

The Age of Digital Media: (Un)truth of Native American-based Representations in 2010's Video Games

Jill Homberg, s1045785

LET-GESB3100-CEH: Maud Ramakers, MA

Supervisor: M.G.W. Reichgelt, MA

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Introduction:

During my studies as a history bachelor student, I came across many different perspectives on a multitude of academic topics. However, one field of study has been stuck in my mind ever since I encountered it. Indigenous studies as a field of study investigates the historical-cultural dynamics, societal presence, national sovereignty, activism, scholarship, economic integrity and epistemologies of and about Indigenous peoples all over the world. The main aims are to both accommodate Indigenous peoples into academia and mindfully work with them, but also to reform racist stereotypes and misconceptions that have been generated through Western (settler-)colonialism since the 15th century. A major trope in Indigenous studies is the scrutiny of systemic exclusion and elimination of Indigenous peoples and their resistance strategies to continue their cultures and ensure their survivance.¹ Indigenous studies as a field has fundamentally changed my worldview both in my personal and professional life. That is why I drew a connection between history, Indigenous studies and my favorite leisure time activity – playing video games. As part of this personal development, I noticed a problem in video games throughout history. The problem is that stereotypes, including extremely detrimental ones, provide the fundamental building blocks for a lot of video games.² Many marginalized communities criticize misrepresentations of their communities through stereotypes. Indigenous communities are one of the most pioneering groups in that area of activism. Therefore, this topic merits more attention from academia and popular outlets. Accordingly, as a history student I noticed a general gap in historical research, overlooking the value of digital video games as a source material, let alone with a focus on Indigenous representations.³

Let us have a brief and comprehensive glimpse into the historiography around Indigenous studies, historical studies and digital studies as well as their intersections. There have been innumerable contributions regarding Indigenous peoples all over the globe. One recurring theme is the concept of *Indigeneity*, which presumes that all Indigenous nations on this planet share one common denominator, that is the constant fight for freedom and sovereignty in the light of oppression, genocide and cultural erasure at the hands of their colonial tyrants. The concept is simultaneously an attempt to articulate Indigenous concerns and identities more truthfully against whitewashed Western hegemonic narratives, but also a generalization that assumes multiple similar worldviews and shared experiences that fundamentally differs from Western ways of knowing.⁴

¹ To read more about the goals of Indigenous studies have a look at: Nado Aveling, “Indigenous Studies: A Matter of Social Justice; A Matter of Urgency,” *Diaspora, Indigenous and Minority Education* 6 (2012): 99-104, 110-112; and to learn more about the logic of elimination as well as the notion of survivance read: Patrick Wolfe, “Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 393, 399.

² Troy G. Deskins, “Stereotypes in Video Games and How They Perpetuate Prejudice,” *McNair Scholars Research Journal* 6 (2013): 19-26, 31-33.

³ In this chapter I will specify this general gap across the three academic axes history, digital studies and Indigenous studies with a focus on history.

⁴ The concept of Indigeneity and the 4 R’s (responsibility, reciprocity, relationship and redistribution) as the center of Indigeneity can be explored in Harris’ paper: La Donna Harris, “Indigeneity, An Alternative Worldview: Four R’s (Relationship, Responsibility, Reciprocity and Redistribution vs. Two P’s (Power and

To establish a common linguistic ground some clarifications are necessary. There are two papers that outline the certain terms that could be used to refer to different peoples that have been living under the rule of multiple settler-colonies, ranging from most prominent terms such as “Aboriginal”, “First Nation”, “Indigenous”, “American Indian” to many less-known sub-categories.⁵ For the purpose of this paper, I will refer to the terms “Indigenous peoples,” and “Native Americans,” which have been established and used as umbrella terms in the literature of recent years. They refer to all the sovereign nations on our planet that are not settler-colonial states. The focus here will lie on the United States of America therefore both terms “Native American” and “Indigenous” cover the nations from the East coast to the West coast, Alaska and Hawaii. It is important to remark that those words demand to be capitalized, since otherwise it takes away the element of recognizing Indigenous nations as sovereign and independent from any “Western” influences.⁶

Multiple researchers have spearheaded that settler-colonialism has to be seen as a structure and not an event. By accepting this unfortunate reality, according to Indigenous studies scholars Dunbar-Ortiz and Wolfe, researchers can have a much broader perspective regarding Indigenous struggles. As a socio-political issue, Indigenous struggles are not only historical, but it is also structurally rooted in the fundamental existence of our societies, especially in settler-colonial states such as the US, Canada, Australia, Norway and Sweden. Ever since 1492, when Columbus arrived in the Americas, Indigenous people became “otherized”, portrayed as deficient, malleable, docile and in need of “salvation” as well as “civilization” from “white supremacist” Europeans.⁷ In order to rationalize Western crimes including (cultural) genocide, multiple misconceptions and stereotypes were constructed. These became the life-essence and sole understanding of the world of European settlers. This phenomenon has been termed the “logic of elimination”.⁸

The scholars Adare and Shaughnessy have independently covered the use of stereotypes in Western popular culture to villainize and (almost literally) demonize Indigenous peoples as a way to ensure white supremacy and legitimize any material, spiritual, financial, emotional and psychological dispossession of “less-than-human” Indigenous populations. Some of the common tropes in Indigenous depictions that are repeated in the literature were: 1.) The Noble Native, 2.) the “Savage” Native, 3.) the “Hippie/Groovy” Native, 4.) the “Real” Native. Each of those depictions was meant to manifest incorrect assumptions that Indigenous peoples were “inferior”, “deficient” and “uncivilized”. Those stereotypes have not only been damaging to Indigenous populations today but led to numerous

Profit). Sharing the Journey toward Conscious Evolution,” *Systems Research and Behavioral Science* 21 (2004): 489-493.

⁵ Michael A. Peters and Carl T. Mika, “Aborigine, Indian, [Indigenous] or [First Nations]?,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 49, no. 13 (2017): 1229-1232.

⁶ The term settler-colonial states refer to a few states including the US, this will be covered in the next paragraph. The binary realities in which “Indigenous” is responsive to the presence of settler-colonies is covered in the introduction of Justice, who will be introduced later in this chapter: Daniel Heath Justice, “Introduction,” in *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (Ontario, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018), 6-11.

⁷ Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, “Culture of Conquest,” in *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the US* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), 39-44.

⁸ Wolfe, “Settler colonialism”, 387-392.

instances of physical and cultural genocides in the past.⁹

Indigenous (mis)-representation is a central aspect of all three fields covered in this paper. Digital scholars Golumbia and Kim have critiqued the continuation of white supremacy through institutionalized processes including scientific inquiries. According to the two authors, major strands of the digital humanities¹⁰ have constantly made an active effort to silence the voices of non-white (and non-female) voices in traditional historiography. White scholars have failed to work with non-white scholars and perpetuated the digital humanities as a “white field” while denying any accusations of doing any of that by making inconsistent claims of supposed engagements with “minority” scholars and their fields.¹¹ To diversify academia and pave the way for more substantial academic findings we must consider the “sublime” histories and historiographies of previously ignored peoples, both in academia and in public. All academic fields have a responsibility to play, also history.¹²

One way to solve this puzzle has been proposed by the professor of First Nations and Indigenous Studies Daniel Heath Justice, who is Cherokee himself¹³. In his seminal book on *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, he pioneered multiple reasons for why artistic installments such as literature make an undreamt-of impression on both Native and non-Native people all over the world in deconstructing “faulty” narratives created by colonizers to frame Indigenous peoples as “wasteful”, “deficient”, “savage” and “disposable”. In the third chapter of his book “How do we become good ancestors?”, Justice coins the term “(Indigenous) wonderworks” which describes the livelihood, love, resistance, survival and positivity in Indigenous lives despite the constant facing of challenges from white settlers.¹⁴

Hopkins, another scholar in the field of Indigenous studies, has highlighted the importance of specifically Indigenous-made products such as video games in fostering more correct forms of representation. Like Justice, Hopkins wants to show that Indigenous “truths” are more than valuable and ensure that nuanced and wonderful ways of knowing continue to exist in this world and resist the domination of Western fiction of our world. She agrees that objectively some myths in Indigenous worldviews are oversimplified but there is always important symbolical and spiritual meaning in those stories as well as the material manifestations of those stories. According to her research “cyberspace”,

⁹ Tim Shaughnessy, “White Stereotypes of ‘Indians’,” *Journal of American Indian Education* 17, no. 2 (1978): 20-24; Sierra S. Adare, “Introduction,” in *‘Indian’ Stereotypes in TV Science Fiction: First Nations’ Voices Speak out* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 2005), 1-9.

¹⁰ The difference between digital humanities is that it comprises of the combination of all humanities such as history and Indigenous studies with digital studies as a field that “bluntly” looks at the nature of digital media.

¹¹ David Golabia and Dorothy Kim, “Digital Humanities and/as White Supremacy: A Conversation about Reckonings,” in *Alternative Historiographies of the Digital Humanities*, ed. Dorothy Kim, Adeline Koh ([No City] Punctum Books, 2021), 35-40.

¹² Golabia and Kim, “Digital Humanities,” 61-71.

¹³ The Cherokee Nation is a sovereign nation located in the Oklahoma territory; you can find more information about this nation on their website: <https://www.cherokee.org>.

¹⁴ Two chapters should be specifically interrogated since those yield most interesting insights for the purpose of this paper: Daniel Heath Justice, “How Do We Learn to Be Human?,” in *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (Ontario, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018), 33-41; Daniel Heath Justice, “How Do We Become Good Ancestors?,” in *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (Ontario, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018), 152-156.

namely the digital material manifestations of video games, are a useful and accessible tool to inform and educate both Native and non-Native people through interactive storytelling.¹⁵ In their intervention, Lameman et al address “cyberspaces” explicitly, highlighting that there is a significant need to encourage the hiring of Indigenous developers. Even though most Indigenous youth play video games in their spare time, Indigenous developers are still extremely underrepresented in development teams.¹⁶

History has been identified as a central theme within video game production. The historian Coltrain has highlighted that for history as an academic and epistemological field this means that video games can teach people about (counter)-narratives of the past. The problem with most American history-themed video games is that they are overwhelmingly white and Western-centric.¹⁷ Historians can read video games as broader texts and research their elements in that way. Yet, although historians recently came to recognize the value of video games as source material a bit more, there has been a lack of investigative integrity, insofar that most historians failed to play the video games they were planning to examine. Therefore, Coltrain calls for an experiential approach to researching video games as most important for meaningful results.¹⁸ One historical case study exemplified this approach by intertwining the researchers’ game experiences with those of study participants. The research on the use of video games to protect, recall and educate about the traditional (historical) knowledge, culture and language of the United Sufpialq Alutiiq Nation¹⁹ has shown that the interactive player-driven form of meaning-making has allowed both young students, but also older Indigenous folks to reconnect with their forgotten languages that have been potentially lost during the peak era of US termination policies.²⁰

The thinker Baudrillard has designed a theory of consumption that describes in a Marxist fashion how production and consumption dynamics impact the ways people perceive the world. Material realities, according to him, are mostly shaped in the department of production, where certain “sign values” are created that desire to appeal to and perpetuate familiar symbols of prestige and

¹⁵ Candice Hopkins, “Making Things Our Own: The Indigenous Aesthetic in Digital Storytelling,” *Leonardo* 39, no. 4 (2006): 341, 344.

¹⁶ One study has shown that 83% of developers are white: Beth A. Lameman, Jason E. Lewis, and Skawennati Fragnito, “Skins 1.0: A Curriculum for Designing Games with First Nation Youth,” *Futureplay '10 Proceedings of the International Academic Conference on the Future of Game Design and Technology*, ACM New York, 2010, 105-107.

¹⁷ James Coltrain, “Historians and Video Games: How the Profession Can Better Engage in Play,” *Journal of American History* 109, no. 2 (2022): 496.

¹⁸ Coltrain, “Historians and Video Games,” 499-500; James Coltrain and Stephen Ramsay, “Can Video Games Be Humanities Scholarship?,” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2019*, ed. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (Minneapolis, 2019), 36-40.

¹⁹ The United Sufpialq Alutiiq Nation is a confederacy of peoples that is situated in Alaska, for more information please examine their website: <https://alutiiqmuseum.org/learn/the-alutiiq-sufpialq-people>.

²⁰ Leslie D. Hall, “United Sugpialq Alutiiq (USA) Video Game: Preserving Traditional Knowledge, Culture, and Language,” *Educational Technology* 49, no. 6 (November-December 2009): 20-24. For more information on the US policies against Native Americans and how the 60s saw the pinnacle of cultural erasure read: David E. Wilkins, “A history of federal Indian policy,” in *Native American Voices: A reader*, ed. Susan Lobo, Steve Talbot, Traci L. Morris (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2010), 104-112.

hierarchies, such as those of “white supremacy” and “Indigenous inferiority”.²¹ The historical-cultural impact of production-consumer dimensions is reflected in one study revealing that from 2010 onward the use of digital media has skyrocketed among the youth, while more traditional media such as TV and print have plummeted.²² Therefore, the 2010s was a period that had a remarkable symbolic imprint on the youth through media like video games.

In his PhD dissertation Pieter van den Heede researched the historical memory-making aspect of video games with regard to the Second World War. Traditionally scholars deemed cultural sources such as film, television and, recently, video games to be less relevant than traditional “texts” such as music and written documents. However, video games according to van den Heede can be a distinct form of “historical culture”. He decided to categorize video games as “texts” in the way philosopher Barthes defined the difference between “works” and “texts”. Thus, video games are seen as “text”, and hence “broader cultural entities” in society. On the other hand, “Works” would be concrete objects that one could physically touch.²³ At the same time, other scholars call to specifically acknowledge Indigenous video games as a continuation of oral traditions within Native nations in a media landscape, through which an Indigenous developer can communicate and tell a story to other (non)-Indigenous peoples.²⁴

In this paper I will synthesize the cultural integrity of Indigenous peoples in their oral traditions and go beyond the constructivist distinction between “works” and “texts” when referring to Indigenous-made video games insofar as those can have both a tangible material manifestation in the minds of peoples and act as broader cultural entities. I propose the use of the concept “wonderwork” coined by Justice which refers to all the above-mentioned dynamics when referring to Indigenous-made video games.

There are many gaps in previous research that need to be addressed. First, historians have failed to recognize the importance of video games as “wonderworks”. Second, a comparative aspect that tries to look at the differences in representation and their broader implications and intricacies between non-Indigenous and Indigenous developed games have been overlooked yet. Third, there is barely any historical analysis of video games and other digital media outside of film with a focus on

²¹ Barry Smart, “Consuming Baudrillard: Introduction to the Revised Edition of *The Consumer Society*,” in *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structure*, eds. Natalie Aguilera, Delayna Spencer (Los Angeles: Sage, 2016), 14-32.

²² Jean M. Twenge, Gabrielle N. Martin, and Brian H. Spitzberg, “Trends in U.S. Adolescents’ Media Use, 1976-2016: The Rise of Digital Media, the Decline of TV, and the (Near) Demise of Print,” *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* 8, no. 4 (2019): 329-332, 337.

²³In his paper he covers the explained theory of “works” and “texts” in historical source material by Barthes: Pieter Van den Heede, “Engaging with the Second World War through Digital Gaming,” *PhD Dissertation*, Erasmus University Rotterdam, 11 February, 2021, 10-11.

²⁴ Loretta Todd, “Aboriginal narratives in cyberspace,” in *Immersed in technology: art and virtual environments*, eds. Mary Anne Moser, Douglas MacLeod (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 179-194; an entire scholarly book was dedicated to the concept of media “cosmology” in which Indigenous peoples use video games as a communicative space to disseminate information about their epistemologies, histories, traumas, origin stories, and cultural values: Steven Loft, *Coded Territories: Tracing Indigenous Pathways in New Media Art*, ed. Steven Loft and Kerry Swanson (Alberta: University of Calgary Press, 2016).

Indigenous nations in general.²⁵ Last, historical research on Native Americans in the US has privileged more distant history from the American Revolution until the 1990s. There is only one popular scholarly book, that is *The Oxford Handbook of American "Indian" History*, which has been committed to the general contemporary histories of Indigenous nations and their mechanisms of cultural continuances, survival, national preservations and active resistances, as well as national economic foundations. One of those mechanisms is described as the use of "modern digital tools," such as video games.²⁶ The lack of attention for Indigenous voices in and of itself is a perpetuation of misconceptions of Indigenous nations as past remnants that have vanished a long time ago.²⁷

As a way to bring more visibility to this topic and combine the different components of concepts and frameworks from history, Indigenous studies and digital studies, I will analyze video games from the 2010s and ask the question: In what ways does the representation of Indigenous nations in the US and Canada differ in (historically-themed) video games based on the degree of engagement with Indigenous developers in the 2010s?

To tangibly operationalize this research, I will use streamlined and straightforward research methods that have been designed to analyze 1.) the foundational elements of video games and their multi-faceted dimensions and ramifications and 2.) the discourses that circulated around those video games. The goal is to understand the underlying meanings, understandings and perceptions of those video games. The methods will be buttressed through clear analytical lenses in the form of four relevant concepts. Two "positive" concepts with regards to Indigenous peoples are *Indigeneity* and *wonderworks*.²⁸ In contrast two "negative" concepts in Indigenous realities that will be used are *logic of elimination* and *white stereotypes*.²⁹

I will use a mixed method approach to investigate the primary sources of this paper. There will be two sets of video games all published in the 2010s directly related to one another and another set of interview sources closely related to those. A detailed explanation of both methods and the source selection and their validity and reliability will follow in the next section.

²⁵ Two papers have illuminated (educational-)cultural dimensions depicted about and by Indigenous peoples through video games. There, only as sidenotes history is mentioned, but there is a general lack of scrutiny from the angle of history in Indigenous representations in video games: Naithan Lagace, "Indigenous Representations and the Impacts of Video Games Media on Indigenous Identity," *Master's Thesis*, Department of Native Studies, University of Manitoba Winnipeg, 2018; Neil Diamond, "Reel Injun," National Film Board of Canada (NFB), June 18, 2010, 00:24:10-00:49:30h; Hall, "United Sugpiaq Alutiiq," 20-24.

²⁶ Most books on Indigenous histories were published in the early 2000s or earlier. Recently, there have only been specific case studies on a few Indigenous nations in research papers. Have a look at chapter 8 for the time period covered in this paper: Paul DeMain, "Contemporary History: Native America in the Twenty-First Century," in *The Oxford Handbook of American Indian History*, ed. Frederick E. Hoxie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 149-170.

²⁷ Joy Harjo, "Introduction," in *When the Light of the World Was Subdued, Our Songs Came Through: A Norton Anthology of Native Nations Poetry*, ed. Joy Harjo, LeAnne Howe, and Jennifer Elise Foerster (New York: W.W. Norton, 2020): 1-4. Daniel Heath Justice has also demonstrated that popular and academic narratives tend to ignore the contemporaneity of Indigenous cultures, calling for the expansion of present Indigenous visibility in academia: Justice, "Introduction," 29-32.

²⁸ Both concepts have been covered extensively above.

²⁹ The concepts of white stereotypes of Indigenous peoples and logic of elimination are covered above.

After that, the paper will be divided into three sections. The first analysis chapter scrutinizes the different dominant discursive foundations on which the video games in question are built upon posing the question: How does the discourse around video games set the stage for video game designs?³⁰ The second analysis chapter will ask the question: How did video games shape the ways Indigenous characters appear to their players? Thereafter, the last section will provide a small discussion of all the findings, the research and the relevant academic fields as well as propose a conclusion by answering the main research question of this paper.

Source Criticism and Methodological Clarifications:

Part of this thesis is the presentation of a few primary sources that I assessed as valuable for the purpose of this research paper. Naturally, there are a few pitfalls and limitations such as selection bias in which all the following sources have been chosen from a problem-driven approach.³¹ Given the fact that there are only a few precedented papers that examined video games as a source material it is difficult to evaluate a consistency with regard to the selection of video games. I tried to stick to a comprehensive number of most popular video games which involve the presence of Indigenous cultures, nations and related elements in some shape or form to establish some consistency. The video games that will be analyzed in this paper come from different game studios but were all published in the 2010s. To make this analysis more accessible I classified those sources in an oversimplified manner into two categories based on the degree of engagement with Indigenous (cultural) consultants: the first set can be seen as being “Indigenous developed”. Video games such as *Never Alone (2014)* and *Killer Instinct (2013)* will be placed under this category. The second set is non-Indigenous developed. Video games placed under this category include *Civilization 6 (2016)* and *Red Dead Redemption Series (2010 - 2018)*. *Killer Instinct*, *Civilization 6* and the *Red Dead Redemption Series* were developed by popular game studios and *Never Alone* was developed by small-time developers. I made this choice to consider that there might be deviations between the games based on the production background of the games.³²

To operationalize this research, I resigned to a mixed method approach combining two established methods. To analyze video games as meaningful cultural entities, I will fall back to a method developed by Lankoski and Björk dubbed *formal analysis of gameplay*. The idea is that

³⁰ An explanation of the source selection and the nature of discourse analysis follows in the next chapter.

³¹ The selection of sources based on their suitability regarding the proposed problem for a research paper has been covered by John Tosh and described as the most conventional approach by historians throughout history. Therefore every research paper contains selection bias to some capacity. John Tosh, “Using Sources,” in *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of History*, 6th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 141-144.

³² Have a look at the bibliography for more information on the game studio and the game metadata. There will also be a discussion of each game’s background in the analysis section. To at least give a small description of each game’s production background: *Killer Instinct*, *Civilization 6* and *Red Dead Redemption* were published by big game companies while *Never alone* was produced by a smaller and less popular studio. It is important to mention this here, because there might be differences in the analytical results based on those specific differences in the production process of the video games, yet this will be explored in the analysis section.

through the application of clear theoretical steps and the repeated playing of video games, the researcher will be able to intimately inquire about them. First, the researcher identifies the games' major components called *primitives* and their qualities and relations to one another (i.e. *game components, actions and goals*). Secondly, one determines the *principles of design* which is the overarching concept of what the game experience is aimed to be. Lastly, the role of the interrelation between those two dimensions of video games is being interrogated and unfolded in a larger cultural and experiential context by the researcher. Here, the focus will be directed towards the role those aspects have with regards to Indigenous representations during the 2010s. To narrow down the scope of this research, I will only refer to intended game experiences and exclude any game-changing modifications provided by players that might alter the games' components and experiences. This is because one can assume that most players will follow the intended experience of the game.³³

At the end of the formal analysis, there will be an evaluation of the ways in which Indigenous peoples were represented. The reason why I argue that this approach is valid is based on the concept of autoethnography. It assumes that people can in some capacity relate their own personal experiences and knowledge to the (material) realities of "others" (here the "other" refers to social binary categories such as Western vs. Indigenous). Most people are supposed to have at least some otherness³⁴ that can guide them in their understanding of others. At the same time, researchers can utilize their knowledge to empathize with another group and hermeneutically put themselves in the shoes of others in an "intersubjective" fashion. Here, "intersubjective" can be seen as a limited form of "objectivity" and an informed version of subjectivity. Of course, there is no such thing as "objectivity" in the first place. Thus, it is the in-between of both "objective" knowledge influenced by the subjects' personal background and contact with certain language realities and memory regimes. That is why as a researcher it is to some extent possible to speak with others and make decisions such as categorizing sources in a way that seems legitimate, comprehensive and accessible to the reader.³⁵ Naturally, those classifications should not be fabricated without precedent. Therefore the decision to evaluate video games into their degree of authenticity in Indigenous representation within the formal analysis of video games is tied to Hopkins' notion that works created are generally more truthful and relate to the true "Indigenous aesthetics" of Indigenous peoples.³⁶

Along with those video games, I selected a set of media sources, namely interviews published on the platform YouTube which discuss the nature of these video games and the opinions as well as discussions about the video games. This provides us with a fruitful understanding of the discursive dimensions in which the video games are embedded. All the YouTube videos include a section in which a developer either answers questions in larger panel discussions with fans or explains the logics

³³ Lankoski and Björk, "Formal analysis," 24.

³⁴ Here the term is referring to identity categories such as trans, female, homosexual et cetera.

³⁵ Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams and Arthur P., "Autoethnography: An Overview," *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12 (2010): 1-3; Tony E. Adams, "Speaking for Others: Finding the 'Whos' of Discourse," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 88, no. 3/4 (2005): 333-337.

³⁶ Hopkins, "Making Things," 342.

behind the game development in a game preview, often being asked questions by another associate of the same company. Usually, the larger game studios answered questions in panel discussions, while smaller studios most frequently answered questions in game previews. Despite the difference in the degree to which the game developers are being scrutinized all those interviews reflect the relevant Indigenous discourses meaningfully.³⁷ Those reflections of Native American discourses serve as another justification for classifying the above-mentioned sources into two categories of (non)-Indigenous-developed games. In the interviews there are, either explicitly or implicitly, mentions of the representativeness of Indigenous cultures within each video game.

The interdisciplinary dimensions of this paper are also mirrored in the second method utilized for the purpose of this research, characterizing the mixed-method approach. Dobson and Ziemann's *discourse analysis* has been designed in the light of linguistics, cultural studies and historical studies. The idea is that meaningful realities are being created through historical-cultural contexts, language epistemologies (i.e. concepts, binaries, conventional metaphors), aesthetic tropes (i.e. narrators used and the "modes of emplotment" implemented such as drama, romance et cetera).³⁸ To extensively and carefully analyze the interviews with game developers, this paper will make use of a selected few categories from this method, namely context, concepts, binaries and narrator language. This is to streamline the method to the most relevant elements that are at play in the interviews. In addition, I will position the discourses in larger contexts that have been elucidated in previous secondary literature.

To make this method even more accessible, comprehensive and relatable, I will make use of four hypernyms as concepts that contain a combination of multiple smaller concepts that can be found in the discourses. These hypernyms have been introduced earlier, namely *Indigeneity*, *wonderworks*, *logic of elimination* and *white stereotypes*.

The reason why discourse analysis is an important addition to this research can be understood in the pervasiveness of discourses in human societies throughout history, but especially in the globalized present. The researcher Potter has illuminated that discourses have complex ramifications that constantly reimagine and (mis)-construe the interests, ideologies and receptions between

³⁷ To give a bit more detailed context I will outline the individual contexts of each interview briefly here: In the case of *Never Alone* the developers have been interviewed by the independent video game commentator VenomQuest as part of a preview of the video game: VenomQuest, "Never Alone game Writer Exclusive Interview & EGX First Impressions Preview. Kisima Ingitchuna," September 29, 2014, game preview, 9:00, <https://youtu.be/h47teMEK15o>. *Killer Instinct* developers have been interviewed by the game studio's PR outlet as part of the character preview of the only Native American character: Xbox, "Killer Instinct: Reimagining Thunder," December 21, 2016, character preview, 2:35, https://youtu.be/R_Hkq3LZrro. In the case of *Civilization 6*, a small gaming media channel decided to ask some vital questions to the lead developer of the game: Cerealkillerz, "Civilization 6: Developer Interview with Lead Designer Ed Beach," August 3, 2016, interview, 8:50, <https://youtu.be/b4QvccD1Zeg>. Lastly, the *Red Dead Redemption* cast participated in a panel at the Philadelphia comic convention answering questions from an exclusive audience of the convention: Philadelphia Comic Con, "Red Dead Redemption II Cast Panel – GPCC 2019," Fandom Spotlight, April 17, 2019, plenary meeting, 43:46, <https://youtu.be/LsdgEg4M3i8>.

³⁸ Miriam Dobson and Benjamin Ziemann, "Introduction," in *Reading Primary Sources: The Interpretation of Texts From Nineteenth and Twentieth Century History* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 5-15.

audiences of media (i.e. players of video games) and activist endeavors, activist groups and the people implicated by activism.³⁹ Along the lines of Foucault, who is generally seen as one of the paramount thinkers behind discourse analyses, discourses are a social construct that allows institutions that hold power (e.g. popular game studios and media outlets such as YouTube) to manufacture realities, knowledge and meaning.⁴⁰ Through discourses we can get a glimpse into the impacts that video games had on the popular imaginary, either benefitting Indigenous activist aspirations of sovereignty or perpetuating cultural misconstruction, distortion and erasure of Indigenous cultures. Therefore, to more broadly understand the discursive foundations (i.e. public discourses in interviews) on which the video games explored in this paper are built upon, this method appears valuable for this research.⁴¹

Discourse Analysis: Framing video games in the popular imaginaries:

In this part of the paper, I ask the questions: how were video games framed in popular discourse and how did this set the stage for video game design? The hypothesis for this part is that the truthfulness of Indigenous representations in each of those video games is mirrored in the mentalities and discourses circulating between the video game producers and their audiences.

Indigenous-developed video game interviews

The first component that demands scrutiny in the discourses are the “concepts” that are represented in the interviews with the video game producers. Concepts give us a broad idea of the logics in which a certain discussion is placed. In the case of game producers’ high degree of engagement with Indigenous consultants, namely games such as *Never Alone* and *Killer Instinct*, the most frequent concepts that I discovered were “Indigeneity” (as a combination of notions such as “Indigenous justice,” “(producer’s) responsibility”), “wonderworks,” “genuine experience,” and “cultural correctness.” “Indigeneity” describes how the people involved with the video games try to contribute to an Indigenous justice movement that considers the struggles of Indigenous peoples to be united but culturally distinct and diverse.⁴² The concepts “wonderworks” and “genuine experience” demonstrate how “high engagement” video games play a role in de-mystifying false narratives and legitimizing the self-told stories of Native American cultures regardless of how vague they might appear to a Western audience.

The last concept of “cultural correctness” is extremely politicized in those discourses and refers to the limitations of video games to place cultures in a correct setting without taking away power from the cultural realities of Indigenous nations and thereby jeopardizing certain century-long

³⁹ To have a more detailed grasp of this examine: Evan H. Potter, *Branding Canada: Projecting Canada’s Soft Power through Public Diplomacy* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2009), 51.

⁴⁰ Victor Pitsoe and Moeketsi Letseka, “Foucault’s Discourse and Power: Implications for Instructionist Classroom Management,” *Open Journal of Philosophy* 3 (2013): 24.

⁴¹ This is also in line with James Coltrain’s explanation on why historians should engage with discourses before researching video games: Coltrain, “Historians and Video Games,” 499.

⁴² This is reflected in the preview about *Never Alone: VenomQuest*, “Never Alone,” 1:28; Harris, “Indigeneity,” 490-491.

political endeavors such as fights for independence, land repatriations or sovereignty.⁴³

The next aspect in line with this analysis is “binaries” used by game developers. The purpose of binaries is to contrast two extremes against one another, which often makes one side appear more desirable than another side.⁴⁴ In the case of “high engagement” developers, the most recurring “binaries” are honest against dishonest stories, fun versus no-fun games and Indigenous mysticism in contrast to Western rationalism. Here, those (implicit) binaries showcased how more collaboration with Indigenous peoples creates more authentic, enjoyable and fair stories than traditional video games with Indigenous elements proved to have. This was one way to expose “traditional” game designs as violent, destructive and stigmatized.⁴⁵

Another element that requires attention in this analysis is the “type of narrator” used by the interviewed producers. The type of narrator can have significant implications for the meaning of the discourse-in-question and the way it is perceived by its audience that are either obvious or more subtle to identify for the observer.⁴⁶ When it comes to “high engagement” producers, generally a distant first-person narrator was instrumentalized. Hence, all the interviewees established some form of distance in their own positionality toward (other)⁴⁷ Indigenous nations while acknowledging the belonging of Native American staff members of the game studios as part of the first-person “us”.⁴⁸

The fourth element of the discourse analysis is the “reality effect” of the discourse. The reality effect reverberates the ways a discourse can be placed in the epistemologies of its audience. This is one of the deciding factors in how a discourse is being perceived and made aware to the recipient.⁴⁹ For example, in the matter of “high engagement” game development, the interviews conveyed a reality effect of Indigenous nations as having “cultural integrity”, being “culturally diverse,” and being “human.” The aspect of “human” plays a pivotal role in most video games. Thereby, Indigenous peoples are seen as differing from one another as nations, but also showing that individual Native Americans from time to time have their own individual lived experiences and socio-cultural agendas. For instance, the Nez Perce nation has deliberately engaged in both alliances and exchange with other Indigenous nations but also with European settler nations throughout history, not only is there synchronic complexities but also diachronic ramifications of Indigenous realities.⁵⁰

⁴³ The last three concepts are deeply intertwined and (implicitly) thematized in the production of both *Never Alone* and *Killer Instinct*: Xbox, “Killer Instinct,” 0:28; VenomQuest, “Never Alone,” 2:48; “Justice, “How Do We Become Good Ancestors,” 123-126.

⁴⁴ Dobson and Ziemann, “Introduction,” 7.

⁴⁵ Xbox, “Killer Instinct,” 2:00; VenomQuest, “Never Alone,” 4:00, 8:30.

⁴⁶ Dobson and Ziemann, “Introduction,” 9.

⁴⁷ One of the interviewees was Alaskan Native and positioned themselves to some capacity distant from other Indigenous nations.

⁴⁸ VenomQuest, “Never Alone,” 3:00; Xbox, “Killer Instinct,” 0:10.

⁴⁹ Dobson and Ziemann, “Introduction,” 11.

⁵⁰ The aspect of “being human,” namely the fact that Indigenous peoples are just as diverse as any other being on our planet is one element considered in the production of the game *Killer Instinct* mentioned in the interview with the producer: Xbox, “Killer Instinct,” 1:30; for more information on Nez Perce alliances see: Nez Perce Tribe, “History,” 2022. <https://nezperce.org/about/history/>. This is in line with Justice’s definition of Indigenous notions of being “human”: Justice, “Be Human,” 33-36; David E. Wilkins and Heidi K. Stark, “Indigenous

Next, each game echoes a “specific context” that is relevant to scrutinize. To start with Indigenous-developed games: The developers of *Killer Instinct* connected to the media company *Microsoft* decided to take accountability and cooperate with cultural consultants from the Nez Perce nation, after receiving criticism on false representations. Similarly, *Never Alone*, is not as popular as the former game, but has received attention due to its consistent engagement with Alaskan Native representatives and developers from multiple different backgrounds making this game a project with the highest Indigenous engagement by far.⁵¹

Non-Indigenous-developed video game interviews:

The close examination of interviews with game producers of *Civilization 6* and *Red Dead Redemption*, which showed a “lack of engagement,” has indicated the use and presence of completely different, almost oxymoronic, “concepts”. Those concepts appeared to be “logic of elimination,” “white stereotypes,” “cultural homogeneity” and “red-facing.” The concept “logic of elimination” reflects, either consciously or unconsciously, the appropriation of certain Western narratives of the “Other,” especially Indigenous peoples, by certain game developers. Those narratives comprise of doctrines such as “the civilizing mission,” “doctrine of salvation,” or “deficiency narrative” to give but a few examples. These have been at the center of settler-colonial attacks against Indigenous sovereignty since the arrival of Europeans in America. For instance, the lead developer of *Civilization 6*, claimed that some nations inhabit “limitations” “[...] [based on] what happened to them in history.”⁵² Similarly, both “white stereotypes” and the assumption of Indigenous “cultural homogeneity” are generalizations adopted by those game developers that completely distort the cultures, languages and histories as well as identities of Indigenous nations as one single and simplistic group of people rather than multiple different peoples. For centuries the purpose of this has been to merely perpetuate the myth of US white supremacy. Lastly, the concept of “red-facing” describes the phenomenon in which non-Native individuals appropriate the culture of one or more Indigenous nations and portray it as their own. In the context of video games, it often refers to non-Native people

Governments: Past, Present, and Future,” in *American “Indian” Politics and the American Political System*, 3rd ed. (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011), 1-4.

⁵¹ This is fundamentally the context that one can deduct from the interviews of each of these games: Tuscarora Haud, “Oregon Trail to Assassin’s Creed: Right and wrong Native American portrayals in video games,” ICT News, October 1, 2019, <https://ictnews.org/lifestyle/oregon-trail-to-assassins-creed-right-and-wrong-native-american-portrayals-in-video-games>.

⁵² Cerealkillerz, “Civilization 6,” 4:50; Maldonado-Torres has compiled an eloquent work that uncovers how Indigenous peoples become Otherized and exposed to the naturalized notion that Westerners have been guided to the Americas in order to bring “progress,” “civility,” and “salvation” to a supposed “less-valuable” ethnicity of people – those languages stand at the center of settler-colonial efforts to silence the critical and resisting voices of Native Americans in North America: Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “Introduction,” in *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity*, eds. Walter D. Mignolo, Irene Silverblatt, Sonia Saldívar-Hull et al (London: Duke University Press, 2008), 1-19; The “deficiency narrative” is the rhetoric in settler-colonial states such as the US in which Indigenous people are portrayed as “inferior” and “absent” and thus unable to provide a proper living for their peoples. This rhetoric has been used to justify oppression, assimilation, and removal of Indigenous peoples in order to “improve” their lives: Stephanie J. Waterman, “New Research Perspectives on Native American Students in Higher Education,” *Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity* 5 (2019): 61-66, 74.

either playing a voice actor's role or pretending to know about one or more Native cultures despite originating from a different ethnic background. Those roles have traditionally been filled by non-White and non-Native actors to make it appear legitimate to a white audience.⁵³

Secondly, "lack of engagement" developers utilized different "binaries" such as success versus inefficiency, victory against failure and civilization vs. "primitiveness." Ultimately, the use of those binaries by the developers in the interviews had the (unintended) effect that non-Indigenous cultures became framed as superior, more desirable and pervasive, while Indigenous cultures appeared to be docile and in need of development.⁵⁴

The next element in line with this analysis is the "type of narrator." "Lack of engagement" video game producers tend to present themselves as having a close, meaningful and intimate understanding of Indigenous cultures and histories. Here, the use of an intimate first-person narrator is a typical pattern. The effect that this has on the audience is a sense of legitimacy and authority, insofar as the speaker comes across as being knowledgeable of specific Indigenous realities.⁵⁵

Furthermore, the reality effect in the interviews of "lack of engagement" game developments, reflect the discourse of "white innocence." "White innocence" in the case of video game development is the reality that certain developers do not feel responsible to implement accurate representations of Indigenous peoples and thereby maintain a decent relationship with them. In most of those interviews, the developers make it seem as if video games do not have any deeper implications for the identities and epistemologies of people and are merely an instrument to have fun. The result of this is that Indigenous struggles appear less urgent and personally relevant to some of the recipients of this narrative.⁵⁶

The specific contexts of the non-Indigenous developed video games characterized the games differently to their counterpart: To give a few examples, the development team of *Civilization 6*, that is *Firaxis Games*, seems to consistently assert that they base their game on "truthful" and "objective" historical precedents based on the assumption of a progress-based linear worldview. Similarly, one of the most famous historically-themed video games *Red Dead Redemption Series* resigned to sensationalized stereotypes when it comes to Native American characters. Albeit to the outside world,

⁵³ To give one example, in the panel discussion with the voice actors for *Red Dead Redemption*, the lead developer makes it seem like casting people from non-congruent cultural backgrounds (i.e. Black Americans rather than Native Americans) for certain characters like Native Americans is acceptable and part of making the game "perfect", at the same time there is a noticeable focus on both white voice actors and characters in those non-white contexts such as Native American characters: Fandom Spotlight, "Red Dead Redemption," 12:00, 25:00; Angela R. Riley and Kristen A. Carpenter, "Owning *Red*: A Theory of "Indian" (Cultural) Appropriation," *Texas Law Review* 94 (2016): 859-869.

⁵⁴ Binary logics such as this are present in the interview with the lead developer of *Civilization 6*: Cerealkillerz, "Civilization 6," 0:40. The voice actors romanticize the characters in the game and frame them as unique due to their success which is supposedly correlated to strength: Fandom Spotlight, "Red Dead Redemption II," 16:00.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, 12:00-30:00. Cerealkillerz, "Civilization 6," 4:37.

⁵⁶ Fandom Spotlight, "Red Dead Redemption II," 14:30, 28:00; Cerealkillerz, "Civilization 6," 7:30; Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is not a metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society I* (2012): 1-4; Bonnie Ruberg, "No Fun: The Queer Potential of Video Games that Annoy, Anger, Disappoint, Sadden, and Hurt," *QED: A Journal in GLGBTQ Worldmaking* 2, no. 2 (2015): 110-113.

the game might appear accurate in terms of representations. *Rockstar Games*, the makers of *Red Dead Redemption*, fail to consistently involve Native Americans in the construction of Native American game elements.⁵⁷

The last component of this analysis that needs to be addressed is the “general context” of the discourses. To give a more detailed context of the two established categories and each single video game we will first explore the general historical context and secondly look at the specific contexts respectively. Generally, the 2010s have seen a significant rise in video game popularity. Therefore, many game design studios decided to cover historical epochs and cultural areas that have been untapped therebefore, such as Indigenous cultures throughout history. Whilst some game studios decided to actively collaborate with Indigenous nations and listen to their activist calls, others blatantly ignored any form of criticism.⁵⁸ Those who ignored the calls positioned themselves in line with the reactionary conservative side of “gaming culture.” These communities consisted of most video game players during the 2010s. This gave game studios the freedom to utilize sensationalized presentations of Indigenous peoples that might appear appealing to the majority white, male, cisgender and heterosexual audience, but cause damage to marginalized communities such as Indigenous nations.⁵⁹

All in all, this part of the analysis has confirmed that video games are framed in specific discursive foundations. Either video game makers tended to blatantly ignore the calls for responsibility in collaborating with cultural representatives of Indigenous nations or a few game studios decided to listen to the criticisms they and other game studios received by holding themselves accountable and working together. The interviews that have been analyzed above reflect discourses that to a significant extent determined all the fundamental and experiential elements of the video games that will be examined in the following chapter.

Formal Analysis: The shaping of realities through video games:

In this section of the analysis, I will analyze how video games shape the ways Indigenous peoples are perceived by others. Four examples will be given in the following parts that will assist me in analytically providing fruitful answers. First, I will look at two Indigenous-developed games and thereafter I will examine two non-Indigenous video games. In the end, I will juxtapose the results of this analysis.

Indigenous-developed video games:

Never Alone:

⁵⁷ All the information is derived from the interviews given by the game developers and popular news coverage: Haud, “Oregon Trail to Assassin’s Creed.”

⁵⁸ Pascal Lupien, “Indigenous Movements, Collective Action, and Social Media: New Opportunities or New Threats?,” *Social Media + Society* 6, no. 2 (2020): 1-3.

⁵⁹ Thiago Falcão, Tarcízio Macedo and Gabriela Kurtz, “Conservatism and toxic masculinity in gamer culture: An approach to Magic The Gathering,” *Matrizes* 15, no. 2 (2021): 251-255.

The historically-themed puzzle video game *Never Alone* has been developed by a small-time Indigenous-based company and was published across both console and computer platforms. It is possible to play this game alone or with one other player who is locally connected to the same device. This video game is certainly straightforward and simply developed, making it accessible to all kinds of audiences. Due to its insightfulness, this game is quite invaluable for this analysis.

One element to analyze is the primitives used in the game. The essential game components consist of *cultural insights*, *story-telling cutscenes*, *Iñupiaq girl Nuna*, *Arctic Fox*, *wild animals* and *movable entities*. The latter is also present in the *environment* of the game which is built on (*climbable*) *walls*, *slidable slopes*, *climbable ropes*, *adjustable platforms* and *arctic wind*. From time to time, one can move platforms and ropes as well as manipulate the arctic wind to give a few examples. Another entity in this game is *actions*. *Player actions* range from *running*, *ducking*, *jumping*, *switching characters (solo-player mode)*, and *triggering an action*. This is the foundation on which the player can finish the different levels and solve the puzzles.

System actions in this game are characterized by quite basic though purposeful functions. The system is programmed to *start cultural cutscenes*, *trigger hint messages* and *respawn player*. Those are important elements in the story-telling process that is at the center of this video game. The placing of strategic cutscenes and explanations as well as helpful advice in the case that someone cannot progress in the game ensures that the audience is guided by the system along the way.

Similarly, *component actions* are quite subtle but have significant implications for the gameplay. For instance, the *arctic wind* seems to follow an irregular pattern of *start* and *end storm*. Furthermore, there are *wild animals* that are tasked to occasionally *chase players* and *avoid obstacles* along the way. These are some additional elements that make the levels a bit more demanding for the player. The *goal* of the game is to finish the levels despite any inconvenient obstacles, ideally with the assistance of another player who can take control of the second playable character. The second most important goal is that the player should be willing to re-learn their values and use their game experience as a lesson on how to solve puzzles easier by cooperating with others.⁶⁰

The game follows the principle of a simplistic game design. It is intended to be played in the form of co-op to maximize the gameplay experience and solve puzzles by working together and trusting one another. Both solving and failing the puzzles are considered a victory since both teach the player a valuable lesson of responsibility and compassion. Players feel reliable for one another. The game is designed in a way that solo players have a hard time progressing with playing only one character at a time. The further the players are in the game the harder the game becomes; this demonstrates the need to cooperate with others, care for others and feel a responsibility to survive together and successfully finish the game. Therefore, playing this game with another person makes the

⁶⁰ Video games as a heuristic tool for learning have been explored in this research paper: A. Martin. Wainwright, "Teaching Historical Theory through Video Games," *The History Teacher* 47, no. 4 (2014): 579–583, 603. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43264355>; Justice, "Be Human," 38-40.

game significantly easier to finish. The game design expects the player to learn about the Iñupiaq nation and their worldviews while having a fun time.⁶¹

The game developers combined a fun gaming experience with confronting the player with the actual realities of Indigenous nations. The implementation of both mandatory and voluntary cultural insights through cutscenes and cultural extras sections is a way to tell their own stories and convey their own traditions more truthfully – this is why the overarching role of the primitives and game design is to present an interactive “wonderwork” that differs from most other “wonderworks” insofar that it is accessible all over the world through the “cyberspace.”⁶²

Killer Instinct:

Killer Instinct is a basic two-dimensional brawling game placed in a futuristic sci-fi world in which Earth was invaded by alien-like creatures. The game has been developed by the game studio Rare and bought by Microsoft. The game is meant to be played by one or two players and can be played either locally or online. Due to its simplicity, anyone can quickly learn the basic mechanics and skills needed to play this video game and that makes it quite accessible to a lot of people. This game has received a lot of attention and popularity throughout the years and therefore proves to be quite interesting for this research.

The most fundamental elements, that is the *game components*, include *playable characters*, *non-playable characters*, *game menu*, *arena*, (*character-unique*) *attacks and ultimate attacks*, *damage*, *health*, *character descriptions*, *game modes (solo story mode or multiplayer mode)*, *tournaments and single battles*. All those aspects bring meaning and uniqueness to the game. There are a lot of game settings, different *arenas* and matchups that make each fighting scenario somewhat different. Each character has their unique interactions and (*counter-*)*attacks* – one could say that these shape the different *environments* in which a character is placed and through which the player perceives the game. The most interesting here is the (*ultimate*) *attacks* and *character descriptions*, both elements give personality to certain characters and make them relatable.

System actions in this game consist of *charge ultimate bar* and *trigger voice lines*. Those occur in a rather predictable way. *Charge ultimate bar* is meant to bring dynamic and pressure into the game, any player that fills up the *ultimate bar* first has an advantage over the other, of course, one can also hold onto that ability and use it strategically. *Trigger voice lines* is quite fascinating since those happen mostly at the beginning of the game, at random interactions with different characters and lastly, at the end of a game.

Hence, there are *component actions* closely related to the former. Those consist of (*ultimate*)

⁶¹ This mirrors the fundamental tenets behind many Indigenous ways of knowing, namely responsibility, relationship, reciprocity and redistribution towards both Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals, presented in the paper by Harris: Harris, “Indigeneity,” 494-495.

⁶² The value of Indigenous self-narratives especially within digital spaces is covered in: Todd, “cyberspace,” 180-190; Justice, “How Do We Become Good Ancestors,” 153-155.

attacks and *choose voice lines*. Those *voice lines* and (*ultimate*) *attacks* bring complex personalities to different characters and contribute to the entertainment of the players, but mostly show the difference between each character and their intentions.

The *goal* of the game is to basically fight simple battles, use better combinations and have better reactions than the enemy as well as to strategize and adapt to the opponent. Most of the time the better strategist is the player who knows when and how to deal *damage* using (*ultimate*) *attacks* as well as keep track of their and their enemy's *health*. In the end, the player opts to either win a *single battle* or reach the top of the leaderboard in *tournaments*.

The principles of the game design are that players are supposed to compete with other players or against (non-playable) computer-controlled enemies in story modes. The game designers tried to create a dramatic and epic storyline in an apocalyptic context. This is reflected in the extremely action-based and violence-based setting. Each playable character is supposed to be constructed as unique and relatable as unique humans. Every character has a different set of identities, ranging from, among others, ethnicity, nationality to gender. All characters have somewhat tragic and theatrical personal backgrounds. Those backgrounds opt to explain the characters' motivations and fighting styles behind their battles, often showing that everyone has their own different and unique reasons.

When I played the game, I focused to experiment with the one Native American character. The Native American character "Thunder" is portrayed as culturally, but also personally unique. His motivations in his fights are explained in terms of responsibility towards his brother. The use of personal and unique reasons in relation to the battles reflects the notion that Thunder is as "human" and "reasoned" as all other characters. Furthermore, the character design of Thunder presents a person who does not wear lavish head-wears or possesses any other noticeable stereotypical aspect of Native Americans in popular culture. However, Thunder wears a culturally-sensitive outfit that is described as "Thunder's personal fighting armor" in the archives section of the game. The character of Thunder in the setting of this game tells a story of Indigenous collective experiences but also the very individualized and personal story of Thunder. Therefore, this game can be interpreted as a "wonderwork," telling one of many truths of Indigenous peoples.

At the same time, it engages with "Indigeneity" insofar as Thunder feels responsible for his brother who died at the hands of an oppressor. This mirrors the struggle and resistance of Indigenous peoples as separate nations but also as a collective movement that fights against the numerous settler-colonial oppressors and violent logics of those settler-colonial states.

Non-Indigenous-developed video games:

To compare the previous section, non-Indigenous-developed video games will be analyzed based on two video games that received similar attention during the 2010s as the previous two.

Civilization 6:

The historically-themed simulation-based video game *Civilization 6*, developed by Firaxis Games, can be either played on a computer or most available consoles. The game experience does not alter based on which device the game is played on. Furthermore, it is possible to play locally or online with other players across the platforms. For this analysis, I have accessed this game via a computer. The game is quite complex and contains endless possibilities of changing game components and their relation to one another. The only constant in this game is the goals of the game and the role that the components play.

The primitives of the game will be described in the following: First, looking at the *game components*, the game consists of *game rounds*, *continents*, (*resourced*) *terrain*, *nations*, *city-states*, *barbarian camps* and *oceans*. Furthermore, there is a *user interface* that cannot be disabled and constantly keeps updated to monitor the game changes. Lastly, *sound effects* and *music* play an important role in the ambiance of the game, since it revolves around different cultures and nations, those differ based on the players' decision which nation to play. All these elements define the *environment* in which a player situates their nation. To understand how those elements matter in the gameplay, we must look at *actions* implemented in the game. One of the most important we find is *player actions*, namely *determine state system*, *diplomatic actions*, *cultural actions*, *scientific actions*, *religious actions*, *city-administration*, *military-unit control*, *city-state interactions* and *national leader interactions*. Most of these actions are optional and determine the individual game experience of the player, except for *state system* and *cultural* and *scientific* actions which are mandatory to progress the game. In addition to that, one of the most defining *player actions* is *generate world* which happens in the game lobby before the start of the game, creating the general premise of the intended gameplay (i.e. what nation to play as, play against and the general shape of the map).

In a related manner, *system actions* play an important role in the game as well. Here, some of the previous-mentioned *player actions* are processed as well. For example, *generate world* translates into the *system action: randomize generated world*. The purpose of most *system actions* in *CIV6* is to make the game as unpredictable as possible within the predictable perimeters. *Initiate new historical epoch* (based on the round in which the save state is situated), *spawn barbarian camp*, *trigger natural catastrophe* or *generate (lootable) ruins* are some examples of a few tasks that the system has. Above all, *set up advice log* is an action that happens quite often to guide the player and help them in their decisions due to the sheer complexity of the game.

The last element that demands scrutiny in this game is *component actions*. Albeit this being a mere small aspect of the game, there are a few *components* that can complicate and significantly alter your game experience. The components that follow certain tasks are *computer-controlled nations*, *city-states* and *barbarians*. The latter two are just decorations and nuisances from time to time. The more interesting component is *computer-controlled nations*. Those nations are tasked to *simulate players* and basically have the same actions as most gameplay-altering *player actions*. The only difference is that computer players are also programmed to randomly interact with the human players and carry out

the *select dialogue option* action. Here, *introduce to another nation* is one of those dialogue options. For example, in the case of playing the *Cree nation*, the *United States* often introduces itself as a peaceful protector of people and freedom, threatening that the *Cree* should behave themselves or face serious consequences.

The *goal* of the game is clearly defined at the start of each save state. A pop-up appears telling the player to compete with other nations and prove that your nation is more advanced and superior to the other nations in some shape or form. The player is expected to win through one or more of the *player action* options resulting in either a *diplomatic, cultural, scientific, religious* or *military* victory. Given that no player-controlled or computer-controlled nation has won a victory until round 250, a victor is chosen based on *points* that are determined by the sum of accomplishments that the nation has achieved.

What are the principles of the *CIV6* game design? Mostly, the design revolves around strategy, diplomacy and adaptability to different unpredictable scenarios. One of the large principles is that time progresses linearly on a one-dimensional plane and that all nations strive towards “progress,” “achievement” and trying to “prove” themselves in front of other nations. If they fail to reach “meaningful success,” the nation is placed into a “dark age” and faced with serious disadvantages. Therefore, the game tries to provide an alternate history that is yet inspired by Western historical memories rather than non-Western culturally-sensitive memories.⁶³ Lastly, the difficulty of the game differs based on the nation that you play as, that you play against and the respective benefits over time. Thus, some nations find it easier later in the game while others find it easier earlier in the game. For example, the *Cree Nation* belongs to the group that only benefits from the early game, namely the ancient eras.

The general game experience and the larger role that it plays is thereby the synthesis of the primitives and the principles of game design. When analyzing this game, I focused on the *Cree Nation* and its interaction with the *United States*. How the Cree nation is represented is extremely stereotyped and perpetuates many misconceptions. The Cree are portrayed as “docile” and “inferior” in comparison to the US. Every interaction shows that the US desperately tries to maintain peace. In every attempt to get rid of US influences, multiple game components try to convince the player to abide by US desires. This is interestingly demonstrated when the Cree nation conquers all the US cities, in response US leader *Theodore Roosevelt* proclaims: “[...] Peace and freedom has failed, only chaos remains.” White stereotypes of Native Americans are being applied to the Cree in this game as well. The Cree are either portrayed as extremely “noble” and “morally principled” or “savage” and “rageful,” without any place for in-between nuances.⁶⁴ Furthermore, the myth of “empty, uninhabited, unclaimed and abundant America land” that originated from Western expansionism from the 19th-

⁶³ The normativity of Western ways of knowing including historical linearity is covered in: Laura De Vos, “Spirallic Temporality and Cultural Continuity for Indigenous Sovereignty: Idle No More and the Marrow Thieves,” *Transmotion* 6, no. 2 (2020): 1-4.

⁶⁴ Shaugnessy, “White Stereotypes,” 20-23.

century (i.e. in the context of the Homestead Act of 1862) is merely falsely being confirmed here due to the actual abundance of land. This is related to the fact that all nations are born in the same period at the beginning of a game, in reality, Indigenous peoples were not “vanished” and already built entire communities different from the Western standard for centuries before any European contact.⁶⁵ The most obvious misrepresentation is to place the Cree nation in a Western understanding of time as being linear.⁶⁶

Red Dead Redemption:

The next game that has been investigated is *Red Dead Redemption*. The game is an open-world action-based three-dimensional adventure game placed in the US, in a fictional place somewhere between Austin and New Orleans, during the peak of 19th-century Western Expansionism. The game was developed by *Rockstar Studios*, a quite popular and successful game studio that is known for its action-based adventure games. The game is playable on all types of consoles. For this research, it was accessed via computer. The game is quite complex and includes hundreds of hours of content. Therefore, I decided to pinpoint a few selected elements that are most meaningful for this analysis.

The first elements that I looked at were *game components*. In *Red Dead Redemption* those consist of *cut-scenes, dialogues, missions, vehicles, weapons, money, stores, bounty, friendly, hostile and story-relevant non-playable characters, character outfits, map/minimap*. *Cut-scenes, dialogues, character appearances, story-relevant non-playable characters* and *missions* determine the game progression as well as the character progressions in which the player gets to constantly relearn the entire plot. Elements like *vehicles, weapons, money* and *map/minimap* are tools that are supposed to assist the player in mostly successfully finishing missions and accessing new missions. Lastly, *bounties* as well as *friendly and hostile non-playable characters* bring some dynamic into the game, demanding the player to always be careful of unpredictable hostilities from the (policing) sheriff or other non-playable characters.

The *environment* plays a paramount role in open-world adventure games since this mostly sets the aesthetical and experiential setting of the game. *Red Dead Redemption* has a quite panoramic environment, reaching from deserts, rivers and mountains to forests and urbanized cities. It is certainly intended to make the player venture back in time and experience the dynamic and multi-colored “wild west” in their own way.

Next, we must consider *actions* in the game as a key factor in shaping the gaming experience. *Player actions* in this game are characterized by *move in any direction, stealth, interact with NPC, interact with environment, shoot, aim, hide, duck and roll*. All of those are mostly outside of cut-scenes and sometimes appear in cut-scenes as *dialogue options*. *System actions* in this game are

⁶⁵ Wolfe, “settler-colonialism,” 392-397.

⁶⁶ De Vos, “Spirallic Temporality,” 7-15.

trigger cutscene, *trigger interaction* and *unlock new missions*. The player has a lot of agency, therefore the only function of the system is to progress the stories in the correct order through those actions. *Component actions* are mostly carried out by *non-playable characters* and comprise of *duck*, *shoot*, *run*, *surrender*, *attack*, *trigger voice lines*. Outside in the open most *non-playable characters* are programmed to fight their way out of situations. If it becomes critical, they often run or surrender. During the fights, they often scream voice lines to other *non-playable characters* or the *player*. Those are often either insults or “take cover” calls.

In addition, the *goals* of the game are officially to finish missions and explore the world map. The player is expected to take their unique route and make personalized decisions. The most explicit objective of the game is to create some action and entertain the player, but it also has somewhat of an educational and experiential character making one feel like traveling back in time to the US in 1899.

To grasp the nuanced dimensions of this game we have to inspect the principles of the game design. The idea is that the player experiences the criminal world of Western US life during the 1900s. The main character *Arthur Morgan* is portrayed as both a hero who situationally cares about people and wants to help them out of generosity and an antihero who only wants to enrich himself by violence against all different kinds of people. The player is expected to follow the main storyline which starts with a heist led by *Arthur Morgan's* gang that went wrong. Thereafter, the player gets to know all the characters that played a part in the bank robbery, including one of the most important side-characters Dutch migrant and gang leader *Dutch van der Linde*. Over time, the player, therefore, is also expected to engage in side-quests that become available chronologically parallel to the main story. One of the most important principles is that the player adjusts to the situation and chooses their individualized path on how they want *Arthur Morgan* to develop. Although his personality is somewhat fixed one can strategically manipulate his personal development. For instance, one can choose dialogue interactions to make the character greedier for money or more interested in helping people. Furthermore, one can decide to finish missions in a stealthier way and murder fewer people or blatantly run into the battlefield and massacre people.

Components and principles of game design shape the way the player experiences the game. Throughout the game, the player interacts with different people and observes the differences, multiplicities and complicated identities and material realities of people. Therefore, the game reflects the facets of unpredictability in actual US Western history by implementing equally unpredictable interactions with characters in the game. Yet, in the case of the fictional *Wapiti* reservation in *Red Dead Redemption*, the game developers used quite stereotypical depictions of Native Americans with regard to the personality of the two Native Americans that one comes across, namely the chief of the *Wapiti* reservation *Rains Fall* and his son *Eagle Flies*. I focused on a few side-missions that have some explicit elements about Native Americans in *Red Dead Redemption*, that is *American Fathers* and *A Rage Unleashed*, apart from that there are only a few non-story-relevant aspects that are not in the scope of this analysis. For example, in one of the missions called *American Fathers*, the main

character *Arthur Morgan* coincidentally meets *Eagle Flies* and *Rains Fall* in a town. Both Native Americans ask him for a favor to steal the municipal plans for the Indigenous reservations and hand it to them. The white stereotype of the “Noble Native American” reflects in this scene, after *Eagle Flies* suggests an attack against the US government, *Rains Fall* is portrayed as “noble” declaring: “No my son, we cannot. We will not fight any more wars. We will seek peace.”

In the follow-up mission called *A Rage Unleashed*, *Eagle Flies* contacts the main character *Arthur Morgan* and his gang wanting to get revenge for the mistreatment of his people by the US government. When the gang inquired about the reasoning of his desire to attack the US soldiers, he says: “[My] father is confused, wisdom and weakness. My people have suffered to much. We must fight.” Here, *Eagle Flies* is being portrayed according to the “Savage Native American” stereotype.

In the same mission *A Rage Unleashed*, we can identify narratives that are connected to the “logic of elimination” as well. *Dutch*’s gang is being portrayed as the savior who is helping a helpless and “docile” people that cannot protect themselves, *Dutch* promises *Eagle Flies* “[...] [the US oppression] ends today”. At the same time, the Indigenous populations in *Red Dead Redemption* are being portrayed as “vanishing” and barely present, which seems like a justification for the player to decide to send the Native Americans into an ambush and use their distraction to rob the military base. The player is forced to agree with betraying the Native Americans after the gang leader *Dutch* states: “[...] [The] civilized world is closing on us [...] kill two birds with one stone [...] [and] steal some supplies from the military base.”⁶⁷

Lastly, the entire setting of the video game makes it seem like there is barely any cultural diversity and distinction between different Native American nations. The fact that there is only one *Wapiti* nation without any mention of different cultures even within the nation appropriates the “pan-Indianism” echoing the settler-colonial “logic of elimination” throughout American history.⁶⁸

To give a short assessment of this analytical section, let us answer the question: How did video games shape the ways Indigenous peoples appear to their players? The analysis above illustrates how video games are an experiential way of learning. However, the player’s understanding of Indigenous peoples can be influenced in different ways, which makes it a useful tool for Indigenous peoples to promote Indigenous self-determination and cultural continuation, but it can also perpetuate stereotypes and misconceptions that are damaging to those nations.

Results and Conclusion:

The analysis above has first shown us the discourses on which all the analyzed video games are grounded and secondly given us an insight into the complex structures and experiences of the

⁶⁷ Wolfe, “settler-colonialism,” 397-402.

⁶⁸ How pan-Indianism became a tool to homogenize Native Americans with US citizens and minimize their unique cultural backgrounds originating during the 19th-century under the 1887 Dawes Act/General Allotment Act was tackled in this seminal chapter: Jason Edward Black, “Pan-Indianism and Decolonial Challenges to Allotment,” in *American Indians and the Rhetoric of Removal and Allotment*, ed. Davis W. Houch (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), 131-135.

games themselves. The guiding research question in this paper was: In what ways does the representation of Indigenous nations in the US and Canada differ in (historically-themed) video games based on the degree of engagement with Indigenous developers in the 2010s? Seemingly, it differs insofar that some video game developers take the responsibility to scrutinize their work. The more they critically think about the limitations, lack of Indigenous visibility and problematic representations and the more those game developers engage with Native American cultural consultants, the more authentic Indigenous representations become. The video game designers that decide to try towards accurate representation therefore (unconsciously) work with the cultural capital of “wonderwork” and “Indigeneity” fighting the settler-colonial projects of “logic of elimination” and “white (racial) stereotypes”. On the flipside, video game producers that ignore the need for taking responsibility and maintaining a good relationship with the Indigenous nations at display resign to narratives and logics that were created by settler-colonial states in order to obliterate Indigenous nations and make legitimate claims to their lands, hence legitimizing the existing of their state, reflecting both concepts of “logic of elimination” and “white (racial) stereotypes”. Their motives are often merely driven by revenue and the goal to entertain an audience rather than social activism. Hence, Indigenous-developed games depict Native Americans as culturally diverse, human and present in the modern world as sovereign, independent and self-determined nations. On the other hand, non-Indigenous-developed video games perpetuate stereotypes and make Native American nations appear as “vanished,” “docile,” and “deficient.”

The degree of engagement with Indigenous people in the development of video games appeared to be connected to the truthfulness of representations. In some way, this finding merely confirms the necessity to allow Indigenous peoples more self-determination not only in politics but also in popular culture such as video games. The 2010s were a decade that made video games extremely appealing, enjoyable and popular for different audiences including highly malleable adolescents. Both sets of Indigenous-developed video games and non-Indigenous-developed video games differed insofar that the latter did not feel responsible to implement truthful narratives of Native Americans, failing to see or even recognize the politicization of popular culture. Thus, at the same time, both genres had played an important (political) role in shaping realities through certain debates and potentially making more people aware of the existence of Native American people, even if it was in a false, homogenized (i.e. all Native Americans as one cultural unit) and stereotyped way.⁶⁹

Combining historical research with Indigenous studies and digital studies has proven to be quite fruitful. Interdisciplinary mixing of different concepts, methods and perspectives can assist academia in unfolding and uncovering new findings but also contribute to older findings in a novel

⁶⁹ Those findings are in line with previous research: Twenge, “Trends in U.S. Adolescents,” 329-311; Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp, “Media and the Social Construction of Reality,” in *Oxford Handbook of Digital Media Sociology*, eds. Deana A. Rohlinger and Sarah Sobieraj (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 53-61; Daniel Muriel, “Video Games and Identity Formation in Contemporary Society,” in *Oxford Handbook of Digital Media Sociology*, eds. Deana A. Rohlinger and Sarah Sobieraj (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 462-479.

way. This research is far from exhaustive and merely demonstrated one of many possible research angles in the history of Indigenous representations, even within the digital area.

In this paper, we have explored a few video games from the 2010s. For future research, I suggest larger datasets for more extensive research papers. Those datasets could also include a diachronic dimension reaching back to the earlier times of video games starting from the 1960s onward. Depending on the research question, it might be difficult to gain access to certain video games, but there is certainly much potential for future academic fields in scrutinizing video games as source material, especially regarding the representation of marginalized groups that deserve more representation in the popular imaginaries of the global digital world such as Native Americans to bring visibility and power to their social struggles and activism.

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