

## **Playing Holocaust? Immersion and historical narrative in *Anne Frank House VR* (2018) and *Through the Darkest of Times* (2020)**

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What is a game's purpose? Game research states that the goal of a game lies mainly in the playing itself. Playing is accompanied by excitement, pleasure, and the awareness of the activity's diametrical otherness from 'real life', as Huizinga notes (Huizinga 1956, 34). Playing a game is neither a random leisure activity nor an activity based solely on pleasure. It is self-determined and voluntary. When playing, the reality of life is constructed and reconstructed, and the game played is treated as if it was reality (cf. Al Chammas 2012, 44) – even though the players know otherwise. Whereas playing a game can teach the players values and knowledge, playing mostly remains a means in itself. If not, it may become an exercise.

So-called 'serious games' are an exception from this rule: here, playing is not the primary focus. The entertaining qualities of the game are balanced with the transfer of information and educational purposes. The gaming experience is supposed to be authentic and entertaining at the same time. As game research shows, games can promote competences in the emotional, social, motoric, and cognitive sector (cf. Krenz 2001, 8-9). Through 'interactive storytelling' and the associated involvement strategies of a computer game (cf. Neitzel 2012), the perception of the created world, its characters, and the story can be deepened and thus enhance the immersion into the diegesis. That is, the narration and the characters involved can be experienced.

What does this mean for computer games that address the Holocaust while including historical characters in the game? There is not much research dealing with this question. Brandenburg, Inderst, and Wagner (2022) devote their anthology to the *Wolfenstein* game series; Bender (2012) examines the representation of 20<sup>th</sup>-century wars in computer games; and Pfister (2018, 2019) deals specifically with the 'imagination' of the Holocaust in games. So far, the (re-)invented historical characters in computer games largely have not been the focus of analytical attention. In our paper, we would therefore like to turn our attention to the serious game *Anne Frank House VR* (2018) and the simulation computer game *Through the Darkest of Times* (2020). In the former, using a virtual headset, players interactively move through the back house where Anne Frank and her family hid

between 1942 and 1944. In the second game, the players become resistance fighters and have to recruit supporters, distribute flyers, steal weapons, hide persecuted people and plan attacks. In our paper, we focus on two questions that have not been explored in research so far: 1) What strategies of involvement enable immersion in the game and to what extent are the invented or reinvented historical characters involved in it? 2) If games can be considered as historical narratives (cf. Brand 2016, Bernhardt/Standke 2022) with specific narrative devices, to what extent do they offer potentials with regard to historical-biographical learning?

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