



# The Games of our People.

## Analysing Populist Nationalist Rhetorics of the Past in Historical Games

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### Abstract

Populist Nationalist movements have been using social media and popular culture as a way to diffuse their rhetorics, by reinterpreting TV series, movies and video games through discourses aiming to seek legitimacy in the history and the past.

In this paper, we reflect on the overlapping between historical ludic experiences and populist nationalist rhetorics of the past, with the goal of contributing to the understanding of the political implications of historical games. The paper investigates the possibility of games aligning with populist nationalist discursive rhetorics of the past under forms of historical resonance, and vice versa, it reflects on their potential to provide forms of friction or alternative historical experiences to those of populist nationalist rhetorics.

To do so, the paper briefly introduces historical game studies and subsequently discusses the political uses of the past and populist nationalist rhetorics of the past. In the following section, it presents an analytical framework that could prompt reflection about the potential overlapping between historical ludic experiences and populist nationalist rhetorics. The framework is designed as a grid comprising a set of questions, which provides a basis to analyse historical games and reflect on their historical ludic experience. The framework is designed to support awareness and practical reflection on the political dimensions of history and digital games. In the final section the framework is applied to the investigation of two historical games, *Assassin's Creed III* and *Sid Meier's Civilization V*, so as to provide researchers, educators and game designers with a clear and actionable tool.

### Introduction

Politics has always looked at history for legitimacy. This process has evolved over the centuries, by using different media forms, and interpreting historical events to create a representation of the past that could align with the propaganda of parties and movements. Populist Nationalist (PN) movements (as well as other political groups) have adapted to convey their messages through the use of social media, exploiting popular culture (movies, TV shows, comics, and digital games) as a tool for self-promotion, recruitment and mobilisation (Devries, Bessant and Watts 2021). Among them, games have also been subject to instrumental use and reinterpretations, including those representing historical settings (Wells *et al.* 2023:11-12).

But beyond the intentional reinterpretation of the past for propaganda lies a vast range of what Billig defined “banal Nationalism”, understood as the presence in everyday life of ordinary, unnoticed elements reinforcing the idea of national pride and identity. Thus “not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion [but] the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building” (Billig 1995:8).

This paper aims to reflect on how gameplay and narratives in historical games may align with pretextual reinterpretations of history under populist nationalist rhetorics. The goal is to contribute to the understanding of the political dimension of historical gaming (Chapman *et al.* 2017) and archaeogaming (Reinhard 2018), by focusing on the possibility for games to align with PN discursive rhetorics of the past, and vice versa, on their potential to provide potential forms of friction or alternative historical experiences.

To do so, we will present an analytical framework to reflect on the potential alignment between Western PN’s rhetorics and ludic experience.

The contribution is divided into four parts: in the first, we summarise the main tenets of historical games; in the second, we introduce the relationship between politics and cultural heritage, and describe populist nationalism and its main rhetorics of the past. In the third, we explain the theoretical components of the framework, its working and general structure. In the fourth section, we provide a preliminary application through the analysis of *Assassin’s Creed III* (Ubisoft 2012) and *Sid Meier’s Civilization V* (2k games 2012), so to test the framework and discuss the results.

## 1. History and digital games

Digital games have an increasingly relevant role in the contemporary system of media, being the most consumed medium, together with streaming (Fandom 2023). Since their inception, they have been openly using historical settings (e.g. Western, medieval, classic Rome, etc.), often concerning specific game genres, such as strategy games (e.g. the series *Age of Empires* or *Total War*), shooters (e.g. *Medal of Honor*, *Battlefield* series) and action-adventures (e.g. *Assassin’s Creed* series).

The interactive nature of digital games sets them apart from other media in how they make it possible to experience history: beyond their inherent multimodality, their interactive nature due to algorithm-based simulation makes it possible to experience the historical content in a procedural way (Bogost 2010): that is, by making choices, interacting and experiencing the results of those actions within the game itself (Chapman 2016).

Over the last twenty years, the discipline of game studies reflected on the dynamics of the historical representation in digital games, following different perspectives and lines of research such as historical game studies (Chapman *et al.* 2017) and archaeogaming (Reinhardt 2018, Politopoulos and Mol 2021). Many researchers undertook in-depth analyses of the historical representations of historical games, exploring various game series (Hess 2007) or historical periods (Kline 2013) represented in these interactive media. Several scholars engaged in discussion over the intersection between historical games, learning and education, evaluating the benefits and limits of game-based representations of the past (Squire 2004, McCall 2011). Further research investigated the complex relationship between cultural and collective memory and digital games (Begy 2017); the use of games for the simulation of historical conflicts (Sabin 2012) or for the dissemination of cultural heritage (Champion 2016).

As noted by Chapman *et al.* (2017), these researches were “at least partly motivated by the idea that popular cultural forms/products are capable of meaningful engagement with the past

and have the potential to *both determine and reflect how we both collectively and individually think about, understand, negotiate and talk about that past in the present*” (p. 360, emphasis added).

With time, researchers have mostly moved away from the investigation of the historical accuracy of single games, to understand better the experience of the past that games convey, its variables and dynamics. Already in 2005, Uricchio highlighted the importance of analysing historical games going beyond the sole focus on their historical faithfulness (as it was done for books and movies). Instead, he suggested considering them as a new peculiar mode of expression and interaction with historical dynamics, conveyed through the very act of playing with historical elements, events and in a digital historical setting.

This experience can be understood through the concept of ‘resonance’ by Apperley (2011), which refers to the way in which certain games may connect with players’ socio-cultural experiences and beliefs. More specifically, Chapman (2016:36) further elaborates on that, calling ‘historical resonance’ the process in which players relate some of the claims put forward by historical games to their understanding of historical discourse.

In our view, despite many differences, all these studies discuss the interaction between games, history and political discourses by presenting two inter-related matters:

1. Many researchers have observed how any ludic representation of the past may project rhetorics and perspectives of our present into the past: “games set in or using elements from the past are firmly rooted in present-day culture and contemporary views on (postcolonial) history and politics...” (Mol, Politopoulos and Lammes 2023:2). As a result, they may dwell on implicit colonialist (Winnerling 2020), orientalist (Mukherjee 2018), capitalist (Dyer-Whiteford and De Peuter 2009, Lundblade 2019) and nationalist (Bijsterveld Munoz 2021) rhetorics by means of gameplay, representation and narratives. Due to their prominent role in contemporary entertainment, games have simultaneously been reflecting and shaping the cultural imaginary of nations (such as the Northern American one: Wills 2019 or Wright 2022).
2. Yet, because of their nature of open digital simulations, games have the potential to critically approach or subvert stereotypical representations of the past (Flanagan 2009, Lammes 2010) through counterplay (Meades 2015), by going against the (historical) expectations of the setting and often resulting in counterfactual history (Ferguson 1997). Many studies have investigated how game designers think and embrace counterfactualism (Grufstedt 2022), as well as the potential of counterfactual gameplay as a way to produce meaningful and thought-provoking historical reflections and interpretations (Peterson, Miller and Fedorko 2013) by making players able to make experience of history by ‘toying with it’ (Mol 2020).

The interaction between these two aspects can be observed since the roots of the investigations of historical game studies (Chapman *et al.* 2017) and traced back to Friedmann (1999) and to Kapell (2002), who identified in *Sid Meier’s Civilization* (1991-, 2K Games) a dualism between the rich systemic understanding of the past through ludic dynamics, and the risks of an inherently Western-centered reproduction of certain historical dynamics. In other words, *Civilization* as a series makes players experience potential alternative histories (and observe certain dynamics of history by interacting with them), all while the underlying mechanics and form of the game reiterate the image of a Western-inspired world leader achieving victory through a scenario of ‘the end of history’, no matter whose civilization may achieve it (Bijsterveld Munoz 2021:1316).

Because of these dynamics, the understanding of the alignment of ludic experience with PN rhetorics can't be limited to the analysis of the sole representation, narrative or gameplay, or to the investigation of games specifically created with an explicit political purpose. The analysis should distinguish the many layers of ludic experience of the past, and focus on how that experience of history could align (or not) certain rhetorics of the past common in populist nationalism, under forms of (unintended) historical resonance.

## 2. Populist nationalism and the construction of the past

### 2.1 Past and politics, and policies of the Past

The quest for the legitimisation of political power through the exaltation, reworking or even distortion of historical facts has ancient origins (Patterson 2010). The relationship between politics, archaeology, history, and the perception of the past develops regardless of political circumstances (Hamilakis and Yalouri 1996). However, it is under totalitarian regimes that it becomes particularly close: in these cases, the appeal to historical elements is not limited to propaganda but goes so far as to influence research and historical reconstruction itself (Galaty and Watkinson 2004), as occurred in Europe with the rise of the fascist and Nazi regimes (Nelis 2007, Arnold 2006).

The search for legitimacy in the past still plays a key role in propaganda, as a crossing element that unites parties and movements with different political backgrounds, often searching for elements that can be instrumentalised in favour of populist and nationalist demands (Niklasson 2023).

The study of this relationship is not new among scholars, however, until the late 2010s this connection was mainly understood as a mere rhetorical and propagandistic tool (Yalouri 1999, Hamilakis 1996), in the last ten years the structural role of historical narratives for the construction of the political identity has emerged. In this second phase, beyond mere propagandistic use, the past becomes a structural element of identitarian construction, in some cases going so far as to have a concrete impact on research, in terms of orientation and funding.

### 2.2 The rise of Populist Nationalism

For a long time, in scientific literature as well as in public discourse, nationalism and populism have been used undifferentiatedly (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017, De Cleen 2017, Bonikowski *et al.* 2019, Brubaker 2020). Despite the efforts of scholars over the past ten years, both eluded any attempt to provide a univocal, acknowledged definition, which made it more difficult to identify their fundamental dynamics.

With some exceptions (Schroeder 2020), both are regarded as political phenomena characterised by the absence of a complex programmatic vision, mainly based on the contraposition *us-vs-them*, in which the definition of both sides is often left (deliberately) ambiguous. This lack of a broad political programme would allow these "thin-centred ideologies" to easily connect with each other, or with other more structured political systems (Mudde 2004).

Over the past decade, a rapid growth and spread of movements characterized by the fusion of elements of both discourses has been observed worldwide. This led to the emergence of a new phenomenon known as Populist Nationalism (Ding *et al.* 2021, Fukuyama 2018) or Nationalist Populism (Bonikowski 2017, Gusterson 2017, Brubaker 2017). This phenomenon

has raised concern especially because of the resulting radicalisation of political discourse, linked to phenomena such as aversion to democratic structures, intolerance towards marginalised groups, fascination with strong leadership, etc. (Bonikovski *et al.* 2019). The elusive definition of these phenomena - nationalism, populism and, consequently, populist nationalism - has led some scholars to dismiss this attempt, analysing focusing instead on the co-occurrence of different traits and features by looking for convergences and patterns (Gagnon *et al.* 2018, Olivas Osuna 2021).

It is within these movements that the past plays a key role in the identitarian construction of the 'us', conflating the concepts of political base, people and nation.

### 2.3 Which past?

As we've seen above, in PN movements, the rhetoric of the past assumes a fundamental role in the identity construction of the movements. But which past is proposed - and often re-imagined - in these kinds of discourse?

Far from being a phenomenon that only characterises Europe and North America (López-Alves and Johnson 2018, Brasted and Ahmed 2023), PNs have rapidly gained ground all over the world. Being a crossing political discourse, it can create an extremely heterogeneous set of rhetoric and claims. However, when analysing its relationship with the representation of the past, for what concerns Western PN - that we are analysing here - it is possible to identify certain constants.

The past narrated by the PN discourse is characterised by three elements: a) nostalgia for a "bygone halcyon era" (Ding *et al.* 2021), b) the removal of any discordant elements to (re)create a homogeneous cultural background (López-Alves and Johnson 2018:54, Greenberg and Hamilakis 2022), and c) a motionless and timeless history (Hofmann *et al.* 2021:6) that legitimate political claims on a long-term perspective.

The past to which populist nationalism looks back with nostalgia is a mythical utopian time, evoked by carefully selecting the elements to be subjected to the process of collective memorisation (Ding *et al.* 2021). This "uncontaminated" past (Gagnon *et al.* 2018:xiv) is often evoked in contrast to the present, to highlight the weakening of the national spirit, of the common cultural (and ethnic) background (López-Alves and Johnson 2018, Singh 2021, Niklasson and Hølleland 2023).

The second point is thus a direct consequence of the construction of this idealised past: the removal of any discordant element, referring to any pluralism (ethnic, cultural, religious, etc.) becomes a fundamental element in the construction of a homogenous national background. Hence, an ahistorical conception of the past ensues (Taggart 2004:274, Hoffmann *et al.* 2010:524). Within these narratives, national identity is presented as pure and unaltered, something that must be defended against external forces (De Cesari 2023). These rhetorics make PN discourse interact with reinterpretation of the past, in what we label as *identitarian mythopoesis*.

In such a crystallised past, current dynamics and institutions are taken for granted and considered as belonging to the origin of societies, regardless of modern accepted evidence and interpretations (Hoffmann *et al.* 2021:524). The removal of pluralist and historicising elements therefore leads to the reading of contemporary social and cultural dynamics as eternal and unchanging, the only possible outcome of the course of history.

The historical development thus emerges in relation to the dynamics of conflicts, generally against external forces. It is in this perspective that the view of conflictuality and

competitiveness (between human groups or with the surrounding environment) as the inevitable driving force of history is placed (Phillips 1998, Merriman 2000, Billig 1995, Varshney 2021), in the dynamic that we defined as the *unavoidable conflict* rhetoric.

In Western PN narratives, this is also embodied in the idea of the cultural and moral superiority of European and (as a result of colonisation) North American populations. The social and cultural models born in these geographical contexts are then taken as a yardstick for judgement and evaluation of all the other societies (Kennedy 2023), in the perspective of a *Western teleology*.

### 3. Analytical Framework

In this section, we propose an analytical framework that can serve to reflect and evaluate the potential alignment between historical ludic experiences and populist nationalism rhetorics.

The framework is designed to support awareness and practical reflection on the political dimensions of history and digital games, so as to provide researchers, educators and game designers with a clear and actionable tool. It's not meant to judge the historical accuracy or quality of single games, to raise moral criticism over games, or to present specific game design solutions as better or worse in representing history.

On the contrary, it is planned to foster reflection and awareness on the political implications of the ludic medium, and as food for thought on potential alternatives and different possibilities available to game design. The framework could be used by game designers to reflect on previous game interactions and potential new gameplay alternatives. Or they could be used by teachers to contextualise a game before creating an educational ludic experience, or by students as a springboard for discussion on their experience of a specific game series.

The framework is built upon two axes:

- 1) A set of three *rhetorical dimensions* that describe the main rhetorics of the past in nationalist and populist propaganda: (a) **identitarian mythopoesis**; (b) **unavoidable conflict**; and (c) **Western teleology**. These three dimensions have been devised by extracting from the ideological elements of PN those features that summarise their ideology of the past. The three dimensions are not intended to define PN rhetorics *tout court*, nor to exhaust all forms of PN rhetorics, but rather to highlight the overlapping between Western PN discourse and their historical rhetorics in a coherent set of recognisable points.
- 2) A set of three *procedures* for the construction of historical discourse in digital games. These components were elaborated after Lozano's (1987) triad of historical procedures, and used by Idone Cassone and Thibault (2016) to break down the practice of historical game design. Ludic historical discourse is understood as a process that (a) establishes a **selection** of elements that will be part of the historical context; (b) draws **connections** and relationships between the elements; (c) restructures them according to a specific **perspective**.

The two axes result in an *operative matrix*, in which the intersections feature a set of open questions for the analysis. Questions are intended to be open and used as a tool for reflecting, contextualising, and brainstorming alternatives.

In the following pages, we will first present the two axes composing the framework, then share the matrix with its set of questions.

## 3.1 Rhetorical dimensions

### 3.1.1 Identitarian mythopoesis

Any work that aims to narrate the past, from university textbooks to historical movies, must necessarily make a selection of historical elements. This selection, however, can be made in different ways with very different results (Tucker 2004).

PN rhetorics tend to read history in terms of specific actors, contexts, actions and results, favouring forms of event-based historical tendencies that have been offering forms of captivating and incisive story-telling (Takács 2015). These narratives are not inherently better or worse than other historical discourses, but may imply that events are understood more as effects of narratives and representation than as historical emergences (Takács 2015:137)

That is, PN tends to read and interpret the past according to mythical models, that create and strengthen the idea of people-as-nation as a pure crystallised entity where borders, culture, language, ethnicity and government are one and one alone (Billing 1995). Specific archetypes (e.g. the saviour, the leader, the enslaved population, the invading enemy) and narrative tropes (e.g. the foundation myth, the war for freedom, the clash of civilizations) are applied, based on nostalgic elements, that recall a utopian past (Ding *et al.* 2021), the (faded) glory and national unity based on a common, untainted background (Niklasson and Hølleland 2023, Singh 2021, Gagnon *et al.* 2018, López-Alves and Johnson 2018).

By decontextualising specific settings and omitting otherness and plurality, this selective mythopoesis is functional to the legitimization of political claims based on the supposed universality of past socio-cultural institutions, providing a bridge between past and present.

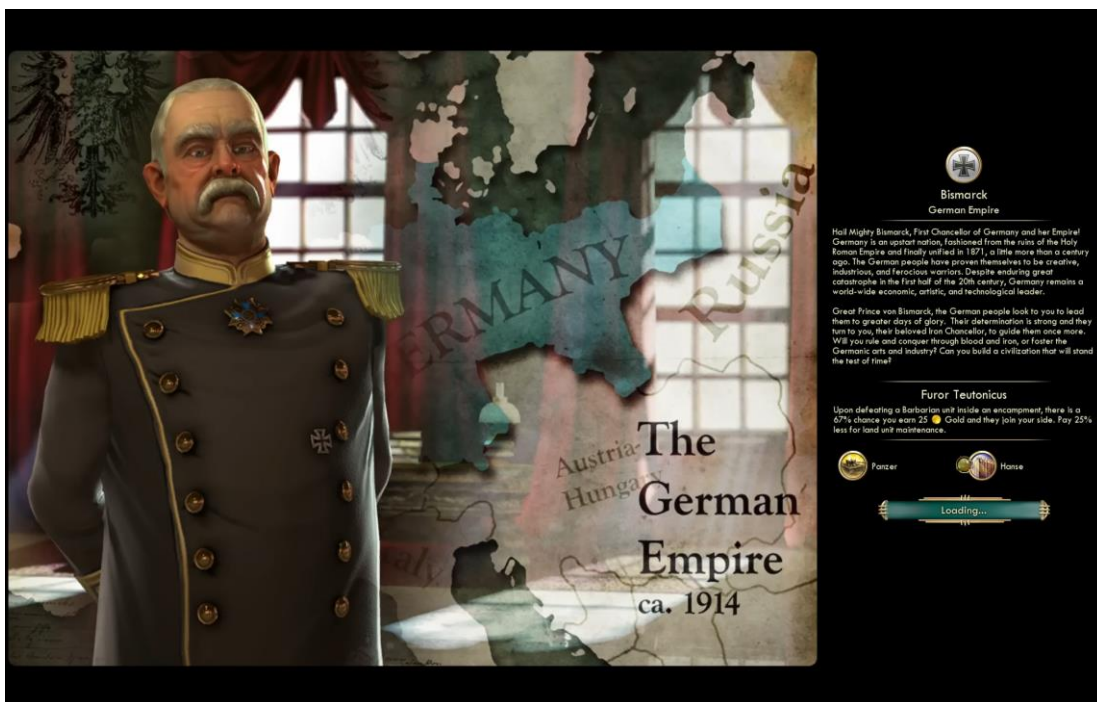


Image 1: Civilization V (2012), the opening message, addressing the player as Leader of the Nation



### 3.1.2 Unavoidable conflict

Because of the centrality of the opposition *us-vs-them* in PN, historical events are seen under a lens that pushes for the acceptance of conflict and competition as necessary and inevitable in relations between different social groups (Hoffman *et al.* 2021:10).

As a result of the creation of a pure subjectivity, conflict is perceived as the inescapable way for *people-as-nation* to emerge, and as the only way to defend and survive against enemies, in the past as in the present. Enemies are generally seen as invading the national boundaries or infiltrating and corrupting the nation. Thus internal conflict, if present, is translated into an external one.

Conflict is thus inevitable and the only relationship with other political actors can be one of whose only relationship can be one marked by fights for defence, reclamation, and autonomy. The land itself and its resources are seen as contested and necessarily owned by the people or by its enemies. This validates the need to exploit them and own land, resources and people before others, providing support for past colonialism and expansion.



*Image 2: Battlefield 1 (2016), a cutscene from the Introduction, featuring two soldiers from opposite forces.*

### 3.1.3 Western Teleology

PN is a global phenomenon, that includes movements from Europe, the USA or South America, as well as Southeast Asian countries. Many of them emerge precisely by rejecting Western culture and idealising a pre-colonial past from which they draw their foundation. As a first step in the creation of the framework, however, we focused on movements from Europe and North America and their shared self-perception as part of the Western civilization. Future research will lead to the further generalisation of this dimension.

Western PN often claim that the historical dynamics of Western populations are the highest expression of the development of human societies toward a process of 'civilization', to the point where the trajectory of Western nations is perceived as the only form of historical development (a teleology, see De Albuquerque 2023).



Countries that do not follow the path traced by economic, technological and societal development are easily considered less civilised and underdeveloped. Even ‘steps’ diverging from the Western ones (other political forms, knowledge systems, cultural dynamics) could be evaluated as such. Just as the concept of state is naturalised and mythicised, development is perceived as natural proof of power and civilization, in the past as in the present.

Furthermore, because of the inherently conflictual nature of PN, the fight against other groups is often presented as a clash between civilised and uncivilised societies.

In this way, on the one hand, the group can keep together the concept of moral and societal superiority, even during adversities: under the assumption that the past and future are part of one single path, restorative and redemptive tendencies (Ding *et al.* 2021:159) may sustain each other and overlap.



Image 3: Crusader Knights 3 (2020), the menu showing Technology Eras with their predefined set of discoveries and inventions

## 3.2 Procedures

### 3.2.1. Selection

Every historical discourse has to select (and omit) specific elements of history to create an intelligible representation of the past. Selection and omission are necessary procedures, that are tied to the selection of the scope (the when, where, what and who of history), topics and domains of life (war, economy, politics, daily life...) as well as the smallest details (single events, descriptions, features etc).

Games may include/exclude historical elements on the basis of many variables: the concept devised by game designers, as well as the tropes and expectations of a specific genre (i.e. strategy games rarely omit wars and battles) or economic motives; games may represent elements in different ways (from 3D animated models to static images, texts or sounds) and according to different aesthetics, art styles and level of details. Some of these elements could be represented or be part of the gameplay of the game (i.e. historical shooters may show contexts of diplomacy, but rarely simulate them).

### 3.2.2. Connection

Historical discourses are formed through links and connections among their elements, by relationships that can be explicit or omitted from the discourse. Rules of cause-effect, correlations, similarities and even lack of relationships are how history is told and understood. Being games digital simulations, relationships and interactions between elements (and with the player) have to be designed, thus creating a model of the world that takes into account historical elements in some form via game dynamics.

Designers choose which relationships will be part of the gameplay and how the different elements will interact, for instance deciding how resources will interact in the game (e.g. units may have drafting costs, but not upkeep costs), how effective certain actions will be (e.g. ludic economies, weapon balance, player's agency) and how these fit (or not) the historical setting. These interactions may relegate the historical setting to a position of background (history as a 'background', mostly idle) or result in different forms of 'historical engines', whereas gameplay translates a discourse on historical dynamics (e.g. dynamics of slavery, economic balance, political support etc).

### 3.2.3. Perspective

Historiography itself is created by selecting one or more points of view, that will put into perspective its elements and dynamics, overlooking others. Perspective includes issues of order and focus, as well as scale and topic-making in historical discourse. The same context may produce completely different historical accounts or representations, based on perspective alone, resulting in different historical understanding and experiences.

Games create points of view for players to perceive and interact with the game, be it through specific avatars (diegetic actors) or abstract perspectives (god-like view). Players may have different agency in exploring different points of view and thus the digital world (with its simulated dynamics); some of these perspectives may be linked to non-interactive elements (game encyclopedia, cutscenes) or alternative modes of play (sandbox, single-player campaign). Perspectives also vary in time, for instance when we can witness the development of cities and countries over centuries.

All these choices are, once again, the result of many different variables and determine the specific point of view over the historical events that players have.

## 3.3. The matrix

The following matrix (*Table 1*, below) emerges from the interaction of the above-mentioned dimensions and procedures, respectively on the horizontal and vertical axis. The intersection between the axes results in nine slots.

Each slot includes a pair of questions: a *preliminary* question, which broadly inquires about the overall design of the game; and a *targeted* one, which triggers a comparison between the features of the game and the characteristics of PN rhetorics.

The framework can be used starting from any of the dimensions, and moving from the top to the bottom of the column (i.e. from Selection to Connection to Perspective), trying to answer the questions as one see fit. It is suggested to go back to previous questions to modify them when needed, and go through the scheme as many times as needed, until this results in a satisfactory understanding of the general historical experience of the game.

	<b>Identitarian mythopoiesis</b>	<b>Unavoidable conflict</b>	<b>Western teleology</b>
<b>Selection</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Which elements are selected?</li> <li>• Does the selection of elements align with those of mythical models?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What modes of interaction between actors are represented?</li> <li>• Do the possible modes of interaction in the game lead to conflict-based interaction?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Which triggers and dynamics of historical development are represented?</li> <li>• Does the selection of triggers and dynamics solely follow Western events, discoveries and processes?</li> </ul>
<b>Connection</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do the elements relate to each other?</li> <li>• Does the relationship between the elements follow and feed a mythical narrative pattern?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In which relationship do the other elements and dynamics stand in relation to the conflict?</li> <li>• Do the relationships between the elements lead all historical processes back to conflict dynamics?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In what relationship do actions and events link up to develop forms of historical progress?</li> <li>• Do the concatenations between actions and events replicate Eurocentric perspectives?</li> </ul>
<b>Perspective</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does the perspective adopted shape the experience of history?</li> <li>• Does the perspective of the narrative allow the projection of myths from the past into the present/future?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In what perspective the dynamics of conflict in historical discourse are brought to light?</li> <li>• Does the narrative perspective make one think of conflict as the only relationship between collectivities?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• From which perspective is the historical development process shown?</li> <li>• Does the perspective of the narrative imply that Western development is the only one possible?</li> </ul>

Table 1: the Matrix

## 4. Implementation

In this section, we will show a preliminary application of the framework, by using the set of questions presented above to reflect on the overlapping between historical game and populist nationalist rhetorics. The aim, once again, is not to measure the populist potential of games, but to reflect on how these digital texts may produce specific experiences of history that may be open or compatible with PN forms of historical resonance.

In the following pages, we will briefly analyse two different historical games from different genres (*Assassin's Creed III*; *Sid Meier's Civilization V*). Each analysis will present a brief introduction to the game, and then include a summary of the main findings of the analysis.

### 4.1 *Assassin's Creed III* (Ubisoft 2012)

The *Assassin's Creed* series (Ubisoft, 2007-; from now on, *AC*) include action-adventure games set across different epochs, recreating past cities or regions in an open-world setting. In the games, players impersonate different members of the sect of the Assassins, here depicted as a group that acts in the shadow of history to defend the world by the plans of world domination devised by their rivals, the Templars. Through a technology called Animus, modern-day people can re-experience the life of their ancestors and thus take part in the hidden war between the two factions.

The series is famous for its recreations of Italian cities during the Renaissance (Florence or Venice in *AC II*), events such as the American or French Revolutions (*AC III* and *AC Unity*) and recently for the recreation of Egypt during the Ptolemaic Period (*AC Origins*) or Greece during the Peloponnesian War (*AC Odyssey*). The games are recognised and acknowledged for the detail and scale of historical faithfulness, especially for what concerns the urban layout of the cities, (Shaw 2015), and the recent addition of Discovery Tours (Poiron 2021) as a gamified and playful historical documentary. At the same time, researchers discussed how the historical detail is coupled with gameplay and narrative that mostly reproduce the effect of a well-crafted but hardly interactive playground (Politopoulos *et al.* 2019).

#### 4.1.1 Identitarian mythopoiesis

##### **SELECTION**

###### **Which elements are selected?**

The game takes place in two timelines: the historical Colonial America during the Revolutionary War, between 1754 and 1783, and the modern-day America of Desmond Miles. The setting includes both fictional (the Assassin Ratonhnhaké:ton/Connor, its descendant Desmond) and historical characters (George Washington, Charles Lee, Benjamin Franklin, the Mohawk tribes and many others). Locations featured include the city of Boston, New York City, and Philadelphia, part of the American Frontier. The events narrated include political upheaval, unrest, battles and plotting, as well as the modern-day fight of Desmond against the Templars, and its attempt to save the world from doomsday.

###### **Does the selection of elements align with those of mythical models?**

The setting of the game represents a paradigmatic moment in American history, the founding myth of the USA. The modern-day events, in addition, can be easily moulded in a heroic pattern of good vs evil (Templars vs Assassins) according to the model of the Hero's Journey.

##### **CONNECTION**

###### **How do the elements relate to each other?**

The fight between Assassins and Templars is depicted as one of the key constant drives of history, but they are not shown as the only ones with the power to shape the past. The game does not overlap these factions to the historical ones (blue and red coats) during the Revolutionary Wars, showing the interaction between different actors and groups with diverging goals and ideologies.

###### **Does the relationship between the elements follow and feed a mythical narrative pattern?**

In the past, Connor doesn't embody the typical Path of the Hero nor does the narrative follow the structure of a foundational myth; heroes and opponents end up cooperating and they do not fully align with any of the historical factions. On the contrary, the actions of Desmond follow a traditional Hero as a Saviour model, with a clear war against the enemy and a task of saving humanity.

##### **PERSPECTIVE**

###### **How does the perspective adopted shape the experience of history?**

In the past timeline, the game adopts first Haytham (the father, a templar) and then Connor's perspective. As a character not belonging to any of the main historical factions, in which Natives are victims of history no matter the historical outcome. In the present, Desmond follows Connor's life and fights an end-of-history scenario while doing it.

###### **Does the perspective of the narrative allow the projection of myths from the past into the present/future?**

The main *filrouge* between the past and present is drawn by the conspiratorial narrative, that sees in the past a repetition of the same conflict between the morally good Assassins vs the corrupt Templars. Because of Connor's position as a marginal subject of history, players don't directly align with the representation of people-as-nation in the potentially foundational context of the game.

#### 4.1.2 Unavoidable conflictuality

##### **SELECTION**

###### **What modes of interaction between actors are represented?**

The game represents the context of the American Revolution War by showing the different historical factions involved in battles, political intrigues and control over the land. Through Connor, gameplay includes actions such as fighting and killing, exploration and parkour, and stealth dynamics. The modern-day timeline shows the Assassins and Templars involved in an endless war made of spy games, hacking and power politics.

**Do the possible modes of interaction in the game lead to conflict-based interaction?**

The game genre (stealth-action-adventure) and setting (American Revolution) all point towards conflict-based interactions. Conflictuality is both the overall dynamics of interaction and the general state of the period (a time of conflict and revolution). Instances of alternative non-conflictual interactions are presented, both in the form of truces and collaborations between main factions, and forms of stealth and non-violent options (a staple element of the series).

**CONNECTION**

**In which relationship do the other elements and dynamics stand in relation to the conflict?**

The main gameplay revolves around loops of exploration (movement, parkour, navigation and interaction with NPC) and assassination (chase, stealth and killing). Players have agency in balancing more or less violent playstyles. The game narrative shows potential alternatives to open combat (war, battles) but mostly as limited, ancillary activities (spy, political intrigue). The in-game encyclopedia includes details about characters, events and places that fall outside conflict.

**Do the relationships between the elements lead all historical processes back to conflict dynamics?**

Conflict is required to progress through the game, with no complete alternative granted to the player; furthermore, there is limited representation of effective non-conflictual solutions within the narrative (e.g. the truce between Haytham and Connor). Yet players can dwell on non-conflictual space and interactions, such as exploring the city, navigating, and interacting with NPC. This doubles the representation of moments of peace in the cities or the American Frontier.

**PERSPECTIVE**

**In what perspective the dynamics of conflict in historical discourse are brought to light?**

Because the game is experienced through the point of view of Connor, players indirectly cross the main historical conflict while not belonging to a single faction, and instead participating in a longer secret war. They accept and use violence as a solution, while they search for alternative ways (cooperation, dialogue) or less-conflictual interactions, which are shown to be difficult and generally ineffective.

**Does the narrative perspective make one think of conflict as the only relationship between collectivities?**

Conflict is represented as an unavoidable reality of that historical period, as well as the main and most direct way for factions to interact. Chances and attempts for alternatives are shown and, for some characters (Haytham and Connor), wished for, but results in failure. The modern timeline escalates this view, painting the war between Assassins and Templars as an invariable element of history, portrayed in a relatively unambiguous “We (People)” vs “Them (Elites)”, more closely aligning with conspiracy theories rhetorics and certain forms of populism.

### 4.1.3 Western Teleology

**SELECTION**

**Which triggers and dynamics of historical development are represented?**

As a game set in a specific historical context, Assassin's Creed games do not directly present mechanics of historical development as strategy games do. The main historical process presented in its development is the American Revolution itself. The overarching narrative of the series implicitly shows (by comparison) different historical contexts, but not explicit historical development per se.

**Does the selection of triggers and dynamics solely follow Western events, discoveries and processes?**

Because of its setting in the American Revolution and present-day America, AC III only covers Western events and historical processes, aside from a few mentions of events in the previous games' timelines.

**CONNECTION**

**In what relationship do actions and events link up to develop forms of historical progress?**

The American Revolutionary Wars and the ensuing Independence are linked to the battles, politics and secret scheming represented during the story, including the actions of the players that contributed to that result (e.g. saving Washington, killing Charles Lee etc).

**Do the concatenations between actions and events replicate Eurocentric perspectives?**

The modern timeline narrative, which concludes Desmond's arch in AC3, aligns with specific representations of historical development in conspiracy theories, under the idea that secret groups may use political influence, wealth and violence to shape the direction of the world on a global scale. This idea mostly conflicts with specific Western views of teleologic and linear progress, driven by technological, cultural and economic development.

**PERSPECTIVE**

**From which perspective is the historical development process shown?**

At the historical level, players are immersed in a specific historical context, following in indirect ways (by leaps and bounds) the development of the American Revolution from its origin to its ending. In the modern timeline, players mostly experience the past as Desmond, as the repetition of the same endless scheme of conflict between Assassins and Templars. The apparent historical process is thus reinterpreted according to a cyclical process, almost atemporal. Science-fiction elements of alien civilization and cyclic catastrophes reinforce this idea of a cycle of creation and destruction. Players are thrown into this cycle with little agency, because only Desmond's final actions can alter the course of history, with the past only being experienced through memories.

**Does the perspective of the narrative imply that Western development is the only one possible?**

The game does not align with the view of progressive, teleologic and necessary Western development; instead, it presents a circular understanding of history, closer to the ones of conspiracy theories, in which historical development is only the cover for an endless fight between factions chasing ideals of progress as Order and Freedom.

#### 4.1.4 Summary of Findings - AC III

After having analysed the game through the above-mentioned framework (*Table 2*), we can briefly summarise the main findings: despite being set in a highly mythopoetic historical context (American Revolution), *AC III* avoids direct alignment with PN rhetorics by assuming the perspective of the native American Connor and making the fight between Assassins and Templars cross but not overlap on the one between American and British soldiers (Shaw 2015). The narrative represents a period of conflict and, while some of its main characters look for alternatives, no successful solution to the cycle of violence and scheming can be found, just as players may dwell in virtual exploration of the historical context, but need to resort to violence to progress through the game. Beyond the immediate historical development (American Independence) and the attempt to provide an *authentic-deconstructionist* experience (Joyce 2022), the perspective on historical progress closely aligns with the models of conspiracy theories, one in which the overarching narrative of Desmond (modern-day protagonist) shows the past as an endless cycle of conflict between Assassins and Templars, in an endless clash between forces for freedom and control, in which players can easily project models of people vs elites, and images of the leader as a saviour.

#### 4.2. Sid Meier's Civilization V (2K GAMES, 2012)

The series *Sid Meier's Civilization* (from now on, *Civ*) is one of the oldest in the gaming industry, with the first game released in 1991 and the latest instalment (the 6<sup>th</sup>) in 2016. The games are turn-based strategy games, considered a paradigm of the 4X genre (label created from the four main gameplay actions: eXplore, eXpand, eXploit and eXterminate).

The games put the player in charge of leading a specific faction (a 'civilization') from the dawn of prehistory up to the recent future, interacting with other factions, developing culture, waging war and making discoveries along the way. Progress through time is represented by turns, in which players make choices about buildings and units to create, new research and policies, unit movement and alliances.

*Civilization V* (released in 2012) presents many significant innovations compared to the previous games, such as the shift to a hexagon-based map, the reworking of civilizations and the initial removal of religious dynamics. The game received three main expansions, improving the trade routes and religion, warfare and ideologies, and environmental dynamics.

#### 4.2.1 Identitarian mythopoiesis

##### **SELECTION**

###### **Which elements are selected?**

The game includes 18 Civilizations at release, each one tied to a historical leader (e.g. Ghandi, Oda Nobunaga, Pachacuti etc). All civilizations can produce buildings and units, research technology, choose government forms, make diplomacy, gather resources and create economies. In the expansions, other historical elements such as religion, trade routes, ideologies and international organizations were added.

###### **Does the selection of elements align with those of mythical models?**

The starting message invokes leaders of the chosen faction, mentions their history and asks them to lead 'once again' their people to greatness/prosperity. Each faction/leader is tied to specific bonuses (production, war, diplomacy), unique building or unit, and preferred environment. This aligns with the elements of foundational myths that shape redemptive or restorative narratives

##### **CONNECTION**

###### **How do the elements relate to each other?**

Players have complete control over the civilization, which acts as a single and homogeneous entity despite cultural changes and changes in borders and cities. The game features a complex system which makes expansion, economy, technology, warfare, order, culture and diplomacy all interconnected, through a system of points and bonuses (e.g. a building may produce wealth, but pollute and thus decrease order; factions can request trades or lose trust, etc). There are different winning conditions (military, cultural, scientific, diplomatic; in multiplayer, score or domination)

###### **Do the relationships between the elements follow and feed a mythical narrative pattern?**

Aside from the starting message and winning condition (see below), the historical model per se (i.e. relationships ) doesn't guide towards a specific mythical pattern, by making players able to create different factions by mixing and matching historical elements and dynamics. Among them, the possibility for the reproduction of mythical patterns may arise.

##### **PERSPECTIVE**

###### **How does the perspective adopted shape the experience of history?**

Players impersonate a god-like historical leader and control/observe a civilization from the dawn of history to the close future. They cross different eras and civilizations in order to become the leaders of the world. History is perceived as a process of rising through greatness (by replicating the perfect conditions of the 'real' historical figure).

###### **Does the perspective of the narrative allow the projection of myths from the past into the present/future?**

The starting message and the winning conditions frame each play/session under mythical models that align with that of the golden age (in the 'real' historical time) and ask for the player to replicate that perfect state through the game (restoration or redemption). The winning conditions always require a faction to become the de facto leader of the world, having outdone all the others. This overlaps with myths of Heros of the People and the People-as-Nation.

#### 4.2.2 Unavoidable conflictuality

##### **SELECTION**

###### **What modes of interaction between actors are represented?**

Different factions can engage in a broad spectrum of interactions through diplomacy, commerce and warfare: these interactions can include conflict (both explicit war or secret sabotage) as well as collaborations (trades, treaties and technological exchange) or neutral relationships (pacts of non-aggression, non-interaction).

###### **Do the possible modes of interaction in the game lead to conflict-based interaction?**



Conflict is an important part of gameplay and a common occurrence in the game, but not the only nor the preferred one. Players can choose between a broad range of pacific and cultural approaches, or mixed ones. A minimum level of military is often necessary to defend from enemies. Non-factions (barbarians) can only be dealt by military force, destroying their camps.

#### **CONNECTION**

##### **In which relationship do the other elements and dynamics stand in relation to the conflict?**

Conflict and other dynamics are part of a layered system of relationships with others, based on a set of bonus/malus in terms of diplomacy, economy, public order, and culture. War is expensive and causes internal distress, but can also lead to further expansion and diplomatic preeminence. Alternatives may be more or less suitable in relation to the enemy faction, power balance and geographical positions. Defending is often needed.

##### **Do the relationships between the elements lead all historical processes back to conflict dynamics?**

Rivalry and competition are the foundation of the game-winning conditions, but conflict is not the only nor the main solution. Historical processes are linked in both ways to military and warfare, but are not strictly dependent or instrumental to conflict. Alternative diplomatic, cultural and economic solutions may ideally take place with low or no military support.

#### **PERSPECTIVE**

##### **In what perspective the dynamics of conflict in historical discourse are brought to light?**

Conflict is represented as one of the many tools used by factions and groups to rise towards greatness. It is represented as something characterising the whole course of history, but not necessarily all interactions between nations at any moment in time.

##### **Does the perspective of narrative make one think of conflict as the only relationship between collectivities?**

Conflict is not the only or necessarily the main modality of historical interaction, despite some factions/leaders assumed by the game as military/aggressive. Not conflict, but rather rivalry, instead, is assumed by the game as a foundational dynamic of interaction between civilizations. Conflict as a tool can be suboptimal depending on the faction and context, but the interaction between civilizations is framed at the beginning of the game as a competitive race. Even collaborative interactions are framed in terms of instrumental value towards soft-cultural dominations.

### 4.2.3 Western Teleology

#### **SELECTION**

##### **Which triggers and dynamics of historical development are represented?**

The progress of civilizations through history is represented by the turns/years and by the progress through Eras (Ancient, Classical, Medieval, Reinassance, Industrial, Modern, Future), which is tied to the development of technologies in the Technology Tree. The Tree includes proper forms of economic, cultural, political, and military discoveries and inventions (such as Pottery, Writing, Banking, Fertilizers, Acoustics, Mass Media, Ecology etc).

##### **Does the selection of triggers and dynamics solely follow Western events, discoveries and processes?**

The concept and names of Eras are clearly inspired by Western historiography. Many of the processes at the earliest stage of the tree are not limited to Western civilizations, but the more one progresses in time the more they reflect specific industrial or modern Western standards (e.g. Penicillin, Steam Power, Railroad, Globalization) or are positioned implying a Western perspective (e.g. Astronomy, Gunpowder appear in the Reinassance).

#### **CONNECTION**

##### **In what relationship do actions and events link up to develop forms of historical progress?**

Progress through Eras is enabled by technological development alone. Players researching all technologies in an Era or the first one of the following Era advance to that Era. Once a player does so, the Era progress for all civilizations, on a global scale. In addition to new technologies, this opens up new Policies, increases costs for faith and research exchange, effects of ideologies and military defence, as well as the graphical design of cities and the aesthetics of the menu.

##### **Do the concatenations between actions and events replicate Western perspectives?**

While players can research different technologies in different order and do not replicate step-by-step the ideal model development of Western states/nations, the general mechanics and progress of the tree largely overlap with stereotypical Western views on historical development. The more civilizations progress through the game, the more they align with Western nations in terms of technological (lato sensu) development. To avoid doing so is possible, but will put the player in a state of disadvantage.

#### **PERSPECTIVE**

##### **From which perspective is the historical development process shown?**

Players impersonate an ideal god-like entity that observes the rise and fall of civilizations, controlling one of them. They can see all the dimensions of historical development, zooming in on specific details such as cities, borders, armies and so on. They have a complete view of their faction, but only a limited one of the others (through spies and certain technologies). They make their faction and the world progress through time and Eras, in complexity and power, until someone reaches one of the victory conditions (war domination, launch of space program, development of cultural utopia, control of the World Congress).

##### **Does the perspective of the narrative imply that Western development is the only one possible?**

The more players progress in time, the more the perspective implicitly presents the Western development model as the mould for the idea of 'winning civilization'. To make one's faction win is to follow a path modelled after the one of the United States, as the conditions for scientific and diplomatic victories are directly inspired by that. While the game gives players a certain freedom in mixing and matching cultural discoveries and elements, the only possible victory conditions require their faction insofar as they westernise. The final victory quotes all insist on the greatness of one's civilization and how it was able to triumph over the others, in this way, they enact Fukuyama's 'end of history' view on world development.

#### 4.2.4 Summary of Findings - *Civ V*

After having analysed the game through the above-mentioned scheme (*Table 3*), we can briefly summarise the main findings: *Civ V* presents an ambitious historical engine that makes it possible to play counterfactual historical scenarios from prehistory to the near future. The game lets players wage war as well as build economics, explore, develop culture, ally and collaborate with other civilizations, showing alternatives and large freedom in terms of the type of civilization to role-play, making conflict only part of the historical experience. However, this degree of freedom relies on a double set of rhetorics: on the one hand, a ludic form of essentialist nationalism (Bijsterveld Munoz 2021), which is tied to the understanding of factions as homogeneous and unchanging protagonists of history, which are tasked by the game with redemptive or restorative fates; on the other, a form of Western teleologism that make factions to progressively resemble Western (American) nations the more they progress in time, up to the point where the victory conditions all mirror an ideal atemporal society (Mol, Politopoulos and Lammes 2023) closely matching Fukuyama's idea of American 'end of history'.

## Conclusions

In the previous pages, we reflected on the overlapping between historical ludic experiences and PN rhetorics of the past, with the goal of contributing to the understanding of the political implications of historical games.

The paper investigated the possibility of games aligning with PN discursive rhetorics of the past, under forms of unintended historical resonance, and vice versa, on games' potential to provide forms of friction or alternative historical experiences.

To do so, we briefly summarised the foundations of historical game studies; we then discussed the political use of history and PN rhetorics of the past. Thanks to that, we designed and presented an analytical framework that could serve to reflect and evaluate the potential overlapping between historical ludic experiences and PN discourse. The framework is

designed to support awareness and practical reflection on the political dimensions of history and digital games, so as to provide researchers, educators and game designers with a clear and actionable tool, which we tested through a preliminary analysis of two historical games, *Assassin's Creed III* and *Sid Meier's Civilization V*.

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