mainly from two genres: strategy games and so-called RPGs (role playing games)⁴. These categories and genres are those where usually religious features are more common. All the games will be chosen amongst the most successful, those which have had a relevant impact on the market and that have been played by millions of people, affecting their imagination and their perception of “actual” or “imagined” religiosity.

Fourth: I will often switch from the analysis of the contents of videogames to that of their forms, meanings, representations or social functions. In other words, I will follow a perspective for which considering the practice of gaming as a very relevant social fact implies to be as attentive and sensible as possible to all its symbolic, emotional and interactional dimensions.

2. Gods, Shamans and Magic

In order to exemplify and introduce the reader to the promised realm, in this short section I will just point out, in a rather epitomizing and descriptive manner, how computer games have dealt with three religious topics particularly well-established in the scientific study of religion: polytheism, shamanism and magic.

Certain games are configured to let the player choose his/her role in a clash between different civilizations characterized and represented by the most famous and worshipped entities in the history of religions: gods, who are the ultimate protagonists of these games narrative. *Age of*

faith and morality implications, a concern that, moreover, is often presented and elaborated in a rather non-critical fashion. Furthermore, and in spite of their academic layout, these attempts are characterized by a rather simplistic, descriptive approach that results in no real interpretative insight (this is particularly evident in works such as Corliss 2011, Geraci 2012 and Perreault 2012).

4 Fantasy videogames are those set in imagined, fantastic and magical worlds, usually crafted after European Early Middle Ages. I will return on this topic. For a definition of role playing games, see Perreault 2012 and, with more emphasis on both paper and digital versions and their differences and similarities, Tychsen 2006.

Mythologies (Ensemble Studios 2002) is certainly one of the most famous of this typology⁵. Its cover shows Zeus, Thor and Anubis in an epic posture, each representing one of the three “civilizations” the player can choose to play with: Greeks, Norse and Egyptians, who stand in fierce combat against each other for military and religious hegemony. In the game, religion is the true cultural marker, the aspect that really differentiates and separates the peoples. Military and other features of the game are secondary or, better, depend on each cultural “style”, which is determined by the *pantheon*. Polytheism is therefore used to differentiate “ethnically” the “civilizations” in the game. Obviously any historical veracity is completely abdicated in favor of the iconicity of the virtual societies and their virtual gods interacting with the player in a virtual world.

Other games offer the player the opportunity to play the part of one or more gods. In this case, the religious feature is not only formal and functional but also participative and immediate (the player does not control the people but the god itself). *Populus: The Beginning* (Bullfrog Production 1998) is probably the most well-known of this kind. In this game, the player is an almost almighty demiurge whose aim is to provide the virtual globe inhabitants with happiness, longevity and prosperity.

Dungeon Keeper (Bullfrog Production 1997), another best-seller, is more controversial and, one might say, “morally incorrect”: the player personifies a chthonic evil god ruling a horde of monsters with the purpose of producing the most sufferance and dismay to humankind. The box cover – soon become a classic in the community of gamers – presents the grinning face of a red horned devil and a motto, “evil is good”. This gothic game is entirely located in gloomy dungeons and is set in a typically fantasy imagined époque: dark and magical medieval times.

Other games like *Demigod* (Gas Powered Games 2009) and *Black & White* (Lionhead Studio 2001) have exploited the same principle, with the same commercial success, but using different ludic strategies. I will quote now some exemplary lines about *Black & White* from an enthusiast player:

“The whole *Black and White* series revolves around a religion. Who's the god? YOU! WOW, this even feels more awesome when time magazine chose you as the person of the year in 2006, isn't it?

Yes, you are a god with all the powers and responsibilities. You can train a holy creature, you can expand your cities, you can work miracles, you can decide what people should do for a living [...].

The main objective is this: there are rival gods. You should conquer their followers by winning their faith, and this is done by proving you're either lovelier or more terrifying

5 The presentation on the game box states that, by playing the game, “History becomes Mythology”.

than their present god [...]. So there you are: an entire game is a cool religion revolving around you". (Nazifpour 2010)

Shamans (but also wizards and sorcerers) are another popular kind of religious operator in videogames, especially in RPGs. In particular, they enjoy a significant popularity in the most played on-line game in the world, *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) (12 million worldwide paying players officially declared in 2010⁶). Shamans are a “class” (developers’ term) of characters using magical powers. They are associated with the “Horde”, one of the two reciprocally hostile groups in the game (the other being the “Alliance”), for instance that composed of primitive, monstrous and belligerent races such as goblins, orcs, trolls and other aberrations mostly taken from Nordic European folklore and J. R. R. Tolkien’s literature. The virtual world of *World of Warcraft* is extremely articulated and complex, but also extremely fascinating, up to the point that apparently a significant amount of players (in the number of millions) spend more time in the virtual than in the “real” reality.⁷

In the official site of the game we find a description of the shamans – which are a “class” playable by role-players – in *World of Warcraft*:

“Shaman are spiritual guides and practitioners, not of the divine, but of the very elements. Unlike some other mystics, shaman commune with forces that are not strictly benevolent. The elements are chaotic, and left to their own devices, they rage against one another in unending primal fury. It is the call of the shaman to bring balance to this chaos. Acting as moderators among earth, fire, water, and air, shaman summon totems that focus the elements to support the shaman’s allies or punish those who threaten them”⁸

As we see, several terms borrowed from the academic study of religions (“mystic”, “totem”, “shaman” itself) are used to define the nature of the virtual characters and their powers and abilities in the game. The expression “shamans commune with forces” clearly echoes the more or less conventional definition of a shaman as a “medicine man” who was born with or develops a special and exclusive relationship with spiritual entities.⁹ The fact that the category of shamanism as well as

6 <http://us.blizzard.com/en-us/company/press/pressreleases.html?id=2847886>, consulted on 1 September 2013. These kinds of games are usually labeled as “MMORPG”, an acronym for “massively multiplayer online role-playing game”.

7 According to recent studies, *World of Warcraft* has been crafted so effectively by its developing and writing teams to the point of provoking often a “Video game addiction”, a psycho-behavioral pathology which is nowadays also related, with the emergence of the on-line massive gaming, to the “Internet addiction disorder” (Young 1999); in the relative Wikipedia page we also read that “Orzack, a clinical psychologist at McLean Hospital in Massachusetts, claims that 40 percent of World of Warcraft players are addicted” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_addiction_disorder, consulted on 7 October 2013]).

8 <http://us.battle.net-wow/en/game/class/shaman>, consulted on 6 October 2013.

9 The historical and anthropological literature about shamans and shamanism is immense and this is not the place to explore it. The reader will find a brief and useful introduction to the anthropology of shamanism and shamanic practices in Bowie 2006: 174-199. It is worth noting that the link of shamans with “chaos” and natural elements

the factual religious operators labeled as shamans have been the object of an intense scientific debate in the last decades clearly does not pose any problem for the game developers.¹⁰ Nor does it seem to bother the players. We can therefore observe as a controversial academic notion has been borrowed and manipulated by the developers and then poured in players imagination despite – or probably even because of – its debated and controversial status. It is not by chance, after all, that it has been noticed that shamanism is a “handy a term, which can mean almost whatever you want it to mean” (Bowie 2006: 179), and that it “has achieved a broad currency in popular literature and in popular imagination” (*ibid*). An entire, huge, transnational “imagined community” (Anderson 2006), that of *World of Warcraft* players, who interact through the game and otherwise (through blogs, publications, meetings, etc.), construct a part of its representations on the commercial reuse of a controversial category built by historians and anthropologists of religion, in an inextricable “bricolage” of constructed and reconstructed representations. Needless to say, we are very far from Siberian Tungus’ religious practices.¹¹

Magic is another very popular feature in videogames and is practically omnipresent in fantasy computer games. It would therefore be superfluous to mention here particular examples. Many videogames, in fact, make it possible for the players to transcend, inside the structure of the game, (the virtual representation of) natural reality and its rules, to which we are all normally subordinated. In these games, the interface allows the player to perform actions like casting spells, riding dragons and be reborn after a sudden death by means of magic (which very often depends, like in the popular *Diablo* RPG series¹², on the use of *mana*, a substance which is nothing else than the popularized version of the Melanesian emic category well-known in anthropological literature).¹³

evoked in the quoted passage is not casual. In *World of Warcraft* imaginary, the monstrous races of the “Horde” seem to be associated with old-anthropological *Naturvölker*: while humans, elves and dwarfs are represented as a set of civilized “medieval” (European) peoples, the Horde is a mixture of races exotically dressed and armed, which live in huts, have tribal bonds and perform rituals that are comparable to those of the “primitives”. This “Orientalized” dichotomy clearly carries a vision of the world where the “Westerns” are associated with the Alliance, whereas the Horde corresponds to non-Western and non-civilized people (I borrow the notion of “orientalization” from Edward Said well-known study about Western collective construction of Oriental otherness [Said 1978; this essay, however, should be read keeping in mind the fundamental critical observations by J. Clifford {Clifford 1988}]).

- 10 For the intellectual history of the category of “shaman” and the notion of “shamanism” and their uses and misuses in the academic literature, see Botta 2010.
- 11 In the next section I will explore some of the implications of this eminently post-modern way of making and living imaginaries. I will also come back, more analytically, on the notions of “imagined community” and “bricolage”.
- 12 The first *Diablo* (Blizzard 1996) is considered a reference game by the whole gaming community.
- 13 More particularly, *mana* in fantasy videogames seems to refer to the old-anthropological conception of it as a supernatural power or energy determining the effectiveness of magical performances; a power or energy named differently but still universally present in all populations actually practicing one form or another of magic. This theory was developed by French anthropologist and sociologist Marcel Mauss in one of the first systematic theory of magic: Mauss 1950 (1902-1903), and has since then been often criticized (see, for instance, Eliade 1967: 135).

Already Malinowski noticed the almost obsessive interest in magic that Westerns have developed in modern times (Malinowski 1992: 69-70). This interest, in diverse and uneven forms, is even stronger today and flourishes particularly on the Internet. People involved in it are often completely unaware of the anthropological and historical debate about what magic is, how we can construct such a notion by means of comparison, how to distinguish different types of magic and magic operators and similar matters. In fact, magic in popular computer games like *Heroes of Might and Magic*, *Sacred*, *Age of Wonders* or *The Elder Scrolls*¹⁴ represents probably the last stage in the popularization of a notion that, at the end of the process, has nothing to do with magic as scholars (historians, folklorists and anthropologists mainly) intend it¹⁵ (and although the degree of verisimilitude can vary a lot amongst the titles mentioned and hundreds of others similar). Magic is a constitutional part of the broader religious imaginary that underlies most of the cultural mass products I have presented so far.

In this second section I have chosen some cases taken from the vast domain of fantasy-oriented products. This choice was made in order to approach more smoothly the topics of the third section, which will start precisely with a brief assessment of fantasy popular culture.

3. Fantasy Imaginaries, Imagined Communities and Real Commodification

Many games evoke an imagined time pervaded by magic, sacredness and epicness. In this regard, all the titles mentioned in the last section are pretty indicative, and many more could be very easily added to the representative list (a few more amongst the most popular ones: *Dragon Age: Origins* (Bioware 2009), *Myth: the Fallen Lords* (Bungie 1997), *Heretic: Shadow of the Serpent Riders* (Raven Software 1994), *Dark Age of Camelot* (Mythic Entertainment 2001)). It is the imagined time of so-called fantasy fiction. In short, fantasy can be conceived as a side-product of late Romanticism and a very popular manifestation of what has been called the Western (and eminently European) “taste for the Middle Ages”, which has been, in turn, one of the main cultural outcome of Romanticism (Amalvi 1996).¹⁶ The cultural products labeled as “fantasy” are usually set in imagined pseudo-medieval times, when different populations and/or races (dwarves, elves, goblins,

14 All the titles quoted are very successful commercial products, generating numerous sequels played by dozens of millions of players throughout the world. Here I mention only the most recent (and successful) ones: *Heroes of Might and Magic VI* (Black Hole Entertainment 2011), *Sacred II: Fallen Angel* (Ascaron 2009), *Age of Wonders: Shadow Magic* (Triumph Studios 2003) or *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011).

15 For an introduction to anthropological theories of magic, see Testa 2010 and Bowie 2006: *passim*.

16 There are several essays in the history of fantasy fiction (see, for instance, Waggoner 1978), but, as far as I know, no systematic anthropological study.

etc.) and different gods combat for power and supremacy.¹⁷ Magic and fantastic beasts usually drawn from European folklore (dragons, leprechauns, unicorns, etc.) are common characters. A strong moral demarcation – if not a manichaeism *tout court* – is also frequently present: both in literature and videogames the forces of Good and Evil are always easily recognizable and engaged in perpetual fight. Contemporary fantasy fiction can therefore be regarded to as a post-modern product of the modern romantic fascination for the Middle Ages, folklore, sacredness and primitiveness, in a constant interaction with numerous other more or less directly related cultural tendencies and fashions like ecology, new age, spiritualism, neo-paganism and certain youth-subcultures (Wicca, hippies, folk music, black metal and others).¹⁸ In spite of their often radically different political, philosophical and religious views, European Romanticism constitutes one – if not the only – of their common cultural matrices.¹⁹

Romantic representations of mysterious esotericism, fairy medieval times, eerie archaism and gothic atmospheres are nowadays produced, reproduced and carried primarily by mass cultural products of very diverse typologies. Several could be mentioned: music genres like folk, progressive rock and metal; fantasy literature and comics; toys, carnival costumes and masks representing dragons, princesses, knights and monsters; cinematographic productions populated by witches, wizards and fairy-tales characters (from Walt Disney's movies for children²⁰ to *Shrek* [DreamWorks Pictures 2001]) or epic cycles about famed fictional or historical characters (Robin Hood and King Arthur²¹, *The Lord of the Rings*²², *The Game of Thrones*²³, etc.). The representations generated and carried by these heterogenic products have a strong capability of circulation and penetration, especially thanks to omnipresent mass media like televisions and, even more importantly, the Internet, the latter being the macro-context in which they nowadays flow freely, relentlessly and unstoppably.

17 Fantasy imagined societies, which are manifestly shaped after European medieval times and which can be, like in the case of Tolkien's literature, pretty articulated and sophisticated, are commonly polytheistic. Ironically enough, no other time in European history has been so hegemonically monotheistic as Middle Ages.

18 Medieval fantasy is particularly popular especially in Europe: it has been rightly argued that, for European folks, the Middle Ages “are an époque of mass popularity because it is at once other and exotic but also familiar and so to say domestic” (Clemente 2005: 261).

19 On the religious aspects of some these cultural tendencies or fashions, see Cerri, Mapelli, Visca 2008, Eliade 1976 and Testa 2009. The literature about so-called “NRMs” (New Religious Movements) is very rich. For an introduction, see Barker, Warburg 1998 and, briefer, Eller: 2007 160-172.

20 See, for instance, *Snow White* (Disney 1937) and *The Sleeping Beauty* (Disney 1959). Referring to a romantic view of Nordic medieval times, K. M. Hjemdahl openly evokes a “disneyfication of the past” (2003: 106).

21 Robin Hood and King Arthur have been the objects of innumerable cinematographic productions.

22 I refer to the last, worldwide popular adaptation, directed by Peter Jackson (New Line Cinema 2001-2003).

23 *Game of Thrones* (HBO 2011-), a fantasy TV series adapted after George R. R. Martin's novels, is one of the most expensive, critically acclaimed and popular TV series ever made (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Game_of_Thrones, consulted on 22 September 2013).

But how and why are these cultural products made and spread out and how and why are they so appreciated by social agents so diverse and numerous? In order to answer the former question, I evoke a well-known anthropological notion, that of *bricolage*. These products are in fact made by means of collection, juxtaposition, invention and reinvention of historical and fictional features, in a way that has little or nothing to do with realism and/or historical correctness,²⁴ in other words, by operations of cultural *bricolage*. I use the critical notion of bricolage to signify a precise cultural option and operation: the construction of imaginaries, taxonomies or more or less coherent set of representations on the basis of elements and features taken from culturally and socially available symbolic sources.²⁵ These elements and features, especially in our post-modern, globally interrelated world, often circulate widely and transcend cultural, social, geographical and economic boundaries, making the recognition of potentially interesting products possible for social agents (consumers). Of course these elements and features can be and actually are borrowed and reproduced by cultural crafters (like writers, video-games designers and cinematographers, etc.) for their artistic and/or commercial purposes.

Bricolage is one of the most evident characteristics of fantasy videogames, which largely and freely manipulate, as I have already shown, the “imaginary sources” of ancient (especially “pagan”) and native religions, ancient and current monotheisms, esoteric and oriental traditions, and new religious movements. Videogames’ religious features constitute the implementation of cultural bricolage at its ultimate, one might say. This is especially evident in very recent and popular products: “World of Warcraft, for example, borrows extensively from mythology, literature, and pop

24 Realism is not in the agenda of fantasy imaginaries, although plausible historical features are often at the basis of the understanding and interest in fantasy mass products. This effect of historical verisimilitude is often implemented by authors in order to make people believe in what they are seeing or playing with (this is particularly evident in pseudo-historical films and games, for examples in those based on King Arthur’s cycle: many people, I have personally verified, believe in Arthur’s real existence not despite but because of movies and videogames). In fact, as it has already been noticed, some examples of “so-called fantasy fiction always keeps a loose condition of verisimilitude: it invents myths” (Flahaut 2001: 863). Historicity can also be found in futuristic, completely fantastic fiction: “there is a longstanding association with the *Star Wars* ‘Jedi’ and the history and culture of medieval Japan, made even more implicit in the *Star Wars Galaxies* series [a popular MMORPG: LucasArts 2003], and historicised tropes such as the medieval period or the Vikings dominate many fantasy games. These historical signifiers need not be very specific, but they rely on a player’s base understanding of how past mythologies or races might have lived. They are not, it is important to stress, either particularly detailed or particularly accurate, but rely on popular representations of history to sustain them” (MacCallum-Stewart, Parsler 2007: 203).

25 This brief definition owes to that of F. Bowie, who writes that “The term *bricolage* has been widely adopted within anthropology to refer to the creation of symbolic structures from a variety of culturally available symbols” (Bowie 2006: 70). Nevertheless, my use of – and reflection on – the notion depends firstly on C. Lévi-Strauss’s theorization about native classificatory systems (Lévi-Strauss 1962) but also on the observations about the theoretical and methodological utility of this notion recently proposed by P. Burke (in his turn also on the basis of Lévi-Strauss’s speculation: Burke 2008: 100-101). Recourses and applications of the paradigm of bricolage to interpret social and historical realities, and especially phenomena of cultural circulation, appropriation and invention, can be found in Hobsbawm 1983, Wolf 2001: 354 and Sahlins 1994.

culture and references pen and paper role-playing traditions, especially *D&D [Dungeons and Dragons]*" (Geraci 2012: 106).

The imaginaries shaped in and by fantasy fiction in general and fantasy videogames in particular have three interrelated and interdependent dimensions: a) emotional, b) social and c) commercial, which I will now briefly explore in this order, with a particular emphasis on the religious (actual or potential) side of them.

It has been argued that a passion for fantasy fiction (and therefore the use – and abuse – of fantasy videogames) be related to a form of dissatisfaction with the real world.²⁶ As a hypothetical track, I suggest that, being both fantasy fiction and new religious movements (especially those appealing to Paganism) built on common cultural and imaginary basis, which are those of European romanticism, as I have argued above, they might have the same psychological basis, to be found, indeed, in a form of existential impatience or dissatisfaction. This general existential and/or psychological condition was considered crucial also by one of the first scholars to study new religious movements: Mircea Eliade.²⁷ His intuition about the relation between an “escapist” attitude and the (post-)modern luxuriance of esoteric and alternative religious movements is useful for my argument: new religious movements prosper, as an anthropologist has recently put, “as responses, accommodations, or protests to new and unsatisfactory social circumstances” (Eller 2007: 167).²⁸ Just like fantasy fiction, addictive use of Internet and compulsive video gaming, I would add.

It is well known nowadays that the abuse of videogames and psychological fragility do not constitute a good combination. Nevertheless, if on the one hand the “escapist sentiments” discussed so far produce or can produce forms of isolation or even pathologic behavior – as I have personally witnessed in many cases –, on the other they determine also a sense of “community” (often very strong) amongst people practicing video gaming, and especially fantasy (and historical) computer games. This is particularly true in our time, when networking amongst people sharing the same passions is made very easy thanks to the Internet. And this is exactly what has happened with many gamers of the games mentioned in the previous pages: veritable electronic communities (sometimes gathering also in the “real world”) have amalgamated around some of them, whose consumers share a strong sense of attachment, identity and even belonging, as it results clear from an

26 It is the classical and nowadays widely accepted “escapist theory”, discussed, amongst others, in an academic paper by one of the very father of contemporary fantasy fiction: J. R. R. Tolkien (who was professor of Germanic philology at Oxford): Tolkien 1983 [1947].

27 See the essays included in Eliade 1976.

28 Hence, it is probably not by chance if one of the most diffused and growing form of new religious movements is the so-called “Internet – or cyber – religion” (for a brief definition and discussion on the category of “Internet religion”, see Visca 2011; on the more or less homologous “cyber religion”, see Karaflogka 2002; for a wider and more articulated discussion on the topic, cfr. the contributions in Krüger 2005).

ethnographically oriented interaction with them. Forms of mutual recognition have been established especially around the magic, religious or “esoteric” features of the games, often regarded as “more symbolic” (like one of my informants had once explicitly claimed). So-called “forum”, which is an “online discussion site where people can hold conversations in the form of posted messages”,²⁹ is for gamers, much more than blogs, an arena in which sociality and a sense of community are created.³⁰ Videogames forums are transnational, post-modern tools of a new form of social engineering leading to the shaping and emergence of new groups, which in the last years have been the objects of ethnographic interest and therefore of anthropological theorization and literature.³¹

Not seldom involved in esoteric, ecological or new religious movements (especially new age and neo-paganism), consumers of fantasy videogames recognize themselves on the basis of shared symbols and representations. These, although not completely “collective” in the traditional, Durkheimian sense (Durkheim 2003), are nevertheless such to a given extent: they are collective amongst the collectivities of those more or less formalized communities of players who gather into the virtual – or even outside in the real – world. These communities are, furthermore, transnational and transcultural – although the videogames we have been talking about are popular especially in the ultra-industrialized world (U.S.A., EU, Japan, South Korea and China) and in the Western world in particular – because the imaginaries on which they are founded are not “traditional”, ethnic and localized but syncretic, multiethnic and globalized. On their turn, the representations, symbols and commercial products that contribute to shape these imaginaries flow in continuous, uneven, interconnected cultural “streams” produced and reproduced by the media (especially by and in the Internet): to define these streams and the way they operate, we might use the category of “mediascapes” theorized by A. Appadurai (1996).

After the emotional and the social dimensions, it is time to evoke the third one: the commercial, which is somewhat intrinsic, since the imaginaries, representations and symbols we have been talking about so far are mainly carried by commercial products (books, comics, movies and videogames of course). Fantasy videogames produce an aesthetic or intellectual interest which eventually results in a commodification by being transformed into a commercial one and as such exploited for economic purposes. Appadurai’s global “mediascapes” turn out to be also “marketscapes”.³² And as long as religious features have an important role in the success and

29 I draw the definition from Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_forum, consulted on 29 September 2013.

30 A friend and informant of mine has once confessed to spend more time playing and “chatting” in the forums of *World of Warcraft* (and other forums as well) than with family and friends.

31 See the rhapsodic article Coate 1998 (1993), not an anthropological study but a pioneering reflection on “virtual communities”. R. Kozinets coined a term for the ethnography of online communities: “netnography” (Kozinets 1998). See also and especially the programmatic essay “The Anthropology of Online Communities” (Peterson, Wilson 2002).

32 This process is inherently related to a broader recent phenomenon brilliantly studied by geographer, economist and

circulation of these products (and “scapes”), they can be regarded as one of the key-element for a successful commodification, circulation and consumption.³³ Game developers and producers seem to have long come to this conclusion, too, as it has already been noticed: “by integrating mythical and religious elements [...] game designers can enhance player immersion and maximize their games’ appeal” (Geraci 2012: 102). No surprise: as I have already argued, another parallel between fantasy video gaming (usually filled with religious or pseudo-religious features) and new religious movements is that they are both formed by a vast global public of consumers who are constantly and voraciously looking for representations and sentiments of mystery, exoticism, esotericism and possibly magic. Since the categories of fantasy consumers, video gamers and followers of new religious movements often overlap, it is not surprising to see a common pattern characterizing them all: above all, an always stronger tendency towards an apparently paradoxical but nevertheless indubitable “religious desacralization”.³⁴ According to D. Visca, expert of new religious movements, collective forms of “new religiosity” are often characterized by a loss of spirituality and dimension of transcendence in favor of more mundane and easily approachable (“click-available”, I would say) ways of thinking and practicing religion. Several evident examples of this pattern could be mentioned: UFO cults, LaVeyan satanism, Transhumanism and “Pastafarianism” (or Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster³⁵). Amongst the causes of this phenomenon that echoes, *mutatis mutandis*, Max Weber’s well-known theory of the disenchantment of the modern world (Weber 2001), Visca explicitly mentions commodification and internetization.

sociologist D. Harvey, who rightly speaks of a current widespread form of “commodification of culture” which is a sub-process of a wider “commodification of everything”, both ideologically justified by neo-liberal moral economy and actually implemented by neo-liberal global policies (Harvey 2002 and 2005: 165-167).

33 In the previous section I have presented the case-study of shamanic representations in the computer game *World of Warcraft*. According to what I am claiming in the text, it is not surprising to find a parallel between pseudo-shamanism within the frame of that commercial product and neo-shamanism “marketability”: F. Bowie has noticed how far the commodification of shamanism (what she calls “the current marketability of shamanism” [Bowie 2006: 191]) has gone: “one can buy shamanic drums and other associated paraphernalia [...] on the Internet” (*ibid*). The similitudes between these two forms of shamanisms lie in escapist religious sentiments, post-modern imagination and commodification.

34 The expression is used and explained in Visca 2011.

35 Pastafarianism adherents “maintain publicly that Pastafarianism is a genuine religion” (I quote from the Wikipedia page: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flying_Spaghetti_Monster, consulted on the 1st of October 2013). During its first year of life (2005), the movement’s website “garnered tens of millions of hits”. The supporters of the movements are thousands around the world and it has already triggered the academic machine, with several articles and conferences devoted to this “new religion” – including a conference paper called “Holy Pasta and Authentic Sauce: The Flying Spaghetti Monster’s Messy Implications for Theorizing Religion” (all data and quotations from Wikipedia).

4. Histor(iograph)y, Power, and Religion in *Sid Meier's Civilization*

In this fourth and last section the focus and the nature of my observations will change considerably and concentrate only on one, well circumscribed, system of planets in the videogames galaxy: *Sid Meier's Civilization* series, one of the most beloved and awarded in the history of computer games. The game, originally published in 1991 (*Sid Meier's Civilization*³⁶) has come to its fifth edition (*Civilization V* [Firaxis 2010]) and has sold millions of copies. Let it be presented in its publisher's words:

“Created by legendary game designer Sid Meier, Civilization is a turn-based strategy game series in which you attempt to build an empire to stand the test of time. Become Ruler of the World by establishing and leading a civilization from the dawn of man into the space age. Wage war, conduct diplomacy, discover new technologies, go head-to-head with some of history's greatest leaders, and build the most powerful empire the world has ever known”.³⁷

In the nineties *Civilization* was considered “the deepest, most rewarding PC game of all time”.³⁸ Few years later, when the third game was published, it was welcomed by *Time* magazine as “the greatest game of all time”.³⁹ In 2005, I bought and played with the fourth game of the series, *Civilization IV* (Firaxis 2005). The game was exceptionally engaging, clever and well-done.

Being conceived as a computer game with historical settings (although this historicity is far from being self-evident, as I argue below), in the last years the Civilization series has been the object of scholarly literature concerning its potentiality as a possible instrument for teaching history in schools in a captivating fashion or even, as it has been recently claimed, as a possible means of historiography, which is, as a means not only to present and make circulate but also to *produce* historical knowledge. In the first, following part of this last section I will introduce and comment the literature of this debate, also exposing my point of view, before concluding this essay with the two last issues of power and religion in *Civilization*.

Sid Meier's masterpiece series is a very articulated and difficult game which sets the player in an invented world in which “civilizations” struggle for total hegemony. These “civilizations” are depicted after well-known – and more or less homogenous – ones, described in historical and anthropological literature (there are 43 civilizations in *Civilization V*, each with its own characteristics and representative leader; for example: the Romans [leader: Caesar], the [North]

36 Also known as *Civilization* (MicroProse 1991). All the other games are also named after the series creator, Sid Meier, but they are usually referred to without mentioning “*Sid Meier's*”. From now on I will do the same.

37 <http://www.civilization.com/>, consulted on 11 October 2013.

38 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civilization_%28series%29#Reception, consulted on 12 October 2013.

39 *Time* magazine article quoted in Poblocki 2002: 271.

Americans [Washington], the Celts [Boudicca], the Iroquois [Hiawatha], the Arabs [Harun al-Rashid], etc.). The game logic and structure depend on a wide set of sophisticated options to control the diverse aspects of the game and manage the player's empire needs and characteristics (politics, commerce, finance and economics, science and technology, religion, warfare, diplomacy, and others). Although the civilizations' development mechanisms are more or less historically-based, the world map of the game where the player can actually build and implement his or her virtual empire and make it expand and prosper is invented (randomly produced by the game mechanism), with few or no realistic representational features of earth geography. Despite this and other manifest non-historical (or pseudo-historical) and non-realistic elements, there are several scholars who have claimed and claim, *mutatis mutandis*, for *Civilization* usefulness in the classroom in order to raise students' interest in – and comprehension of – history or even as a general means for studying and understanding history (also at University level) (Chapman 2012, 2013, Bachynski, Kee 2009, Squire 2004 and Taylor 2003).

I will not enter in a debate that has to do mainly with pedagogical issues and that therefore transcends my fields of expertise – even though I cannot but express my skepticism for this kind of approach to the study and the learning of history. Instead, I will focus on one question recently raised, developed and presented in two articles by A. Chapman, end especially in the most recent one, named “Is Sid Meier’s Civilization history?”, published in the journal *Rethinking History* (Chapman 2013).

Chapman has thoroughly investigated the forms and the contents of so-called historical videogames, rightly claiming that “historical videogames must be understood on their own terms” (Chapman 2012: 2). Games logic is different from other narratives logics, but this, he argues, should not be regarded as a limit for producing historical knowledge. Rather, videogames may establish a different kind of historical knowledge, as useful and trustworthy as more “classical” kinds. In other words, Chapman’s attempt is to evaporate the aura of historical unreliability and *invraisemblance* that surrounds historical games and, in so doing, give theoretical depths to the consequential assertion that not only videogames themselves but the very process of gaming (especially in relation to *Civilization*) may be one legitimate type of historical narrative amongst others. Chapman sustains his position by borrowing tools and arguments from several post-modern theoreticians and historians who have worked about historiographical methodology. For him “[videogames] developers [make] similar choices to those historians who write ‘proper’ history” (Chapman 2013: 316). Also, videogames’ historical “flaws” cannot be brought back to videogame design only, as they are inherent to any kind of historical narrative: both historical books and historical videogames cannot be flawless and give perfect representations (or “simulations”, as Chapman writes) of past

realities.⁴⁰ The logical consequence is that professional historians cannot demand for the monopoly of the production of “proper” history, as cinema and videogames may also advocate not only for the status of historical representations but also for that of *historiographical* narratives, what involves the capability of presenting and narrating “past-as-history” (author’s emphasis).

Chapman’s position is interesting and well discussed and has the virtue of being critically postulated. Nevertheless, I think that Chapman’s opinions and conclusions about history and historiography in videogames and especially *Civilization* (*per se* and also as the most eminent representative of historical videogames) cannot be accepted, and that because of several reasons that I will now introduce under the form of problematic points:

- *Civilization* cannot produce proper historical knowledge because it is constructed on isolated “compartments” (“civilizations”, religions, sciences, spans of time, virtual spaces) that are not always coherently – and even less often realistically – correlated. This is quite obvious inasmuch as videogames’ depictions and mechanisms cannot be as inextricably interrelated, fluid and multifaceted as real life features. Nevertheless, this consideration affects the general problem of the historical representativeness of historical videogames (*Civilization* for instance) for, conversely, in the last decades “paper” historiography, especially after the linguistic, anthropological and constructivist turns, has been trying to develop critical and holistic visions of the past.⁴¹ Unlike recent historiography, videogames produce and make circulate visions of the past which are partial, fragmented and, in the end, essentialized. Essentialization is manifest: *Civilization* gives non-historical, monolithic, stereotypical representations of past civilizations, in a way that strongly reminds XIX historiography.⁴² Thus, while recent trends in historiography (and anthropology) are oriented at trying to de-essentialize and criticize reified historical and social representations, videogames – as we have also seen in the previous sections of this essay – go in the very opposite direction.

40 This is one of the core-arguments of Chapman’s discussion. It underlines his entire speculation (“In actuality most of the flaws are not in the particular forms we use to explore ideas about the past but in the epistemological understanding of ‘history’ itself” [Chapman 2013: 318]: “[...] this intrinsic flaw in representation is not inherent to the digital simulation alone but to all simulation” [320]).

41 Holism orientates not only world history, but also historiographies of smaller-scale contexts; like micro-history for example, whose aim is to re-integrate small-scale, very circumscribed (and often localized) histories into wider sets of historical and socio-cultural patterns (the methodological literature about micro-history is abundant; Revel 1996 is probably the best introductory essay to the topic).

42 The anthropological literature about the de-essentialization of cultures and societies both past and contemporary regarded as social and historical monades is huge, and it would be inappropriate to summarize it here (but see, for instance as an early example, Clifford, Marcus 1986). Instead, I will mention a significant and cautious example taken from XX. century historiography: more than half a century ago the French eminent historian F. Braudel had already criticized the criteria, often quite arbitrary, with which certain renowned historians (namely O. Spengler and A. Toynbee) had represented (and therefore re-constructed) past civilizations (Braudel 1969c [1959]). On the same problem, with regards to the reproduction of stereotyped civilizations in *Civilization*, see Pobłocki 2002: 169-171 and 173. We will come back to this issue farther on.

- *Civilization* cannot produce proper historical knowledge because of the process and the reason of its making. In fact, writing history and developing videogames are two rather different jobs (in other words, videogames are made by game developers, historiography is made by historians).⁴³ Their methods are completely different in procedures and purposes. A historian, for instance, is never “unconscious” about his/her epistemological, theoretical and methodological choices in writing history – like often are game developers, according to Chapman himself.⁴⁴ Nor these two categories of professionals work with the same materials, despite what Chapman writes: “videogames are already capable of producing competing narratives, as developers/historians utilise the same basic sources” (Chapman 2013: 319). This statement is at least incorrect, if not completely untrue. In fact, it can be easily ascertained that no game developer has ever declared his or her sources or critically theorized and discussed with historians – in historical terms of course – about his or her way of interpreting primary sources in the process of developing a videogame. Nor historical videogames themselves (*Civilization* as well as others) cite any primary or secondary sources. And sources are at the basis of whichever kind of historiography.

What precedes must not be considered a weakness of game developing: again, developers do their job as well as historians do theirs.⁴⁵ And this is never an “unconscious” process. On the contrary, it is so conscious that the creators of the two most important and best sold historical computer games have openly admitted they were not doing historiography (thus disavowing Chapman’s claims): Sid Meier, creator of *Civilization*, has once said that “We are not trying to duplicate history” (quoted in Bachynski, Kee 2009: 1), whereas Bruce Shelley, creator of the *Age of Empires* series,⁴⁶ has quoted John Ford to express that, in game developing as well as in cinema, “It is more important to film the legend than the truth” (*ibid*). No surprise: after all, historiography and

43 This apparently obvious difference is refused by Chapman, who often, in his article, uses the compounded expression “developers/historians” (quotation farther in the text).

44 “When a developer makes the decision that their historical game will feature what I term a ‘realist simulation’ (i.e. the physics, audio-visual design, and rules will show a high degree of fidelity to the world we know), they are, simultaneously, often probably unconsciously, making the first epistemological decision about the approach that the game will take to the evidence of and its eventual claims to the past” (Chapman 2013: 319).

45 I believe that one of the main contributions of French historiographical theory of the last century has been its emphasis in considering – and theorizing about – making history as a *profession*, with all its knowhow, expertise, tricks and, above all, a necessary, specific methodological *apprentissage* (see Bloch 1993 and the important preface by J. Le Goff [1993]). And this, in order to avoid the risks of misunderstandings, incorrect revisionisms or even “memory assassination” like negationism (of which the most striking case has been described, criticized and refused in Vidal-Naquet 1987). The professional aspect of making historiography – and the relative literature – is not discussed by Chapman, which might be the reason for his audacious, reiterate parallels between game developers and historians.

46 *Age of Empires* is another very popular series of computer games with historical settings. *Ages of Empires II: The Age of Kings* (Ensemble Studios 1999), for instance, is still considered a milestone in the field of historical strategic games. Although several features clearly remind *Civilization* (for example, the player can choose amongst different civilizations and must develop prudent and forward-looking strategies in managing his/her empire), in others *Age of Empires* differs significantly (for example, the game modality is “real time” and not turn-based and it is far more oriented towards military strategy and warfare).

videogames have different aim and function. This rather obvious aspect is unfortunately neglected by Chapman, who, in his ardor to prove, with arguments often very sophisticated, that “paper” historiography and historical videogames share more or less the same amount of flaws, weaknesses and strengths (but in different forms and amounts), overlooks the fact that, in the end, the basic aim (the *raison d'être*) of a historical essay is to say something (approximately) true about the past, whereas the basic aim of a videogame is to sell as many copies as possible. Of course there is a commercial aspect in the production and circulation of historical knowledge and of course there is an intellectual aspect in the production and circulation of videogames, but these reciprocal aspects are secondary.⁴⁷ Function depends on the aim: the function of a videogame is to entertain, whereas the function of historiography is to improve our knowledge of the past (although, in this case also, no component belongs exclusively to either of them). Historiography (the essay) is a critical narrative that has a will for truth, historical videogame (*Civilization*) is a fictional narrative that has a will for entertainment.

Civilization cannot produce proper historical knowledge also (and probably especially) because its design, structure and logic produce counterfactual representations of geographical and historical (and more generically cultural) facts. In other words, the outcomes of a gamer's strategies are not constrained by the need of reproducing actual facts of history. The main consequence is a playful production of counterfactual – which is, false – historical narratives. This serious defect subsists in every historical videogame. Two examples amongst many that could be mentioned:

In *Civilization* the player can choose the Iroquois and lead this “civilization” to build the Colosseum and defeat the Ancient Egyptians and the English Empire in order to attain the complete hegemony over a two continents planet and, eventually, set off to outer space.⁴⁸

Axis & Allies (TimeGate Studios 2004) is one of several games in which the player can play as Germany during Second World War and lead the Nazis to the victory. The game is very realistic in the reconstruction of settings, troops, weapons and other warfare features – like usually are videogames set during Second World War.

The gaming outcomes above mentioned are obviously counterfactual (i.e. historical untrue) and do not improve our knowledge of world history (nor, it goes without saying, do they produce new historical knowledge). Sometimes Chapman seems to be wholly aware of the profound anti-historical consequences of *Civilization*'s and other games' counter-factuality. Other times not, like when he concludes, using R. Rosenstone's words and in accord with him, that “the familiar, solid

47 This has already been noticed in an article named “Lessons Learned from Developing a ‘History Game’”: “marketplace is demanding. The academy’s standards [and purposes, I would add] are different from those of the workplace” (Bachynski, Kee 2009: 10).

48 It is not only a question of players' choices. The narratives of *Civilization* result, as Chapman cleverly demonstrates, from the interaction between players' choices, developers' and programmers' implemented vision of the history and the possibilities and limitations of the game logics, dynamics, and structures.

world of history on the page and the equally familiar but more ephemeral world history on the screen are similar in at least two ways: they refer to actual events, moments and movements from the past, and at the same time they partake of the unreal and the fictional” (quoted in Chapman 2013: 320). While the latter “way” is questionable but passable, the former one is hardly sustainable and even less provable: the Colosseum being built by the Iroquois can hardly be considered an “actual event”.⁴⁹

It has been written that, in historical videogames, “Historical contingency [is] determined by the formal rule system, which has been created by the computer programming” (Bachynski, Kee: 3). I would add that, even though the “contingency” is determined by computer mechanisms, it is, after all, implemented and experienced by the player. The point here is that neither the computer programming nor player’s choices are based on a critical and theoretically founded historiographical attitude (so much the less, if the historical knowledge of the player is shaped in the process of gaming...⁵⁰). Therefore, it remains audacious to define what results from this process as a form of reliable “historical narrative”, and it is possible to conclude that videogaming allows the player to “invent” the past (or something perceived as “the past”), whereas in “classical” forms of historiography the past is always a “given” that must be interpreted and cannot be invented.

- The programmatic essay by Chapman borrows extensively from post-modern epistemology and its uses of categories such as narrative, discourse, production of meaning and “past-as-history”. This is obviously no place to start a discussion about post-modernism and its categories, but I can declare that I do not deny the critical efficacy and usefulness of these categories. On the contrary, I also make (a prudent) use of them in this essay as well as, more in general, in my research. However, at the end of my critical reading of Chapman’s essay, I could not avoid the sensation that the author had somewhat overused them and enlarged too much their interpretative range and efficacy. For example, Chapman repeatedly states that “the production of historical (i.e. about the past) meanings” (Chapman 2013: 315) is at the basis of the presentation and perception of “past-as-history”: “the production of a videogame-based history (like any history) is a creative process, as meaning is produced even whilst a duty of care is given to the referential nature of the evidence” (319), and: “games developers/historians seek to arrange these pieces of referential data (with supporting explanation) to produce meaning: the beginnings of narrative construction” (*ibid*). The

49 Counter-factuality has also been seen as very problematic – and accordingly discussed – by E. MacCallum-Stewart and J. Parsler, for whom, in computer games “counterfactual history takes our own world and in some way changes it through the alteration of an event in our known past” (2007: 205). And also: “historical games are often blamed for their lack of accuracy and linear depictions of historical events. At the same time, they often involve recreations of history which may alter events, or encourage players to pursue multiple paths through a game which potentially follows different routes through history or offers alternative endings. Both of these issues are seen as problematic. One ignores history, the other changes it” (204).

50 I can only hope that Chapman is wrong when he writes that historical videogames produce representations “that their users recognize as history” (Chapman 2013: 327).

syllogism that underlines the conceptualization that can be inferred from these and many others' statements in Chapman's essay goes as follow: a videogame is a narrative that constructs meaning; history is a narrative that constructs meaning; *ergo*, videogame is history. It is clearly a false syllogism. (It becomes even clearer by simply exchanging the subject of the first term [and therefore the second term of the third proposition] with any other kind of "narrative", like myth, fairytale, Star Wars saga, etc.). Such a syllogism presupposes a part of Chapman's arguments and constitutes an epistemological aporia.

The products of historiography are subjected to the open, public discussion of professional historians who critically evaluate their contents, along with the theories and methods that sustain them. Videogames are not subject to the same evaluating procedures and therefore escape from a scientific approach. Or better, they do not escape it: they simply do not pursue it.

A profound gap divides my conception of history and historiography from that of Chapman. Unlike him and other radical post-modern thinkers that more or less consciously and critically pursue the task of "abrogating the borderline between historical narratives and fiction" (Iggers 2005: 149)⁵¹, I think that historiography *is* a science, subjected to the rules of criticism, non-contradiction, coherency, methodological and theoretical update, mutual control and assessment, and accumulation of knowledge. History is not only a "narrative about the past", as frequently stated in Chapman; nor it is, in my opinion, only one way amongst many others to imagine "past-as-history". History is (still and above all, for me), an attempt to say something *true* about the past.

Sid Meier's *Civilization* has also been studied as a very peculiar means of expressing and empowering a vision of the world and a socio-cultural theory deeply involved with power in its double anthropological and more common sense.⁵² The game is in fact so evidently related with this dimension of human experience that it is easily deducible also from the few introductory lines quoted at the beginning of this fourth section and taken from the presentation of the game on the Internet: the main aims of the game are to "build the most powerful empire the world has ever known" and consequently become "The Ruler of the World". Hence what follows rises not only epistemological, theoretical and methodological questions, but also ethical.

In reality, this imperialistic attitude had been developed by Sid Meier also in another computer game characterized by a rather indicative title: *Colonization* (MicroProse 1994). E. MacCallum-Stewart and J. Parsler, in a section of their essay "Historicizing the Computer Game" significantly named "Altered History", have summarized the game plot as follows:

51 Iggers 2005 is an excellent intellectual history of XX century historiography, with acute insights about the "post-modern turn".

52 Literature about theories of power in social sciences is huge. I have epitomized some of the most influential of these theories (namely those developed by Antonio Gramsci, Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault) in Testa 2014 (forthcoming).

“Sid Meier’s *Colonisation* (1994) was a management game which involved the exploration and subsequent colonization of the American continent. The player could take the role of either English, Spanish, French or Dutch seafarers. Colonisers had to establish successful settlements by setting up small towns and balancing their resources, harvesting the land and negotiating with the local natives for trade and land space. These latter relations involved trade and balancing the relationship between settlements and indigenous tribes already living in the area. Key decisions involved encroaching on locals’ land, and making the choice to supply the Indians first with horses, and then with guns. The final objective of the game was to fight off an invading army from the country of origin, and achieve Independence.” (MacCallum-Stewart, Parsler 2007: 207)

No surprise that “The colonisers’ most frequent option was to go to war with the natives, destroying them in the process” (*ibid*). In their article, MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler go on with expressing several interesting arguments about history and counter-factuality in the game, but we will not follow them on this path. I quoted *Colonization* just to show how the political and ideological basis that underlies the vision of history and power of the mature offspring of Sid Meier, the *Colonization* series, are by no means casual or unique.

Several other authors have noticed and discussed this side of one of the most popular and best-selling computer game. J. Bachynski and K. Kee, for example, have noticed that “Civilization has been criticized for perpetuating American myths of benevolent capitalism and frontier expansion” (Bachynski, Kee 2009: 2). However, there is one essay in particular that has thoroughly and convincingly explored the power dimension inherent in Civilization, coming to rather drastic conclusions that, sharable or not, raise many questions. This essay is in Foucauldian style named “*Becoming State: The Bio-cultural Imperialism of Sid Meier’s Civilization*” (Pobłocki 2002).

For K. Pobłocki, “Civilization is the first bold attempt to simulate the whole human history in computer software. Ambitious as it sounds, the game nevertheless does not go beyond reproducing models of social change well known, and extensively criticized, in twentieth-century social science” (164). The author shows how in the first three episodes of the series, those which, as we have seen, contributed to build up the fame of Civilization as “the greatest game of all time”, the best path leading to victory is to try to reproduce not the general history of “civilizations”, whatever one mean by this expression, but to reproduce the history of “*our*” “civilization”: in Pobłocki’s words, “the history of the West” or better the history of the United States, “the ultimate inheritor of all the human advancement and elevated to the position of the most perfect and most ‘civilized’ state of all” (166). The author’s conclusions are severe: for him, Sid Meier’s philosophy of history is characterized by a “crude determinism, and very much in the Hegelian vein [...]. The *telos* is well known. In the case of Hegel it was the Prussian state [...], the fetish-object of Meier’s fantasies is

the ‘ultimate empire’, the state that resembles most the end product of all human advancement, namely the United States of America” (167).⁵³

“By embracing nineteenth century models of social change and by brutal [sic] projection of the Western history onto contingent grounds of randomly generated maps, random civilization names, random starting positions, random distribution of resources and the like, he [Sid Meier] essentializes the story of the Western success, suggesting that their causes lie in personal abilities, rationality, high administrative skills and other qualities of the Westerners, reducing culture to an imperialist check list (one either has it or not), and suggesting that starting conditions (both ecological and cultural) do not matter in the absorbing of a new advancement since there is no difference between developed and imported advances. Liberal democracy is the best political system, developed by the most cunning ones, and can be swallowed *en bloc* by all those who wish to live peacefully surrounded by thriving economic, cultural and scientific life, just as the Americans do today”. (171)⁵⁴

Power in *Civilization* is related to both the game dynamics and the interpretation of historical and social features given by its creator, Sid Meier. In the end, the conceptualization of power in these terms sustains the crafting of a vision of world history which empowers and legitimates the hegemony of the West, and particularly the imperialistic claims of the United States of America.

Having experienced *Civilization* myself, I think that the conclusions expressed by the authors quoted so far, especially Poblocki’s, are convincing, although, in the last case, expressed probably in a way too severe. After all, one might say, *Civilization* is a cultural product whose main aim is to entertain, not an imperialistic manifesto. True. However, these very same conclusions should be meditated by those who claim for this game’s utility and efficacy as a vehicle (or even a producer) of historical knowledge. Sid Meier’ vision of the world and philosophy of history as outlined so far are very problematic and controversial and would surely not represent a suitable resource for learning history.

The last portion of this essay will focus on the topic of religion in *Civilization*.⁵⁵

53 If this interpretation is correct, Sid Meier’s would be sustained by the “modernization theory” (based on the “three worlds model”) which has been a hegemonic cultural (social, political and economic) theory widespread in the West and especially in the U.S.A. during Cold War years (as it has been convincingly re-affirmed, recently, in Chary, Verdery 2009: 19). Very briefly, “modernization theory” advocated that the best world possible was the democratic, liberal and technologically advanced “first world” – especially in its north-American declension –, opposed to the non-democratic, illiberal and technologically underdeveloped “second” (socialist) and “third” (southern) worlds.

54 “Civilization proves that the history of the West is the only logical development of the humankind that would have happened anywhere and anytime, regardless of the initial conditions and players’ strategies. [...]” (168).

55 The topic is also discussed, very weakly indeed, in Geraci 2012: 104-105 and Owens 2012.

Religion has a rather important – although not primary – role in the dynamics of the game. First of all, following the principle of a global mass commercial product, the “religious side” is treated in a quite “politically correct” way. The long (224 pages!) *Civilization IV* manual has a whole section devoted to religion (*Civilization IV* manual, pp. 77-82), a section which begins with a box named “Religion in This Game” containing a statement which deserves to be cited here:

“We know that people have extremely strong opinions about religions – in fact, many a war has arisen when these beliefs collide. We at Firaxis have no desire to offend anyone. However, given the importance that religions have had in human development, we didn’t want to just leave them out of the game altogether; instead we have tried to handle them in as respectful, fair and even-handed manner as possible. (All religions in the game have the same effects, the only difference being their technological requirements.) There are seven religions in *Civilization IV* (testing having determined that seven is the optimal number for gameplay). When determining which seven to include, we picked those religions that we thought would be most familiar to our audience. We do not mean to imply that these religions are more important, better or worse than any other religions. We offer no value judgments on religion; we mean no disrespect to anyone’s beliefs. We’re game designers, not theologians.” (77)

First remark: over the thousands of religions individuated in world’s history by historians and anthropologists, only seven have been “picked”: the “most familiar”, namely the most statistically relevant in terms of believers. In the manual they are reported in alphabetical order: Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Taoism (81-82). It is evident how “ethnic” or “indigenous” religions have been carefully avoided, and understandably: the game’s imperialistic logic can only fit with a universalistic, expansive (and even aggressively so) religious attitude, an attitude well represented by some of the religions above quoted.⁵⁶ Moreover, those religions are amongst the oldest, those which have proved to be more flexible and adaptable to historical changes. Another reason for the choice, linked to that of their “popularity”, is their “marketability”.

Second remark: the above mentioned religions are represented in an extremely static way. Their models completely lack inner diversity, dynamism, local or temporal variations. Thus, the mechanical automatism of Civilization game, combined with the developers’ choice to make “the same effects” happen with any religion, flattens the historical reality, which is, the differences in the ways in which whatever of those religions has historically developed. *Civilization* religions are monolithic, static, reified entities which offer no insights about real religions and actually mislead the player about them.

⁵⁶ I make a simplification for the sake of brevity. Actually the category of “ethnic – or indigenous – religion” is rather problematic, as it has been recently argued (Tajord 2013). The category of “world – or universalistic – religion” is, conversely, relatively less problematic (see Eller 2007: 188-217).

Third remark, related to the previous one: religions have probably been amongst the most influential factors in world history, deeply affecting social, economic, material, political, artistic and generally cultural features of societies. Therefore, the fact that “all religions in the game have the same effects” results in a highly counterfactual depiction. This can be explained by appealing to two elements that characterize developers’ standpoint: a strong concern for politically correctness and a lack of methodological awareness and interest for historiography and anthropology.

Fourth remark: the last sentence quoted, “We’re game designers, not theologians!!!”, could be used as an argument for those who wish to see *Civilization* used in history classes. The choice of the word “theologians” instead of “historians” is already questionable, and significant for an assessment of the impact of the scientific study of religion over non-academic sectors of American society. The point, however, is that this statement is an evident (and slightly craven) way to easily sort the issue out, an admission of helplessness which sounds like “ok, we wanted and actually had to integrate religions in the game but had no clue how to do it in a realistic way and without cutting out the markets of non-Westerns and non-Christians; so, this is the result”.

With regards to the actual functioning of religions in *Civilization*, they basically function as other technologies in the game “tech-tree”, an apparatus that allows the empire to develop – in a rather evolutionary manner – according to the gamer’s strategic choices. Religions can be “discovered” at some conditions, which is, after the discovery of some other material and immaterial technologies. For example, in *Civilization IV* the technology “Theology” enables the technology “Christianity”, “Meditation” enables “Buddhism”, “Polytheism” enables “Hinduism”, etc. As material and immaterial technologies are interrelated, the paths leading to each religion are not completely linear: for example, “Monotheism”, which enables “Judaism”, requires both the technologies “Polytheism” and “Masonry”. This evolutionary, functionalist and interconnected system reminds, *mutatis mutandis*, that theorized by XX century historian of religions A. Brelich, for whom recognizable stages of human development were determined by the interdependent influences of several factors historically ascertainable and more or less reproducible in different historical and geographical contexts. For instance, this paradigm was applied by the author to the study of polytheism as a specific and well-defined religious form (Brelich 2010 [1960]), and it might be of some interest to notice a convergence between Brelich’s speculation and the game logic: in *Civilization IV* the technology “Polytheism” leads to “Priesthood”, “Monotheism” and, along with another technology (“Alphabet”), to “Literature”. In his work about polytheism, Brelich showed how writing (therefore literature) and the birth of polytheism were correlated; he also argued that polytheism led to the creation of “ritual specialists” (priests) and that, after a long development, it also determined the conditions for the diffusion and success of monotheism.

It is quite unlikely that Sid Meier or other developers ever read Brelich’s works (Brelich has never been translated into English and is not very well known outside the Italian academic milieu),

but this convergence is nevertheless significant in the sense that it shows how, in spite of what we have seen so far, videogames' logic and structures (and more generally virtual representations of religions) can sometimes produce or trigger a conceptualization of religious dynamics that rejoins the scientific one, even being this conceptualization completely unconscious for – and unwilling to – their producers. The lesson we can draw from this last example is that religious representations can be meaningful and thought-provoking regardless of the means they are expressed by and even in spite of the purposes for which they are conceived, realized and reproduced (in other words, the distinction between emic and etic interpretations [Harris 1976] and the importance of this demarcation applies also to videogames religions).

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